

Bridge-ins. About building bridges at the beginning of a language lesson

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During the teacher training seminar I attended in 2014, the course instructors mentioned a model for lesson planning called BOPPPS, and my attention was especially caught when it came to “bridges” which I found to be a good metaphor for describing different relations in the classroom. Since I started teaching languages, I have been interested in building such “bridges”, and learning more about the respective theories has increased my interest in using better and more deliberate techniques in the beginning of a class. In this report I want to show how I have tested both familiar and new methods as “bridge-ins” in my own language classes.

1. The theoretical background

BOPPPS is developed by The University of British Columbia’s Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG) as a guide for developing lesson plans. It consists of the following steps¹:

Bridge

*An introduction to the content to be covered.
This is often something the learners can relate to,
or something dramatic or funny.*

Objective or Outline

*Share with the learners what is to be covered
or what they are to have learned by the end.*

Pre-Assessment

Determine what students know about the topic.

Participatory Learning

*Teaching the topic in a way that involves Active Learning
and student participation.*

Post-Assessment

Assess if the students have learnt something about the topic.

Summary

*Conclude the lesson by summarizing what was taught
and potentially foreshadow the next lesson.*

¹ <http://kumu.brocku.ca/twiki/BOPPPS> (Brock University, Canada)

So the focus of my interest lies on the first step which is considered a short introduction, a connection, a “bridge”. It is supposed to evoke the students’ interest for the topic and arouse their attention to the upcoming class. The strategies for bridge-ins can vary from “*providing reasons for learning the topic, telling a story connected with the lesson, referring to something in the learner’s realm of experience or posing a provocative question linked to the current topic*”².

Beside trying to create this initial connection between the students and the lesson’s content (and/or the connection between two consecutive lessons), I’ve always been committed to “building bridges” on a social and communicative level, meaning the “bridge” or the “two-sided approach” (Meyer 1987:123) between the teacher and the students. Unruh/Petersen (2009:33) find it highly important for teachers to make – and to remain in – contact with the class, showing the students their interest in them by observing them with attention and listening to them. The students will only be in the mood for the lesson and for learning if the teacher signalizes: “I enjoy being here! I enjoy being a teacher! I like my subject! I’m interested in the topic of the lesson!” (Unruh/Petersen 2009:53ff.).

But, on a social level, there is not only a bridge to build between the teacher and the students. I also find it quite necessary in my role as a teacher to build bridges between the students themselves. Having in mind to create a good and safe atmosphere in the class should, in my opinion, be a continuous process beyond the first days or weeks because some students might need more time to get to know each other better and to feel more comfortable in the classroom situation. “Ice-breakers”, “warm-ups” – or “bridges” – might then also be used to create excitement in a safe environment. In this context, I have experienced myself as a teacher Tessa Woodward (2004:49f.) describes as “*the kind of the teacher who is unable to get into the main work of a lesson until you judge the atmosphere of the class to be just right*”, feeling that “*it is impossible to do the main part properly until the mood in the class is right or until the students’ confidence is built*”. She mentions different factors that may influence the students mood when they arrive at the classroom – such as e.g. physical conditions / stress, the time of the day or year, the weather, or the fact that they don’t know each other well yet. Woodward suggests different ways to create a good atmosphere, like concentration exercises to quieten and calm the students, or games to make them become more lively, or socializing (by e.g. asking how the students have been) if you are interested in a friendly atmosphere. I normally use the third and second approach in combination with each other. As

² http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/BOPPPS_Model (The University of British Columbia, Canada)

a second/foreign language teacher, I meet students with many different cultural and educational backgrounds, coming together only a couple of times a week for their language class, and I find it necessary to build this “social” bridge as well, trying to include it at each step of a lesson but focusing at it especially in the beginning of a class.

At first I want to recall a situation I suppose we all remember from either side of the classroom – both from the teacher’s and the students’ perspective: The teacher rushes into the classroom, dead on time, and then quite often the first thing the students will be hearing after the initial greeting is a rather conventional lesson-start like “Let’s take a look at your homework” or “Let’s continue from where we left off last time”. I assume that most teachers can see a bit of themselves in situations like these – routines which happen to arise in the busy day-to-day when we have to hurry from one class to the next or the classroom is occupied just before our lesson, procedures we and the students get used to and which seem quite effective. The lesson is well-planned, we know the students more or less, they know us, and they have got used to our routines so the lesson might start straight away with the main content, perhaps preceded by an introduction. Certainly, the students will get a benefit from such a class – but how can we make a better start, include and activate them to be more engaged and focused? And how can we make it all begin at the beginning, *before* we inform the students about what is going to happen in the upcoming class and moving to the middle part of the lesson – or as Tessa Woodward (2004:47) puts it when she talks about the “beginning before the beginning”?

