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TEACHING LANGUAGE VARIETY

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TEACHING LANGUAGE VARIETY

ABSTRACT

The Multiliteracies movement has stressed the importance of students learning to negotiate such differences as among 'regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects' and even 'the code-switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers' (New London Group 1996). The position that language learners should become familiar with such a range of varieties is not entirely new, but its bases and implications have rarely been explored at length, and even the recent book length treatment of Multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis 2000) says little more about the matter.

The present paper reviews literature relevant to this issue to evaluate the basis for this proposal and to explore its potential impact on language teaching in the twenty-first century. In particular it will consider:

- to what extent and for what reasons it is important for language learners to become familiar with different dialects and, in some situations, even distinct languages;
- how the teaching of language variety can be approached in practice; and
- how this issue relates to issues in the roles of language teachers, native versus non-native teachers, and computer assisted language learning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores proposals made by the recent Multiliteracies movement (New London Group 1996, Cope & Kalantzis 2000) about the importance of learning to cope with language variety; e.g:

Local diversity and global connectedness mean not only that there can be no standard; they also mean that the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects; variations of register that occur according to social context; hybrid cross-cultural discourses; [and] the code-switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers;... (New London Group 1996:69)

The Multiliteracies literature itself does not go very far towards justifying this position. If you study this literature you can see how it relates broadly to the Multiliteracies concern for 'Design', which is essentially a concern for how education in a changing world should help people learn to use and even reshape existing resources for various purposes, old and new, in an uncertain future. As Fairclough (2000:162) notes in the Cope and Kalantzis (2000) volume, this implies 'a conception of language which centres difference, change and creativity.' A concern for varieties also fits in well with how the pedagogical approach advocated by Multiliteracies includes 'Critical Framing', which should promote a critical awareness of the social implications of language choices, including choices of variety.

The need to teach a variety of registers does not seem controversial, but it seems worthwhile to go beyond the Multiliteracies material to look more closely at why it might be important to teach dialectal and even multilingual variety, and how this might be done. Accordingly we'll first review the relevant literature on second language teaching and then consider how these issues have manifested themselves in two rather different teaching situations we have been involved in, namely the teaching of English in Japan and the teaching of Indonesian in Australia. We'll then end by presenting our views of what this means for language pedagogy.

We will not consider the claim that 'there can be no standard' (New London Group 1996:69) further after the present paragraph. This and a parallel claim for English in Cope and Kalantzis (2000:5) seem idealistic, especially since they are themselves written in perfectly standard English. Among the proponents of Multiliteracies, Fairclough (1992:54) had earlier expressed what seems a more realistic position, namely that learners 'should be encouraged to develop the ability to use standard English in conventional ways when they judge it to be necessary to do so, because they will be disadvantaged if they do not develop that ability.'

DIALECT IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

To the extent the literature on second language teaching has considered questions of dialect at all, often it has focussed on which one variety should be selected for teaching (e.g. Corder 1973:205). The typical common answer can be seen in Rivers and Temperley (1978:154):

The choice of the kind of English to be taught will depend on several things: the variety the teacher uses, the variety used in the surrounding community, the goals of the students in studying English, and the resources (texts, tapes, other English speakers) that are available.

The same focus on a single variety can even be seen in recent discussions of World Englishes. For example, Bamgbose (1998:8) simply echoes Strevens (1980:90) in suggesting that 'For [an EFL situation], it is usual to advocate a native model, but for [an ESL situation], enlightened opinion will support the need to use a non-native model.' To similar effect, in his plenary address to the present conference Lin (2001) noted that there were many Englishes that might be taught in East Asia — e.g. American, Australian, British, and even Chinese English — and commented that 'We don't know which one to choose.'

Even so, the teaching of dialectal variety was advocated quite strongly as early as 1965. Bowen (1965:255-257) recommended exposing learners to dialectal variety even at early stages in their study of the language:

From very early in the language-learning process... a student should begin to develop receptive versatility by hearing different speakers (in person or recorded) in a variety of linguistic situations. It is my belief that this will not significantly affect a student's chance of developing consistent dialect habits,...

The second-language speaker needs this extra flexibility as a listener (or as a reader) of the language just as much as a native speaker does. In some cases he may need it more. It is my contention that the second-language classroom should be specifically geared to provide for this need, and that the way to do this is to provide multiple standards for all the legitimate variations of the language and to present these in a context of situations that is sufficiently varied to develop the kinds of adaptability and versatility that the student must achieve.

