Nobody’s a Native Speaker of Everything: Teaching Language Variety and Indonesian Code Choice
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Abstract

Supposed advantages of native speakers over competent non-natives as language teachers tend to relate to their role as models of language use. However, if it is important to expose learners to language variety, as stressed by the recent Multiliteracies movement (e.g. New London Group 1996, pp. 69), then even native teachers can hardly model the dialectal variety or even multilingual code switching associated with some situations. The present paper first reviews the literature on familiarising learners with dialectal variety and describes how this can be done with the aid of audio-visual material. It then goes on to the more unusual case of code choice in Indonesia, showing why it is worthwhile for all learners of ‘Indonesian’ to become sensitive to the social significance of choices between varieties of Indonesian and regional languages, and pointing out how this can again be promoted through the use of multimedia material. Both concerns detract from the ability of teachers, native or otherwise, to serve as models of language use, although in the conclusion we’ll suggest that this issue may in any case be eclipsed by developments in multimedia-based and increasingly distributed approaches to education.

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Introduction

Recent literature seems to have left the supposed superiority and to some extent even the concept of the native speaker as language teacher in tatters; for book-length treatments alone see Coulmas (1981), Paikeday (1985), Davies (1991), Singh (1998), and Braine (1999). To the extent much of anything is left it tends to rest on a belief that native speakers are the best models for second language learners (for a contrary view see Cook 1999). Here we propose to snip off another bit from what’s left by pointing out the importance of teaching language variety — and how can any one teacher serve as a model of dialectal variety, or worse, of the social bases for language choices in a multilingual community? For such matters reliance on multimedia audio-visual material becomes essential, and hey, hasn’t it been there for decades to supplement or even replace teachers as language models?

Teaching language variety is occasionally mentioned in the literature but rarely discussed at length. Recently its importance has been stressed by the Multiliteracies movement, whose position we will consider before reviewing the literature more generally. After discussing why dialectal variation should and can be taught, we then go on to consider a more extreme case, namely the importance of familiarising students of Indonesian with the social significance of choices between distinct languages. Both types of endeavour tend to detract from the abilities of teachers, native or otherwise, to serve as models of language use, if not from their more important role as facilitators of learning. At the same time we suspect that such issues are likely to be swamped by a coming revolution in the teaching of language and culture, and we hope we can be forgiven for exploring this in a somewhat visionary conclusion.

The importance of teaching of language variety

The recent Multiliteracies movement (e.g. New London Group 1996, Cope & Kalantzis 2000b) has stressed the need to teach both multimodal and multivarietal communication. The former relates to communicating through not just written or even spoken language, but also such modes as gesture, graphics, sound, and spatial arrangement, as in multimedia presentations or World Wide Web pages. Here, however, we are concerned only with the second “multi-”, the matter of multiple varieties. In view of changes in societies and schools the Multiliteracies position is that:

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; the code-switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers; different visual and iconic meanings; and variations in the gestural relationships among people, language, and material objects. (New London Group 1996, p. 69)

Elements of this position are repeated elsewhere in the Multiliteracies materials, but not with much explicit justification. Ultimately the concern for language variety relates to a belief that ‘Curriculum is a design for the future’, as noted by Kress (2000) and Fairclough (2000) below.
...meaning-making is a creative application of existing resources for meaning (Design for meaning) in negotiating the constantly shifting occasions and needs of communication... (Kress 2000, p. 161)

What is implied here is a conception of language which centres difference, change and creativity.... In broad terms, this tradition stresses both the social diversity of language, the multiplicity of co-existing but socially differentiated forms of a language, its ‘heteroglossia’; and the possibilities for creatively articulating together these diverse forms of a language in texts which are mixed, heterogeneous, in terms of, say, social dialect or genre. (Fairclough 2000, pp. 162-3)

The claim that ‘there can be no standard’ (New London Group 1996, p. 69), later echoed for English by Cope and Kalantzis (2000a, p. 5), seems a bit extreme, particularly in works written in superbly standard English. Only eight years earlier, Fairclough (1992, p. 63) himself had allowed that learners should still learn ‘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.’ Accordingly we’re not going to debate the question of standards here.