In the following I want to present some methods I have used before, but which I now have used more consciously as “bridges” in the beginning of a new class, as social bridges as well as content-related bridges.

2. Some examples for bridge-ins

Meyer (1994) categorizes four different types of lesson starts:

- teacher-centered
- student-active
- game-focused
- problem-oriented

In a teacher-centered lesson start it is the teacher who plays the active role, e.g. telling a story to present a new topic, checking the homework or introducing a new song. A classic game-

focused approach could be repeating the previous lesson's vocabulary by playing the game Hangman where words have to be guessed by suggesting single letters. In a problem-oriented approach, the teacher would confront the students with a challenge, like a contradiction, comparison or provocation, by e.g. showing a short news-clip, using stories or articles or perform rankings to activate the students' formation of opinions.

Preferring the students participate actively throughout most of the class, I have chosen to try out more or less student-active lesson-starts. During the student-centered activities the teacher will be required to withdraw from the classical, exclusive role as the expert or educator, towards being a facilitator, collaborator and even an active participant, providing interactional support, offering a safe environment and encouraging the learners (Richards / Rodgers 2014:388ff.) – according to the different underlying teaching-methods I won't go into here.

Before I list the different activities, I want to mention Tessa Woodward's (2004:47) recommendation about "the beginning before the beginning": already before the students arrive, the teacher gets into the classroom to "*open windows, clean boards, move chairs, turn on music, pin things on the wall, put things on chairs*", ensuring to make the classroom her/his own. This is a good illustration of how to start building bridges. Preparing a class the way Woodward suggests, gives me also the opportunity to "surprise" the students with a new classroom setting from time to time. Usually, my students would sit in a U-shaped classroom, but now and then I make them stand or sit in a circle where they can face each other. In this setting, the students can reflect and talk about different issues, and it can be used for different activities. By the time the students have got more and more used to it, and when it can be prepared beforehand like in the first activity listed below, the approach becomes less teacher-centered and more student-focused.

2.1 Students ask students³:

In this activity, the actual lesson will be linked to the previous one. At the end of a class, I put some students in charge of preparing questions according to the topic that has been discussed and asking these questions in the beginning of the next lesson. They were also responsible of correcting or possibly completing the answers, and I only provided assistance. Each time I used this method, it was someone else's turn, and in the end, all students had been in charge at least once.

³ http://www.sn.schule.de/~sud/methodenkompodium/module/1/4_4_1.htm

Beside building a bridge from one lesson to the next, using such an activity makes the students learn to take responsibility for their own learning. In addition, a better atmosphere can be created in the classroom through this method, so I also recommend it as a social bridge-in.

2.2 Hello! How are you?

The initial greeting is usually the very first thing expressed by the teacher entering the classroom, but I extended this utterance to an activity that expects more from the students than just responding. This worked well in a beginners' class but might also be used at a higher level where students will get the chance to consolidate their knowledge. Half of the students were provided with a slip of paper, and on each of these slips of paper I had written a different expression containing a greeting or a question about someone's well-being. The students walked around in the classroom and met each other to ask and answer questions. Because this is a very repetitive activity, I could assist as many different student pairs as possible.

This method is a very good warm-up, but since it is not necessarily suitable as an introduction to a new topic, it might be combined with a second, more topic-oriented bridge-in.

2.3 Where are you from?

I pinned a world map at the white board in my beginners' class and invited the students to gather in front of the map. In this repetition activity, I wanted the students to learn (in one setting) or repeat (in another setting) how to ask someone where they are from and to get to know to each other better. According to the setting I introduced / repeated the question several times and answered myself, pointing at my home country. Then I asked the first student to answer and to show her/his home country at the map. The students continued then to ask each other one by one, and soon the atmosphere became very relaxed and they started using other questions related to the topic after a while.

This activity works very well as a social bridge-in, but can, at the same time, lead on to the content of the upcoming class, e.g. talking about places or the climate in different countries.