The reason Bowen dismissed concerns about dialect consistency is because he believed that 'a student who can approximate any native English dialect will usually be found doing satisfactory work' (p. 253). As for just how learners might be exposed to dialectal variety, in the above quote Bowen did make a brief allusion to the possibility using recordings, but at same time he commented on the difficult position of the teacher as 'very often the only source of language models and linguistic guidance available to the students' and who is yet 'in effect, being asked to provide vicarious experiences which will be a satisfactory substitute for growing up in a linguistic and cultural community' (p. 254).

After Bowen's (1965) paper we haven't found any other strong advocates for teaching dialectal variety until Loveday's 1982 book on *The sociolinguistics of learning and using a non-native language*, which similarly advocated what it called 'the honest and important task of modelling with variety' (Loveday 1982:174).

In a subsequent paper, Fairman (1988) pointed out how the ability of native speakers to understand speaker of other dialects implies a similar need on the part of second language learners. He accordingly advocated introducing learners to 'multidialect communication', although 'at a suitable stage above the primary, or beginners, level' (p. 124).

This conclusion itself is probably now widely accepted. For example, Harmer's 1991 text on *The practice of English language teaching* echoes Rivers and Temperley (1978) in giving criteria for choosing a particular variety to teach, but it goes on to

suggest that intermediate students can be exposed to several accents or varieties, even though beginners had best stick with one. Harmer (1991:28-29) adds that, 'Indeed, with the student of English as an international language it is vital that any competent user of the language is able to understand as many varieties and accents as possible.'

More recently, the French specialist Albert Valdman (2000; Auger & Valdman 1999) stressed the importance of exposing even beginning French students to dialectal variation 'Precisely because "any unfamiliar language sounds strange"' (Auger & Valdman 1999:408). He stresses that such an appreciation of dialectal variety should largely be only a receptive skill; for their active use he advocates teaching students what he calls a 'pedagogical norm', a term that apparently goes back to Valdman's work in the 1970s, although also used occasionally by other scholars. In practice a pedagogical norm would tend to be similar to a standard variety: its main characteristics are that it should draw on varieties that are actually in common use while also being in accord with native speakers expectations as to an appropriate norm for non-native speakers.

In another recent paper Youssef and Carter (1999) have described how a multidialectal approach is being implemented in the West Indies, with students using the local standard of English while also paying some attention to both the local English-based creole and to the overseas English varieties spoken by some of their teachers. The same paper belittles the 'fear of using dialect in EFL teaching', comparing it to 'the traditional fear among parents of exposing their children to two languages lest they become confused and retarded in their development' (Youssef & Carter 1999, p. 35).

While the second language teaching literature has thus occasionally advocated the teaching of dialectal variety, note the problem this raises for teachers: how can they model a variety of dialects? The West Indies program draws on the variety of models available locally, but in many situations the only convenient solution is to rely on audio-visual material. There is in fact a recent text by Gass and Lefkowitz (1995) that uses audio-tape to introduce students to English dialects and other varieties. Interestingly, the text itself does not present much of a rationale for studying varieties: instead this seems to be presented as just one of a number of options offered in a series for context-based instruction, the other alternatives including such things as literature and readings in business, ecology, and healthy living.

To summarise the literature at this point, it has often neglected questions of dialectal variety, but nowadays even such a popular text as Harmer's (1991) allows that students should be exposed to a range of dialects as they become more advanced in the language, and audio-visual material obviously can provide a convenient means of doing this. A few scholars have maintained that such exposure should begin early in the learner's study of the language. We do not see this as an 'either-or' matter: it may well be useful for beginners to gain an appreciation of dialectal variation from the occasional prominent example even though they may be ill prepared for intensive immersion in dialectal extremes.

We will now go on to add what we learned from our own experiences before we start drawing any conclusions.

TEACHING ENGLISH DIALECTS IN JAPAN

The second author (hereafter 'I') encountered questions of teaching dialectal variety while teaching freshman English in Japan in 1991-93. The students typically had

very poor spoken English ability after six years of secondary school English, and yet class sizes ranging from 36 to 56 tended to rule out much work on oral production. Accordingly I concentrated on improving their listening comprehension.

As an American with some fifteen years residence in Australia I was particularly conscious of dialect issues, and I actually asked my students whether they preferred to study American, Australian or British English — I didn't think about the possibility of Japanese English in those days. As one might expect, a majority said American, with smaller numbers expressing interest in British and Australian English.

One way in which I followed this up was by presenting a few short lectures, with written notes to support comprehension, pointing out dialectal differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, particularly between Australian and American English. To a great extent, however, students were exposed not only to my own, somewhat mixed Australo-American variety, but also to a range of other varieties through audio-visual material.

