
The Importance of “Bridging” in the Classroom

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Terms such as bilingualism, multilingualism, and multiculturalism have engendered animated debates in the last few years. Both the scholarly community and media outlets have discussed at length the pros and cons of exposing children to different languages and cultures. While the general consensus is that multilingualism and multiculturalism represent a benefit rather than a drawback, two recent books presented opposite perspectives on these issues, reigniting a controversial discussion. In Aneta Pavlenko’s *The Bilingual Mind* (2014) and John McWhorter’s *The Language Hoax* (2014), the authors take opposite standpoints in discussing whether multilinguals demonstrate different personalities, or even different worldviews, when they speak their different languages.

While discussing this point at length would exceed the scope of this article, it is relevant to note that the debate on multilingualism and multiculturalism has begun to acknowledge differences, even separate worldviews, within one and the same bilingual individual. In this sense, Multicultural and Multilingual Native Speakers (MMNSs), and particularly expatriate multilinguals who teach their native language and culture abroad (Multicultural and Multilingual Language Instructors or MMLIs), represent examples of both a complex interplay of different cultures within the same individual and an attempt to reconcile them. Having moved from the country where they were born and raised into a new and often foreign geographical and cultural environment, MMNSs inhabit a mediated space between two cultures. Further, as MMLIs, they expand and redefine that space by confronting and reassessing the relationship between two or more cultures in the language classroom setting. Thus MMLIs embody a fluid subject position. In light of this, they are ideal candidates to facilitate the “bridging” of cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom and to help students mediate between different worldviews in the wider context of a today’s globalized and connected world.

The word “bridging” recalls the idea of putting together two ends that don’t naturally meet, creating a mediated space usually informed by, and devoted to, communication. A quick Google search shows that the term is mostly associated with “culture” and “cultural,” thus highlighting the importance placed by the global online community on finding common ground between different sets of values.¹ The focus of this article is this act of “bridging” in the classroom; yet, in order to begin it is first necessary to define what is meant by ‘bridging.’

¹ Among other examples, the National Endowment for the Humanities-sponsored program “Bridging Cultures” states that: “during a time of rapid global change, the vitality of our twenty-first century democracy depends on a commitment to understanding the historical and cultural forces that have shaped and continue to shape our world. To that end, NEH has developed a special initiative, Bridging Cultures, which engages the power of the humanities to promote understanding and mutual respect for people with diverse histories,

When applied to MMNSs, “bridging” can refer to several contexts. The first and more basic is a geographical meaning: MMNSs have “bridged” the geographical distance between their home country and the United States and continue to do so in their travels back and forth. In this way, they not only mediate between two cultures in which they live and work, but they also cement their knowledge of the journey that they undergo in order to be citizens of two countries. Second, “bridging” can be understood linguistically: MMNSs, and particularly MMLIs, have become bilingual to the best of their abilities, learning and welcoming a new language as their primary means of communication in the new country, while simultaneously retaining and reassessing the perception of their native language when teaching it (especially if confronted with an advanced language class, which usually allows for in-depth linguistic discussions). In this sense, MMLIs are well-suited to understanding the process of learning and relearning every language in light of different experiences. Third, “bridging” can refer to the process of mediating and communicating through different sets of values and cultural practices. Since MMLIs are not just visiting but living and working in the new country, they acknowledge and adapt to new values and cultural practices as they retain and present their own culture to students.

I will use “bridging” particularly in this sense of cultural differences and underline the beneficial role that MMLIs, as examples of successful integration in another culture, play in language departments to help finding common ground between groups of people with different backgrounds. Drawing from my experience both as a multicultural and multilingual native speaker and as a language instructor, I will illustrate a few examples of in-class strategies aimed at promoting multiculturalism, ranging from simple vocabulary presentations to role playing and target language discussion groups; I will focus on the controversial differences between the countries and discuss the importance of the mediating role of MMLIs.

As instructors in a language classroom, MMLIs are often the first “bridge” to a foreign language and culture for college students. They present a foreign language to students in comprehensible input bits, which build day-by-day to form an understanding of the structure of the language. Along with that, language instructors in most universities in the United States include cultural aspects associated with the target language. In the case of Italian, examples can be found in the importance of the formal “*Lei*” form, in the criteria for the distinction between the greeting “*buon giorno*” and “*buona sera*,” or, at a more advanced level, in the predominant use of passive form and of the “impersonal *si*” in institutional language.