With regard to dialectal variety, the classical question in applied linguistics was generally which one variety of a language the teacher should select for teaching; see e.g. Corder (1973, p. 205) and Rivers & Temperley (1978, p. 154). Interestingly the question often remains the same even in literature questioning the appropriateness of former colonial language standards in postcolonial nations. For example, a recent paper by Bamgbose (1998, p. 8) simply echoes Strevens’ (1980, p. 90) earlier advice that an EFL situation calls for a native model but an ESL situation may call for a non-native one.

A minority position on the importance of teaching even dialectal variety nonetheless goes back a long way. In an excellent paper on the linguistic variation in second language teaching, Bowen (1965, p. 253) dismissed the questions of whether exposing learners to dialectal variation might promote undesirable dialectal mixing or inconsistency in their speech by suggesting that ‘a student who can approximate any native English dialect will usually be found doing satisfactory work.’ He also 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 ‘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). Bowen doesn’t really suggest a solution to that problem, although on a later page he does allude to use of recorded material in presenting a recommendation on teaching dialectal variety:

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, but in developing a tolerance for differences in individual speakers a student
will have an opportunity to extend his tolerance to an acceptance of patterned varieties in the language....

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. (Bowen 1965, pp. 255-7)

We haven’t found evidence of anyone picking up on Bowen’s suggestions during the next fifteen years. Even in a book from that time that was actually written to provide practice with English varieties (Moody 1970), dialects were represented merely by extracts from novels by Dickens, Greene, Twain, Synge, and Hardy (pp. 101-12), cautiously introduced by the comment that ‘The enlightened approach to language includes a genuine respect for all kinds of dialect, but suggests the need in a modern community for all users of a language to be familiar with the standard form’ (p. 101).

The importance of exposure to dialectal variety received more attention in Loveday’s (1982) book on the sociolinguistics of second language learning, which stressed the importance of ‘modelling with variety’ (p. 174), but did not really say much about how to go about it. Somewhat more pointed is a later paper by Fairman (1988) that points out how the importance of coping with dialectal variation is implied by Hymes’ notion of communicative competence:

In fact, we are all multidialect users... We all learn to use several varieties of English, and competence is always multidialect, never unidialect. Since language is, as Johnson lamented, endlessly mutable and since we frequently meet people who use English in ways we have never met before, we must always be forming new rules in order to communicate. Up to a certain point,... our innate language acquisition device can cope with this variability by generating new rules for communication and misapplying old ones. (Fairman 1988, p. 123)

This is a refreshing view in a generation that has tended to continue to portray language as static, at least in terms of how it conceptualises and writes grammars. It reminds us of Langacker’s (1987, p. 57) attempt to develop the notion of a cognitive grammar as ‘a constantly evolving set of cognitive routines that are shaped, maintained, and modified by language use’ (p. 57), and which at least partially “sanctions” the ways others use language, thus explaining how we can understand varieties that we do not produce ourselves. In any case Fairman (1988, p. 124) concludes that ‘at a suitable stage above the primary, or beginners, level students should be introduced to multidialect communication in English, which will involve listening to, reading from and talking about other Englishes.’

Fairman’s conclusion, at least, is hardly controversial nowadays. With respect to English teaching, for example, Harmer (1991, p. 28) echoes Rivers and Temperley (1978, p. 154) with regard to how teachers might decide on which variety to teach, but he also follows this up with the suggestion that intermediate students can be exposed to several accents or varieties, even though beginners had best stick with one. He even goes so far as to note 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’ (Harmer 1991, pp. 28-9).