2.4 Mind-mapping

This is one of my favourite activities which I use to introduce a new topic – sometimes during the main part of a lesson or preferably in the beginning. It invites the students to do some

brainstorming on previous knowledge about either vocabulary (suitable at all levels), or topics related to cultural as well as linguistic topics in more advanced classes. This time, I tested it in different contexts, as e.g. with the topic “family” which I wanted to introduce in my beginners class. I wrote the word at the whiteboard, drawing a circle around it, and gave the students some time to reflect. I then asked each of them which words they already knew related to this topic. I only asked for single words and wrote them around the circle, using “family members” as one subcategory and grouping other words into the different parts of speech. To make this activity less teacher-centered, the students can be asked to come up to the whiteboard and write the words themselves.

In an advanced class, I put the word “languages” in the circle and asked the students to discuss their ideas about languages with the person next to them first and then come up with a word, comment or sentence each. I grouped the answers into topics like “kinds of languages”, “language learning”, “language policies” and so on. In both classes, I left the mind-map at the whiteboard throughout the lesson and extended it with new words that came up later in the main part.

I find using mind-maps very suitable as bridge-ins for new topics, but can also be used as a repetition. At a lower level I’ve rather experienced it as a more teacher-centered activity, but at higher levels it allows the students to participate more actively.

2.5 What did you do last weekend?

This is an often used question to introduce a class with after a weekend. I use it a lot myself, varying the setting so it won’t be a monotone teacher-centered question-and-answer-game. To give it a good start, I would tell about my own weekend first. In one class, I let my students work in pairs and they interviewed each other about what they had done during the weekend. After a few minutes, I asked to pairs of students to join each other so there would be groups of four. The students exchanged the information they had just talked about. In another setting, they presented the gathered information to the whole class, sometimes in a circle setting. In a different class I handed out small slips of paper with adverbs of manner, place or time, and asked the students to use these words or expressions in the beginning of their sentences about what they had done in the weekend. A funny way to involve all the students more actively at the same time was to make them tell a collective story – one started with the first sentence, the next one continued with the second sentence, and so on. The students got very engaged using their imagination and came up with hilarious stories.

This activity can be used in different variations and offers especially a very good social-bridge-in. Beside being a good method to repeat vocabulary or the past tense (and to repeat it continuously), it can lead on to different topics such as using adverbs of time or place, introducing new vocabulary or discussing cultural issues.

2.6 Arriving at class later

Woodward (2004:51f.) wants the students to take responsibility for their own learning without the teacher and suggests her/him to arrive at the classroom *after* the lesson has started, finding things already happening – with or even without previous guidance. I figured out that this approach has to be prepared quite well and with clear guidance, so it might be more teacher-centered in the very first beginning. To try it, I chose a setting where my advanced students got the assignment to talk with the person next to them about a picture I had put at their desks. The task was written at small slips of paper for each pair. When I entered the classroom five minutes after the class normally starts, I asked the students to tell me and the rest of the class very shortly about their pictures which were all connected to the topic I wanted to introduce in that lesson.

This way of bridging-in offers a new experience for the students and both a social warm-up and curiosity about what is going to happen when the teacher arrives. In the future, I would like to try to make the students work on other activities before I enter the classroom. This could be a mindmap they create themselves at the whiteboard or a task where they test each other on vocabulary from the last lesson as a repetition or in preparation for an upcoming test – or maybe even an assignment where they should develop a short beginning of the upcoming lesson themselves?

3. Conclusion

Most of the activities I've tested, have proven to be different kinds of "bridges" at the same time, improving connections between two consecutive lessons or as an introduction to a new topic as well as the relation between the teacher and the students and the students themselves. I found it especially interesting to use different bridges each time and want to try out more methods like outdoor activities or inviting visitors in the future to create more excitement in the classroom and curiosity among the students. Anyway, there should also be certain routines (like singing a song on Tuesdays or talking about the nextcoming weekend on Thursdays) because they create a comfortable environment for the students and provide continuity. In my opinion, there should be a good balance and level of variation, and then also the "getting back

to where we left off last week” might work as a successful bridge-in from time to time. Being more conscious of the “beginning section” and making the beginning a *part* – an *important* part – of the lesson will ensure the students know that “something happens” during the first minutes of the lesson, show them that the teacher cares about them and the topic, and create a better atmosphere in the classroom and fundament for better learning.

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