Perhaps the most relevant example of culturally-informed language is represented by vocabulary choices and the specificity of particular words dedicated to describe areas of interest of a specific culture. In Italian, for example, a wide variety of words is used to describe food and the preparation of food, while the vocabulary relating to the family doesn’t account for a distinction between “half brother/sister” and “step brother/sister,” which are clearly marked in English. Particularly in the case of delicate topics, such as family, religion, or politics, instructors must be careful to mediate the cultural differences and fill the cultural gap between countries. In these situations, MMLIs emerge as the true strength of a language department. There can, of course, be teaching assistants born and raised in the U.S. who have travelled extensively in the foreign country and absorbed the cultural landmarks which they can later transmit to the students. But the specificity and delicacy of the task of

cultures, and perspectives within the United States and abroad” (<http://www.neh.gov/divisions/bridging-cultures/featured-project/about-the-bridging-cultures-initiative>).

mediating and negotiating between cultural set of values and practices usually benefits from the presence of MMLIs.

Why is that? First of all, a language instructor born and raised in the U.S. shares, or is aware of, the same core values of his/her students. The class can discuss the cultural differences between the two countries with respect and competence, but the interaction will probably lack a genuinely comparative (even if clashing) component, which arises when two members of different cultures meet and negotiate meaning. On the contrary, MMLIs have been raised in the foreign country, and even in the case of incompatible and/or untranslatable worldviews, they can offer more insight on why different values and cultural practices are important to the country’s population. Second, MMLIs have already experienced a successful negotiation between their own culture and U.S. culture by living and working in the United States. Though such a negotiation can be long and difficult at times, it has already taken place, and MMLIs are more likely to identify points of closeness and distance between the two cultures and to devise strategies to bridge cultural gaps, as the examples below show. Third, thanks to their native mastery of the target language, MMLIs can consistently draw more ties between language and culture, helping to explain how language mirrors the social and cultural practices of a country.

In short, MMLIs can effectively recreate, in a classroom setting, the genuine communicative exchange that students encounter in a foreign country, and thanks to their personal experience with bridging cultural, geographical, and linguistic differences, they can help students more effectively negotiate between their native language and culture and the target language and culture.

A few examples, drawn from my experience in the classroom, might help to illustrate successful language strategies that benefited from a MMLI’s presence. I will start with a simple vocabulary presentation, specifically concerning the vocabulary related to clothing. In one of my classes, I prepared a PowerPoint presentation about the changes in the clothing styles of young Italians from the end of WWII to the present. I drew from my own experience during my teen years in Italy, as well as that of my family and friends to create a comprehensive list of most of Italian fashion subcultures in the past fifty years. While it doesn’t take a MMLI to create a comparably detailed presentation, it is easier, faster, and usually more accurate for native speakers to have access to cultural trends or popular personalities that are rarely advertised and/or known outside of the target country (in this case Italy). It is also more common for MMLIs, in my experience, to make connections to different media, such as songs, films, TV shows or commercials, books, and magazines with relation to a specific topic. In this case, I was able to recall how various media popularized different clothing trends (in magazine pictures, TV ads, newspaper articles, etc.) and provide additional material for the students. Further, by portraying my own experience at the same age of my students but in a different geographical and cultural space, I could create productive comparisons and discussions. By presenting the clothing vocabulary embedded in a cultural and personal context, I was able to spark interest in my students. They not only remembered the basic vocabulary better and faster, but also learned words and cultural tidbits often pushed to the side in traditional language teaching (such as punk and goth subcultures, the influence of U.S. trends— jeans, the hippie subculture—,and other more recent controversial trends like tattoos). They also shared their newly-acquired vocabulary both in guided writing assignments and in spontaneous oral and written interaction (such as class debates and the class blog).

A second example of the beneficial role of MMNSs in language teaching is the use of humorous anecdotes, often employed in “warm up” sessions at the beginning of class or after long and difficult grammar explanations, to ease a tense atmosphere and create a relaxed environment, more conducive to learning. While non-native instructors can, and have, successfully presented anecdotes about their own adventures and mishaps while learning the target language, this approach might create a vertical relationship between teacher and students. While this isn’t necessarily negative, it places the instructor “further ahead” on the road to language proficiency, making the interaction one-sided. Students can laugh, but their participation is mostly passive, as they haven’t yet experienced the context of reference. In the case of a MMLI, instead, the linguistic and cultural misunderstandings or mistakes are framed in a context familiar to the students. MMLIs can provide a mirroring image of a foreign learner trying to learn the language in which students have native proficiency, effectively erasing hierarchies in the process of language learning and creating a collaborative atmosphere, which has been proven to foster competence.