The policy of waiting till an intermediate level before introducing dialectal variation has been challenged by Valdman (2000; also Auger & Valdman 1999), who has been concerned with teaching students about French varieties “outside the Hexagon” (metropolitan France). His response to a proposal by Salien (1998) that this might come in the fourth semester of college study was quite scathing:

It is this pusillanimous pedagogical attitude that, before the generalization of communicative approaches, led foreign language teachers to postpone oral practice until students had mastered the basic structure of the written language and acquired an adequate vocabulary.... If adopted, Salien’s timid pedagogical strategy would deprive secondary school FFL [i.e. French as a Foreign Language] learners of any contact with non-hexagonal varieties. In view of the high attrition rate in basic college French course sequences, only a small minority of the “happy few” would have the opportunity to hear the diverse voices of Francophony. (Auger & Valdman 1999, p. 408)

While Valdman favours exposing even beginning students to French dialects, for their active use he favours a ‘pedagogical norm’. This should draw on varieties that are actually in common use while also being in accord with native speaker expectations as to an appropriate norm for non-native speakers, and thus one might expect it to be on the order of a colloquial version of the standard.

A search of the literature found few other papers concerned with familiarising second language learners with dialect variation. Maire (1990) discussed acquainting Swiss learners of French with relevant regionalisms, while Balboni (1990) and Repetti (1996) are apparently concerned with the teaching of Italian dialects. Youssef and Carter (1999) describe how a multivarietal approach, involving a local creole as well as local and more widespread standards of English, is actually being implemented at a branch of the University of the West Indies. In doing so they also belittle the ‘fear of using dialect in EFL teaching’ by suggesting it is ‘comparable with the traditional fear among parents of exposing their children to two languages lest they become confused and retarded in their development’ (p. 35).

The approach in the West Indies is to exploit the varieties actually spoken by students and teaching staff. There doesn’t seem to be much in the literature on how to implement familiarising students to dialectal variety more generally. One exception is a recent text by Gass and Lefkowitz (1995) that introduces students to dialects and other varieties with the help of audio-tape. Interestingly, the text itself does not present much of a rationale for studying varieties: this seems to be just one of the options offered in a series for context-based instruction (CBI), the other alternatives including such things as literature and readings in business, ecology, and healthy living. In any case, such audio-visual material seems a convenient solution to the teacher’s dialectal limitations. Let’s consider an actual examples from our own experience.
Teaching English dialects in Japan

One of us paid some attention to questions of dialectal variation while teaching English to Japanese freshmen in Japan in 1991-93. Since few of the students had much exposure to spoken English in their six years of secondary school study, the program used fluent teachers, popular American television programs, and audiotapes to help strengthen their listening comprehension. As an Australianised American I (the first author) may have been more sensitive to dialect issues than some teachers, and I actually asked the students about whether they preferred to study American, Australian, or even British English. About two-thirds preferred American English, but with some nominating British and a smaller number either Australian or ‘all the above’.

Much of what they heard were in fact American varieties, but ranging from the level of Black English used on the *Bill Cosby Show* to midwestern and eastern metropolitan speech in other programs and my own somewhat mixed variety. The television programs probably provided more influential models, since they listened to segments of them intensively and repeatedly as they attempted to identify the forms missing from a partial script that provided them with some context.

Later in the year audiotape was used to expose students to a British variety or two. One was a taped interview with a busker in a London subway. His accent was akin to Cockney and thus rather challenging, but by listening to the tape repeatedly, students were able to pick out more and more with each additional repetition after they had shared what they had heard from the time before — sort of a problem-solving approach to comprehension.

I also exploited my own, somewhat mixed variety as a model, not only though my general management of class activities, but also by presenting a few short lectures on differences between American and Australian vocabulary and pronunciation. Aside from this, however, little in the program depended on being a “native speaker” of English. Reliance on audio-visual material ensured that this would have been true even if I had not made an overt attempt to deal with dialect, of course, but I could not have done the latter without such material.