Much of the year was spent working through videos of American television programs, which included Black English of the sort heard of the *Bill Cosby Show*, as well as examples of midwestern and eastern American metropolitan speech. The programs were recorded from Japanese television, which provides both original and Japanese sound tracks on different stereo channels. Accordingly the students could first view the Japanese version so they would know what to expect, and then they worked through the English version over a number of sessions, filling in blanks in a script that gave them some context and any relatively difficult language. They thus listened intently and repeatedly to the English in these programs, which may thus have provided more significant models of English than my own speech.

I also used audio-tape to give them some exposure to British varieties. One example was an interview with a busker in an underground station in London. The accent on this particular tape was relatively difficult, in the direction of Cockney, but by listening to the tape repeatedly, students were able to pick out more and more with each additional repetition after discussing what they had heard from the time before — something on the order of a problem-solving approach to comprehension.

Such a heavy reliance on audio-visual material lessens the importance of the teacher as a model, thus minimising any advantage a native speaker may be thought to have. Indeed, it seems quite common for Japanese tertiary teachers of English to use videos and movies for language teaching (the movie *Splash!* seemed especially popular for this), and in fact such relatively authentic materials (in the sense of not having been prepared specifically for language teaching; cf. Nunan 1989:54) will tend to introduce students to a range of dialectal variation whether or not that is the teacher's intension.

Introducing my students to dialectal variety did not seem to raise any practical difficulties, and — fortunately or not — to the extent the students attempted to use English themselves their strong Japanese accents seemed largely affected by the dialects they were exposed to. Like Bowen (1965:252-253) I didn't see dialect consistency as pedagogical problem, 'since a student who can approximate *any* native English dialect will usually be found doing satisfactory work.'

LANGUAGE CHOICE IN INDONESIA

To move beyond the question of mere dialectal variation, recall that the Multiliteracies manifesto proposed that students may even need to learn 'the code-

switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers' (New London Group 1996, p. 69). It did not provide any example of such a situation, however, and certainly not one involving different languages.

Indonesia is a good example of such a situation: while Indonesian is the national language, most Indonesians also speak and use one or more of the various regional languages of the country. In many programs on Indonesian, however, the multilingual nature of the country simply tends to be ignored. The rationale for this is that Indonesian is the language for inter-ethnic communication, so that outsiders need not concern themselves with other languages, which are mainly used just within particular ethnic groups. However, there are reasons for believing that the situation is not this simple.

During some two years of research on code choice in Semarang, in Central Java, Goebel (forthcoming) found that both Indonesian and the local Javanese were being used for inter-ethnic communication in the neighbourhoods he was studying. The choice of language tended to depend on the degree of familiarity: those who interacted infrequently used Indonesian, but as people developed closer relationships they increasingly relied on Javanese. The same considerations can be seen in an inter-ethnic conversation reported earlier by Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo (1982:66).

This is not an isolated matter: a similar pattern of language choice can be observed in some Indonesian television programs. Several examples have been reported in detail by Black and Goebel (2000 and forthcoming) and Goebel (in preparation). One is presented in the appendix; it is from an Indonesian sitcom called *None*, which is set in a Sundanese speaking area in West Java. In this example a young woman uses Indonesian to interact with a stranger that comes to her house, but when she sees that the driver of the taxi the visitor came in is an old family friend, she greets him profusely in Sundanese. The average Indonesian television viewer may or may not understand the common Sundanese expressions — mostly greeting and address forms — but they surely appreciate the social significance for the language switch: the effusive greeting would have sounded oddly stiff in Indonesian.

In the above the use of Sundanese was between two Sundanese, but an example reported by Goebel (in preparation) shows Jakarteneze (or Betawi; see Wallace 1977) forms being used inter-ethnically in another nationally-broadcast sitcom, *Si Dul Anak Sekolah*. In this example a Javanese uses just a few distinctively Jakarteneze forms while speaking to the Jakarteneze mother of his girlfriend, but this is enough to signal an attempt at solidarity. The same character then continues in Indonesian alone to talk to a customer who enters the mother's shop.

It thus seems clear that Indonesian television viewers recognise the social significance of language choice, whether or not they can speak the languages involved. It thus seems reasonable to familiarise Indonesian learners in Australia to this as well, whether or not they might ultimately find it advantages to become more familiar with particular regional languages. As with teaching dialectal variety, this is not something teachers can do on their own, but the same Indonesian television programs that demonstrate the phenomenon could also be used to teach about it.

Goebel (1996) has in fact already used extracts from such programs in course materials for Indonesian teacher training. Even better would be to incorporate such materials in a multimedia database that would learners considerable choice in how to

access and interact with them; see Black and Goebel (2000) or Goebel and Black (in preparation) for a detailed proposal. Such flexibility is vital if one agrees with such CALL specialists as Lian and Lian (1996, 1997) and Hoven (1997) that it's really up to learners to make sense of the materials, and thus control must be in their hands. In any case the materials should not simply familiarise learners with particular examples of language choice, but also help prepare them to learn further from what they may later experience in visits to Indonesia.