In my experience, for example, I have often used anecdotes of my own troubles with cultural and linguistic discrepancies between the United States and Italy: for example, my surprise at the way Americans define the “pepperoni” pizza topping, my bewilderment at the American distinction between a “café” and a “bar,” and my sense of shame when asking for a “doggybag” at restaurants or when returning unwanted merchandise in shops. Also, I usually ask for students’ help when I can’t recall an appropriate translation of words or expressions; in my experience, students respond very well to this input, creating a truly collaborative class atmosphere.

MMLIs can also be great sources of linguistic and cultural material that is otherwise unavailable or not included in textbooks, such as regional dialects, slang expressions and jargon, proverbs, and idioms. When interacting with a MMLI, students can experience difficulties that would arise for them in the foreign country when confronted with language that is closely tied with the local culture. They can thus learn how to find common ground and negotiate meaning in different communicative situations, such as understanding and comparing idioms from one context of reference (Italian) to the other (American). A good example of this is the Italian saying “buono come il pane,” which translates in English into “as good as gold.” The original Italian expression relates the “goodness” of a person to “bread” (*pane*), one of the most basic and common foods in Italian culture; when translated in American, the association is lost and replaced by “goodness” being associated with “gold,” an element much more valued and relevant in American culture. As students, along with the MMLIs, understand how these expressions are constructed, they explore the relationship between a language and its worldview. Further, as they compare different languages and their cultures of reference, students, with the help of the MMLI, can find common ground between different languages and cultural practices, effectively recreating a genuine interaction in a class environment. What is more, thanks to the mirroring experience offered by the MMLI, students can reflect on the importance of finding common ground and appreciate how the process of learning a foreign language requires not only negotiating meaning, but also mediating between different worldviews.

When considering all these reasons, MMLIs’ pivotal role in language departments is apparent. While I am not suggesting that language departments across the United States should only be populated by MMLIs, the importance of their role should be highlighted, especially in light of the bureaucratic difficulties that at times create overwhelming circumstances for foreign students and teachers, such as citizen-restrictive criteria for grants

and scholarships, federal laws that allow for limited off-campus work, and the difficult path to obtaining a work visa. This situation is made all the more acute and relevant considering the recent developments of the job market, where adjunct positions are the norm and tenure-track jobs have become scarce and extremely competitive. MMLIs cannot become adjuncts for long periods of time, since these positions don't offer security, a work visa, or even health insurance. Therefore, in light of the benefits represented by MMLIs that I hope to have underscored in this article, it would be beneficial to language departments in the United States to acknowledge the importance of these figures in helping students to go beyond cultural stereotypes, in filling the gap between two countries, and in creating a productive, solid bridge on which to construct mediated meaning.

As Aneta Pavlenko writes: “a bilingual is not a sum of two monolinguals but a unique speaker/hearer in his/her own right” (2014). By the same token, language learning in a classroom setting should not be a sum of two cultures facing each other, but rather a unique experience in which students and the instructor can come together and bridge cultural differences in a productive way. MMLIs can thus serve to help students understand the overlapping of different stories that create the multifarious nature of a country's ‘culture,’ going beyond stereotypical views of foreign countries and promoting a mutual understanding.

This is particularly true when considering that language teaching is undergoing a process of restructuring through new computer-mediated communication that has developed at high speed in the past decade due to technological advancements and particularly the exponential development of the Internet (Kern 2000, 2006, and 2011). In light of this ease of access to foreign speakers and cultures provided by online communication tools, it becomes not only relevant, but necessary to address the best practices to teach and facilitate a “bridging” of language and cultures in the language classroom. In fact, approaching multiculturalism without mediation leads to the exacerbation of the discrepancies in social and cultural modes of communication. Thus, particularly in our globalized society, mediation is needed and is best represented by the multicultural and multilingual native language instructor. The instructor's ability to transmit the very condition of our globalized society rests on the ability to bridge cultural gaps and accept a less determined, more fluid and complex identity.

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