The exposure to non-American varieties was rather limited, of course, and how being exposed to dialect difference affected the students is not actually clear. It certainly never became obvious from the English the students themselves used, which tended to remain markedly Japanese over the year. I can only imagine the effect from my own encounters with dialect in Japanese as an advanced beginner in that language.

Learning about Japanese dialects

Introductory Japanese texts tend to ignore questions of dialect. Indeed, few have bothered to mark accentual patterns, which vary markedly between even such more central areas as Tokyo and Osaka. Mizutani and Mizutani (1977, p. xv) do better than most by marking accent as in ‘standard Tokyo Japanese’, but they otherwise do not mention dialect, even in noting that ‘intervocalic g’ is close to the “ng” sound of “king” (p. 17), which also tends to be true in Tokyo but not in Osaka.
My own Japanese remains poor, especially in my handling of accentual patterns; to echo Bowen (1965, p. 253) I’d be able to approximate any native Japanese dialect. After a succession of teachers, in-country experience, and now especially Japanese movies, however, I have begun to notice variation of several types, especially in register and style, but also in nativeness (e.g. the non-nativeness of the Peruvian Japanese taxi driver in the Imamura movie Kamikaze Taxi) and occasionally dialect, particularly dialectal variation in the pronunciation of g. My own pronunciation of g tends to follow Tokyo practices, but especially because I’m conscious of it I imagine it would change if I were to live in a place like Osaka for a time.

What is important here is my consciousness of the differences and their social significance, since this should help me choose dialects appropriate to such factors as situation, topic and interlocutor. This relates to the Multiliteracies position that pedagogy should include an element of ‘Critical Framing’ (e.g. New London Group 1996, p. 86-7), i.e. a critical awareness of the social dynamics of what one is learning. Learners may be imperfect, of course, as I question the importance of teaching those. #Paul I’m really not sure what you mean in this last sentence#

Questions of code choice

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). For registers (here undoubtedly in the broad sense, including styles) it seems clear that learners should be developing a repertoire that they can exploit as needed, and perhaps occasionally even mix within texts. For dialects, our preceding discussion tends to assume that learners would generally end up using just one themselves, such as Valdman’s ‘pedagogical norm’, but certain situations, such as Ferguson’s (1959) classic cases of diglossia, do involve people using two distinct varieties, one of which may be a regional dialect.

Consider the situation of someone planning to take up residence in a German-speaking area of Switzerland. High German is a recognised standard, but also a foreign one, so that it’s also important to learn the local Swiss German dialect and when to use each variety. To some extent the choice depends on what sort of “social message” one wants to convey. For example, Lee (1992, pp. 170-82) has described how both High German and Swiss German dialects can be heard in Swiss television commercials, with the High German signalling ‘power and authority’, as when a scientist expounds the merits of a product, and Swiss German signalling ‘everyday informal interaction’, including such feelings as warmth and friendliness.

Where students need to gain an active command of two or more dialects, their teachers are unlikely to have such a command themselves and thus have additional limitations as language models, whether or not such audio-visual material as television commercials might help demonstrate the social meanings behind code choice. (We say ‘additional’ because, just as in non-diglossic situations, learners may also benefit from exposure to local dialects beyond that spoken by the teacher.) Perhaps there may be analogous situations involving distinct languages in some countries, but for the one we are most familiar with, in
Indonesia, the practicalities seem to call again for a multimedia solution that minimises the importance of the teacher as a model.

**Code choice in Indonesia**

The language situation in Indonesia is complex. Most Indonesians could be regarded as native speakers of one or more of the hundreds of regional and local languages found in the country, although Indonesian continues to gain native speakers since its introduction as a national language during the last century. However, being a native speaker of Indonesian, rather than, say, Javanese, has never been considered any particular advantage as far as teaching that language has been concerned.

As the national language, Indonesian has generally been viewed as the main language for inter-ethnic interaction in Indonesia and by extension sufficient for interactions between Indonesians and foreigners (see Abas 1987; Lowenberg 1992, pp. 65-6, 70-1; Moeliono 1986, p. 30; Nababan 1985, p. 5, 1991, p. 119). Accordingly discussions of what varieties to teach have ignored the other languages and have focused instead on a distinction between standard formal Indonesian and non-standard Indonesian (e.g. Anderson 1983, 1984; Lukmana 1997; Sneddon 1990).

