Using Language History, Loanwords & Etymologies in Language Teaching to Inspire Learners and Build Motivation

Michael Carrier

Highdale Learning, United Kingdom

Abstract

The talk will outline how we can use aspects of English and Indo-European language history to build motivation and a delight in learning a broader vocabulary in their target language. We will look at deep history, the roots of English and Indo-European (and even the languages before them), suggesting how we can use these thrilling historic stories of the linguistic developments and migrations of 5000 - 6000 years ago to inform and engage students.

We will touch briefly on how the triple sciences of archaeology, genetics and linguistics lead us to a better understanding of the history of languages in and around Europe, and its connection to the history of European peoples, and will look at how to make use of this to inspire our learners.

We will look at word histories – the etymology of common words in modern languages and how they got there, using interesting stories about unusual words to spur learners' fascination with language.

We will look at loanwords, how and when words were borrowed from world languages and how they often changed their meaning along the way, and we will look at the cognates in other world languages that learners can learn to recognise.

We will discuss what kinds of word histories can be used to engage, excite and motivate learners. Using this fresh and fascinating content in the language classroom is not aimed to provide detailed knowledge of the history, nor to displace more usual communicative activities but to add new types of linguistic content. It also provides extra skill development in constructing meaning through reading, listening, speaking communicatively and writing about a more substantive set of factual topics.

Keywords: *Engagement, motivation, language knowledge, language history, projects, community*

Using Indo-European language history in language teaching

1   Introduction

Most of our language learners are highly motivated to learn English (or other languages – though this paper focuses on the learning of English) because they need it for their education, their work or for future career opportunities.

But we still need to find new ways to motivate learners, to keep them interested, to keep them delighted in the process of learning more.

Most textbooks use quite standard topics – work, holidays, foods, the environment – to contextualise language. Can we include a wider range of topics?

For example, topics about the language itself. These might include where English and other modern European languages come from, how English is related to other languages, how Indo-European developed over 5000 years ago, and how it reached English-speaking countries.

In my teaching experience, the majority of students are quite fascinated by this new area of knowledge about Indo-European language history which most of them had not previously encountered.

2   Themes and Content

What would this mean in practice? We need to decide what kind of stories we want to tell about the history of English, stories that learners can get involved in and re-tell in speech or writing.

Traditional Stories

For English language learners we can tell the 'traditional' stories, those usually outlined in books on the history of English. These includes stories about the arrival of Anglo-Saxon into England in the 5th

century CE, the invasions of Scandinavian Vikings in the 8th and 9th centuries CE, the coming of the Normans in 1066 and examples of middle English from Chaucer, through to Shakespeare and on to the present day.

Deeper Stories

But this traditional approach raises the question – where did the Anglo-Saxon language come from? From German – but where did the Germanic language come from? From Proto-Indo-European – but where did the Proto-Indo-European language come from?

A new, broader approach suggests looking into the deeper history, the roots of English and Indo-European (and even earlier languages), suggesting how we can use these thrilling historic stories of the linguistic developments and migrations of 5000-6000 years ago to inform and engage students.

This means looking briefly at how the triple sciences of archaeology, genetics and linguistics lead us to a better understanding of the history of languages in and around Europe, and its connection to the history of European peoples. We can make use of this to inspire our learners.

Word Stories

To complement the history stories we need also to focus on actual words, and tell the story of individual modern words and where they came from – whether from Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans or as borrowing (or thefts!) from other languages.

This involves looking at the etymology of common words in modern languages and how they got there, using interesting stories about unusual words to spur learners' fascination with language.

Looking at loanwords borrowed from world languages, and cognates in other world languages that learners can learn to recognise, can engage, excite and motivate learners.

3   History stories

First, we would need to establish a context and a history timeline for learners.

This would be a story in itself – how modern humans left Africa 60,000 years ago, how they migrated west into Europe from the Middle East after the end of the last Ice Age around 12,000 years ago, how they developed farming about 10,000 years ago.

We can tell the story of how historical linguistics has re-constructed the Indo-European roots of hundreds of modern languages – spoken by almost 50% of the world's population – and identified the likely original homeland as the steppes of southern Ukraine.

We can plan some sessions on the Yamnaya, the dynamic hunter gatherers in the Ukrainian steppes and how they moved across Asia and into Europe, carrying the Indo-European languages that they spoke.