This concern for "learning how to learn" matches up nicely with the Multiliteracies concern for Design and the adapting language resources to suit new purposes in the future, an ability that also depends heavily on Critical Framing, i.e. appreciating the social significance of language choices. For Indonesia one can take the Multiliteracies concern for design for an uncertain future a step further, since such recent political developments as nascent independence of East Timor and the continued unrest in Ambon, Aceh, and West Papua raise questions as to whether Indonesia can remain integrated or whether it may break up under the stress of economic, ethnic, and religious tensions (see e.g. 'Amatiran, penanganan kasus Ambon' 1999, Williams 1999). Could we perhaps be looking towards a future in which other languages will increasingly eclipse the importance Indonesian, as is already happening in East Timor?

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have presented a brief survey of the second language literature on teaching dialectal variety and described our own experiences with the teaching of English dialects in Japan and with the more unusual matter of language choice in Indonesia. Obviously we agree with the Multiliteracies movement with regard to the importance of acquainting students with language variety and the social significance of code choice, and we hope we have added a bit of substance to its proposals.

Note how this relates to the role of the language teacher. Individual teachers, native speakers or otherwise, can hardly model a range of dialectal variation, or the social basis for language choice in Indonesia. Of course, individual teachers have always been limited in the extent to which they can model the use of even a single dialect, except of course to the extent they are simply modelling language teachers interacting with classes of less fluent learners (cf. Widdowson 1998). Accordingly they have long sought assistance from audio-visual material. As we are able to do even better, on superfast computers with DVDs and gigabytes of memory, computerised multimedia seems increasingly able to replace teachers as providers of what Bowen (1965:254) described as 'vicarious experiences which will be a satisfactory substitute for growing up in a linguistic and cultural community.'

NOTES

Of the authors, Paul Black is primarily responsible for the material on teaching dialectal variety and Zane Goebel for that on language choice in Indonesia. We are grateful to Junaeni Goebel for her help with the transcription of the conversations from Indonesian television programs, and also to the ALAA conference participants whose comments on our oral presentation contributed to the further development of this paper.

APPENDIX

The following are from near the beginning of an episode of the Indonesian sitcom *None*, set in Bandung (West Java). A woman responding to an advertisement for a house to lease arrives at the house in a taxi. When she tries to pay the driver she pretends to have only a very large denomination note, and the taxi driver can't make change for it. Accordingly she goes to the front door of the house and has the following exchange with the young woman who answers the door, who she thinks is a maid but who is in fact the owner. Their exchange begins as follows, in Indonesian, including (in italics) some non-standard forms:

visitor: Ada orangnya *nggak sih* di situ? Heh!
Is anyone there or not? Heh!

owner: Ya.
Yeah.

visitor: Ada orangnya *nggak* di situ?
Is anyone there or not?

owner: Ada.
Yes there is.

visitor: Panggil, eh. Ada uang kecil *nggak*?
Call [the house owner] eh. Have you got any change?

owner: Ha? Ada kamar kecil? Ada *tu* di dalam, masuk *aja*.
What? Is there a bathroom? Yeah there is one inside, come inside.

After the visitor has gone inside, the owner notices the taxi driver and realises that he is an old friend of the family, and he also recognises her. They call out to each other, and with great excitement they have an exchange that begins as follows, more in Sundanese (in bold face) than Indonesian:

driver: **Neng** Dewi?
Miss Dewi?

owner: **Mang?** Heh! **Mang?**
Uncle? Huh! Uncle?

driver: **Neng** Dewi. **Neng!**
Miss Dewi. Miss!

owner: **Mang? Mang! Mang...**
Uncle? Uncle! Uncle...

driver: Ini **teh** **Neng** Dewi **téa**?
You're Miss Dewi aren't you?

owner: Ya **Mang**.
Yes Uncle.

driver: **Euluh euluh euluh mani** sudah besar begini ah; masih **ingat ka Mang** coba, he.
Gee gee gee wow you're already grown up; do [you] still remember Uncle, try [and remember].

owner: Ya masih **atuh** ini **teh Mang Mang kéheula kéheula kéheula kéheula, Mang,... Mang** Ucup
Yeah of course you [are] Uncle, Uncle, hang on, hang on, hang on,
hang on, Uncle,... Uncle Ucup.

driver: **Wah ketut damang Neng?**
Yeah how are you Miss?

owner: **Saé Mang.**
Very well, Uncle.

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