Actually, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that inter-ethnic communication continues to occur in other languages as well. During two and a half years of research in Central Java, Goebel (forthcoming) found that people from different regional language backgrounds often preferred to use Javanese with each other, rather than Indonesian. For example, the following exchange from a women’s neighbourhood meeting shows a Javanese (with the pseudonym Bu Joko) and a Sumatran (Bu Sumaryono) exchanging remarks in Javanese (properly low or *ngoko* Javanese, in bold face). (The names, laughter, and italicised bold face forms would be the same in Indonesian, but there is no reason to treat this particular extract as involving code-switching, although other exchange at the same meeting clearly did.) This particular exchange is about a neighbour who always helps prepare and pay for the Independence Day celebrations, but never actually attends.

**Bu Joko:** Bu Sumaryono *kih apal iki*. 
Bu Sumaryono remembers the [story].

**Bu Sumaryono:** *Apal aku apal. A:h, sanggup bayaré gampang, tekoné ra tahu* 
hahaha
Yeah remember I remember, able [to help out], always pays, [but] never comes hahaha.

**Bu Joko:** Hahaha
Hahaha.

It may not seem surprising to find Javanese being used by a Sumatran living in a Javanese neighbourhood, but this was not inevitable: others in the same neighbourhood preferred to use Indonesian in inter-ethnic communication, at least with some of their neighbours. This was particularly true of men in this middle income neighbourhood, and yet in a lower-income neighbourhood nearby even the men preferred to use Javanese inter-ethnically. What Goebel (forthcoming) found was that Indonesian tended to signal social
distance, but gave way to Javanese as people became more familiar with each other. Another example of this can be found in Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo (1982, pp. 66-8), who made a similar observation some twenty years ago.

Much the same pattern of code choice can be seen in some Indonesian television programs, which suggests that an appreciation of its social significance, at least, is well within the communicative competence of the average Indonesian. The following is an example from an episode of a popular series called Si Dul Anak Sekolahan [Dul an educated fellow], broadcast nationally by SCTV. A Javanese character called Basuki (played by a Javanese actor from Semarang) is talking to Nyak Leala, the mother of his Jakartanese girlfriend and an original inhabitant of Jakarta (Betawi) played by a Betawi actor. Basuki accordingly spices up his Indonesian with a few distinctively Jakartanese forms (in bold face), including the address terms Mak and Nyak (both used to mean something like ‘Ma’am’) and Bang (‘older brother’). The forms in italics can be classified as either Jakartanese or non-standard Indonesian, but see Wallace (1977) on whether Jakartanese should be considered a language distinct from Indonesian.

Basuki: **Mak, Nyak, Bang** Mandra sudah jalan toh?
Mak, Nyak, Bang Mandra has already gone heh?

Leala: **Udah.**
Yeah.

Basuki: **Kok tumben lho pagi pagi!**
Gee that’s unusual [for him to get up] so early.

Leala: **Iyé, mau ke rumahnya Munaroh**
Yeah, [he] wants to go to Munaroh’s house.

Basuki: Ke rumah Munaroh?
To Munaroh’s house?

Leala: Iya.
Yeah.

Basuki: **Ngelamar ya?**
He wants to propose [marriage] yeah?

Leala: **Nggak, cuma mau nanyain** kapan lamarannya bisa diterimé, **gitu.**
No, [he] only wants to ask when [is the best time to propose so that] it is accepted [by his girlfriend and her parents].

Basuki: Oh jadi belum ya **Mak Nyak**?
Oh so not yet heh Mak Nyak?

Leala: **Belom dong.**
No of course not yet.