We would explain how Proto-Indo-European (known as 'PIE') came about – probably from north-west Asia - and how we can reconstruct it from existing languages.

From that point we can show the development of language families like Italic and Germanic (and others) from PIE), and how Anglo-Saxon and later English developed as part of the Germanic language family.

We would give key examples of words from each of these families and arrange activities to try and match these cognates to their meaning.

These language history lessons may be taught in a longer session (eg 45 minutes) or a series of short sessions (5-10 minutes per activity) over a number of lessons. Activities would include comprehension questions and tasks to help learners unpick the relationship between languages.

Here are some of the lesson topics we might include:

- Ancient History: migrations out of Africa
- The Yamnaya & early Indo-European
- The creation of language families
- Germanic languages
- Anglo Saxons & Vikings & Normans
- Middle English and Chaucer
- Shakespeare and the King James Bible
- Renaissance borrowing from Latin & Greek
- The empire – borrowing from India and beyond

Each theme combines a bit of history, some sample words in context showing the changes in meaning, and some word histories – how words relate to their cousins and cognates in other languages.

4   Word stories

In a series of short activities combining input, reading, discussion and writing, we can outline the development of modern words.

This might be through showing with words came from Anglo-Saxon and Viking words, and how the two languages often gave us 2 versions of a similar and cognate word (like 'ship' and 'skip').

We can show students how the influence of Norman French had a massive impact on changing Old English to Middle English, offering leaving pairs of words like 'house' and 'mansion'.

We can show word stories that derive from Shakespeare's neologisms and words that came from Latin and Greek during the Renaissance.

The other kind of development is how the language grew and changed through 'loan words', the words borrowed (or 'stolen') from other languages in the last two or three hundred years.

As James D. Nicoll wrote:

> "We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary."'

5   Classroom Activities

What kind of activities could we involve the learners in?

When looking at the present day, we can develop activities around the English language by the selection of loan words and phrases borrowed from other languages and countries.

One activity could be to learn about loan words from specific languages like Hindi (bungalow, pyjama) or Arabic (alcohol, algebra). Learners can match the word, the meaning and the origin.

Another activity can be based on cognates (related words, or 'cousin' words) that we can recognise in modern languages. Learners can read short texts on the language families, and explain the word histories in pairwork 'information gap' activities.

For example, we can explain how the word 'exit' in English is linked to 'exodus' in Greek and 'vykhod' in Russian, noting how 'exodus' links to the word 'method' as well.

We can also look at the deep roots of words in Proto-Indo-European (PIE), the language spoken about 5500 years ago. Our English word 'heart' is cognate with Latin 'cor', and both stem originally from PIE 'kṛdjom'.

PIE roots can be fascinatingly close to modern English. The change from an initial 'k-' sound to an 'h-' sound is an example of a common sound shift. And this also explains how PIE 'phter' becomes Latin 'pater' but English 'father' – via a sound shift in the initial consonant.

A further activity may be based on the reverse borrowing from English into other languages – such as the way modern French 'flirter' is borrowed from English 'flirt', without people being aware that 'flirt' is itself an example of the English stealing the word from French, 'fleuretter'.

This type of language history lesson might fit into other subjects taught in the school (eg history, or the students' native language and literature) in a CLIL approach.

6   A sample lesson plan

Here is a sample activity plan that can be used as a model for a number of lessons.

- **Warmer** - give students a word and ask what they know about its origins and its relation to other languages.
- **Pre-teaching** - explain words before they read a text.
- **Input** - using a text or a illustration, introduce the simple context of the word history in about 100-200 words.
- **Comprehension check** - check comprehension and get students to summarise the texts to each other.
- **Pairwork** – get students to explain the word history to each other; or speculate on other languages this may be related to. Ask them to link this back to their own language wherever possible.
- **Research** - get students to research the origins of words in the language they are learning which have been loaned to or borrowed from it. They can present the results to the class and discuss how their usage may have changed in the language under study.

7 Conclusion

These activities, and others like them, are not meant to displace more traditional communicative tasks and competency-building exercises.

They are designed to introduce variety of theme into the language classroom, as well as making students more aware of the links between the language they are learning, their own language, and other languages that have borrowed from them.

There could be an intercultural benefit too, as understanding the long historical connections of languages like English to other languages around the world may help learners to build more acceptance and understanding of other language speakers in other cultures, and become more accepting of a multilingual world.

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