Basuki: Atun ada **Mak.**
Is Atun [Basuki’s girlfriend and Leala’s daughter] around, Mak?
Leala: Ada Noh lagi sarapan.
Yeah Noh is having breakfast.

Notice how just the use of a few common Jakartanese form enables Basuki to signal some degree of solidarity with Nyak Leala. In contrast, Basuki uses Indonesian alone to a customer who comes in to Nyak Leala’s canteen as the episode continues on. For a similar example from an Indonesian sitcom that uses Sundanese and Indonesian, see Black and Goebel (2000 and forthcoming).

If the average Indonesian television viewer can appreciate the social implications of code choice, then perhaps foreign learners of Indonesian should gain some appreciation of it too. Certainly it would be too much to ask most Indonesian learners to embark on a full-scale study of a regional language as well, especially since they may not be sure which regional language might prove most relevant to their interests in the future (Goebel in preparation), but sensitisation to how languages can function as a mediator of social relationships can also provide a starting point for such study in the future. But how can such a sensitivity be taught? Even if they should happen to be fluent in two languages, how can individual teachers possibly model situations that make the bases for language choice clear?

This is actually part of the more general problem of enabling learners to explore and master the links between language and culture (see e.g. Rivers 1993, pp. 151-2; Kramsch 1993, pp. 27, 85, 180, 187), treating the act of speaking as a simultaneous cultural act (see e.g. Hall 1993, Kramsch 1993:240, Crozet 1996, Liddicoat 2000) and more generally recognition of cultural variation within and between countries (e.g. Byram 1997 and the collections in Heusinkkveld 1997, and Byram and Fleming 1998). This is what makes an exposure to authentic materials important (see e.g. Stern 1992, p. 188; Crozet and Liddicoat 1997, p. 7). As Kramsch (1993, p. 178) put it:

...authentic texts require participants to respond with behaviors that are socially appropriate to the setting, the status of the interlocutors, the purpose, key, genre, and instrumentalities of the exchange, and the norms of interaction agreed upon by native speakers.

We can again look to multimedia for a solution, and indeed, the very same Indonesian television programs that demonstrate the importance of code choice can serve as a reasonably authentic basis for familiarising learners with its social significance. Although scripted and acted, they are authentic at least in the sense of not having been produced for the purpose of language teaching (see Nunan 1989, p. 54).

Goebel (1996) has in fact already used excerpts from Indonesian television series in a program for the education of teachers of Indonesian. Such material could be exploited more fully by developing a multimedia database that allows learners to access a range of video clips in various ways, e.g. to compare and contrast them in terms of social relationship, speech function, and region within Indonesia; see Black and Goebel (2000) and Goebel and Black (in preparation) for a more detailed proposal along these lines.

Ideally such an approach would not only familiarise learners with language choice but would in addition be designed to promote learner autonomy (cf. Lian & Lian 1997; Hoven
1997, section 1.3.1) and give them the tools to continue to learn further during later visits to Indonesia (e.g. Barro, Jordan and Roberts 1998). This matches up nicely the Multiliteracies view of curriculum as a design for an uncertain future (e.g. Kress 2000, p. 161), and thus to help learners to not merely emulate some current competence but to be able to adapt language resources to future needs.

For Indonesia a concern for an uncertain future seems especially appropriate considering the nascent independence of East Timor and the continued unrest in Ambon, Aceh, and West Papua that raises 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?

To what extent sensitivity to language choice may be also important for foreign learners in multilingual situations outside Indonesia is not entirely clear, but the Indonesian examples may nonetheless suggest directions for future research; see also Moerman (1988) on code choice in inter-ethnic interactions in Thailand.

**Conclusion and prognostication**

The main point of this paper is that teachers, native or otherwise, generally cannot be adequate models of the sort of dialectal variety that learners of major languages often need to be able to cope with. It would surely be even more difficult for them to illustrate the social significance of code choice in such multilingual situations as Indonesia. Often, however, models of dialect variety and code choice can be supplied through audio-visual material, such as television programs authentic enough to entertain a “native” audience. The value and convenience of such material can increasingly be enhanced through computerised access and manipulation.

We haven’t really considered the alternative solution to the limitations of teachers as models of variety and code choice, namely simply not to bother. This seems to be a prevalent view considering the silence on the issue in much of the literature on language teaching. Certainly it was an entirely reasonable view some fifty years ago or more, when the use of audio-visual materials in language teaching was at best a novelty, and the teaching of dialectal variety tended to require multiple teachers or in-country experience. Without some such support, however, individual teachers are limited even in their ability to provide models of interaction in even a single variety, except of course to the extent they can model language teachers interacting with classes of less fluent learners (cf. Widdowson 1998). To the extent that language is joint action (Clark 1996), this is rather like a bird trying to fly on a broken wing.

We thus believe that relatively authentic multimedia material can do a bit better than the individual teacher to — in Bowen’s (1965, p. 254) words — ‘provide vicarious experiences which will be a satisfactory substitute for growing up in a linguistic and cultural community.’ This is not to say that such materials can effectively replace the teacher within today’s educational constraints, which typically timetables the study of a language into a number of set class periods within a given time, whether a semester or school term, and
gives harried teachers the task of finding something useful to fill in the hours. To fill those hours with computerised multimedia would be like returning to the lock-step language labs of the audiolingual era.

However, education in general is seeing the beginnings of substantial change, and language education is no exception. We know of one Australian company that has a contract for supplying English teaching to China via the internet, which allows access to Australian tutors as well as choices of instructional materials. However, high-bandwidth audio and multimedia material are being supplied on CD-ROM or (surely soon, if not already) DVD for local access to avoid delay in transmission. There are also provisions for local tutors in China. Whether or not the Chinese prefer to access the computerised lessons during set periods, there is no reason they would need to. Only local and perhaps internet tutorial sessions would need be scheduled, although a very large distributed system might well make one-on-one tutorials available twenty-four hours a day, and wouldn’t matter if the tutors were located in Australia, North America, Britain, or India.

Such a heavy reliance on multimedia can easily cater for dialectal variety, and indeed, it could hardly avoid some such variety to the extent the materials were reasonably authentic. The material currently being used by the Australian company are not: to avoid copyright hassles and payments they were recorded specifically for language teaching purposes and (to judge from the sample we saw) are prone to the slight artificiality typical of such materials. As such programs come to cater for not hundreds but hundreds of thousands of students, however, one can hope them to do better.

To project still further, we might even anticipate a time when language as an admittedly hefty tail will stop wagging the dog of culture more generally as programs broaden their focus from language to a more inclusive coverage of what learners need to survive and thrive in another culture. As Chen (1995, p. 155) has noted, there are aspects of culture that language teaching does not cover. The Multiliteracies movement is a step in the right direction with its emphasis on multimodal communication, but it does not get into aspects of culture that are not deliberately communicative, such as how to take a bus in Japan (e.g. you board through the front or the rear door depending on whether the fare is fixed or variable). A more general program could still strongly support learning the language by using it to elucidate the culture of daily life (as in content-based instruction), but undoubtedly a reliance on multimedia would become even more vital.

In any case such a distributed approach to education provides various roles for native and non-native speakers, including course designers, interactive tutors, and the models appearing in the multimedia material. The multimedia material is especially important in that it may be viewed again and again and again, and yet one might expect it to involve a range of native and non-native varieties, quite possibly including those of learners coming to grips with linguistic and cultural differences. And as for tutors, if learners should sometimes prefer a native speaker over a competent non-native who may be better prepared to appreciate what they are going through, then perhaps they can be given the choice.

We thus see little reason in general to favour native over non-native teachers, provided of course that the latter are competent enough in the language to act as resource
selectors/producers and more generally as facilitators of language learning. Our concern for the teaching of dialect variety and, in Indonesia, the social bases for language choice simply highlights the limitations of teachers as models of language use.

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