The Sociology of Language Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

This handbook is concerned with second-language teaching and learning, and this chapter focuses upon the social settings in which these activities take place. My title, however, omits the word ‘second’ because I intend here to discuss elements of the broader picture of which second-language learning and teaching are a part. While the formal context of the classroom is the focal point here, it is worth mentioning at the outset that the teaching-learning nexus very often—most often, perhaps, if we were to approach the topic from broad temporal and geographic bases—arises outside the school gates. Considering the longstanding and ubiquitous efforts by which people have expanded their language repertoires in response to real-life pressures and requirements, one might object that extra-educational linguistic settings suggest learning much more than teaching. But this is only to restrict the latter to formal and regularized procedures, and neglects the obvious fact that there is always a ‘teacher’ of sorts for every language learner. One might then imagine that studying the language dynamics of the home, the streets, the market and the workplace could reveal elements profitably transferrable to narrower milieus.

One might imagine that . . . and one would be right, because the impulse is exactly what underpinned the beginning attempts, a couple of generations ago, to make classrooms more like the informal places in which people interact because of immediate necessity or desire. A great range of approaches—from ‘language laboratories’ prioritizing conversational skills over grammatical precision, to field trips, to immersion programs, to study terms abroad—can be seen as emanating from this impulse. It seems so obvious now, and yet we recall that for a long time children in language classes had little or no exposure to the real social life of language. For most of them language learning was just another subject and, in the absence of any extracurricular activities (rare enough, and particularly so in anglophone settings), the results after years of formal study—after sustained emphasis on construal over conversation, on parsing over production—were entirely predictable.

Language diversity in the classroom falls into several main categories. In many (perhaps most) contexts, they are not to be found in ‘pure’ form and do not exist as mutually exclusive types. There are classrooms with children who speak either ‘foreign’ languages or non-standard forms of locally dominant ones. A third variant introduces speakers of ‘foreign’ languages who learn and use, sometimes before coming to school, one of those local non-standard forms. A fourth classification—involving another sort of non-standard usage—is one that now emerges increasingly frequently in
a world where English is becoming more and more globalized, but where its apparently permanent incursions are spawning sturdy local ‘Englishes.’ Teachers may expect to encounter more speakers of such ‘Englishes’ and, in the opinion of Ferguson (2006: 174), this will necessitate the replacement of ‘absolutist conceptions of what is proper and correct in language with greater flexibility and principled pragmatism regarding norms and models.’ To strengthen and broaden the point, one might add that any effect on linguistic ‘absolutism’ brought about by the presence of these variant ‘Englishes’ will also be beneficial where more indigenous non-standard forms are concerned. Two final categories reflect consciously specialized intentions: bilingual and immersion classrooms (each having variants along substantive, temporal and other dimensions).

Attitudes, Motivation, Necessity

Approaches to teaching and learning that try to bring classroom practices a bit closer to those operating beyond the school gates are clearly on the right tack. Attempting to replace decontextualized and often quite artificial environments with ones more related to ‘natural’ pressures and requirements is good. These attempts are easier in some settings than in others, and they imply degrees of relevance of favorable motivations and attitudes—although not always in immediately obvious ways.

Where social necessity is evident—consider, for instance, immigrants and their children in situations in which they must expand their language repertoire—classroom teaching is reinforced by extra-educational forces; in some instances, it may be driven by them. Conversely, where necessity is not a feature, schools act more in isolation and, needless to say, their task is much more difficult. These simple facts account for many of the disparities observed in the success of language teaching and learning. One need not be a Solomon to see that there are more difficulties teaching German in Nevada than in Nijmegen. In the Nevadas of the world (and there are many of them), the difficulty of creating an instrumental linguistic need means that favorable attitudes may become more important than in the Nijmegens; see also below, this section. Here, as already implied, schools have typically done a poor job. Traditional classes, with their emphasis upon grammar and writing skills, have often made the learning of languages a passive, receptive matter for students. This is hardly likely to induce in pupils any sense that learning German is a different sort of exercise than learning trigonometry or ancient history. It does nothing to reduce the artificiality of a classroom in which students (and often their teachers) routinely use a language which is neither the maternal variety nor one that can be put to any immediate use. It is neither an extension of the way first languages are acquired, in which communication is stressed and where grammatical refinements come afterwards, nor a representation of normal, interactive conversation. Language learning at school will always either benefit from externally imposed necessity or suffer for the lack of it.

The perceived importance of language attitudes and motivation, reinforced by the enduring difficulties in encouraging and maintaining interest in many classroom settings, have led to a specialist literature on language attitudes; Garrett (2010) provides an excellent broad-brush treatment, and the collection edited by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) focuses more particularly on language-learning matters. Throughout this literature, the general point is that favorable attitudes contribute to the ease and depth of language acquisition. The specific point is that the more such attitudes can be created and/or sustained in the classroom, the better. While a great deal of consideration has been given to the varied forms that motivation may take, to the ways in which it can best be encouraged, and to its intertwinnings with other personal and social factors, acceptance of its centrality has become the received wisdom among many scholars. As Gass and Selinker (2008: 426) point out, ‘motivation appears to be the second strongest predictor of [language-learning] success, trailing only aptitude.’ This implies continuing difficulties for formal teaching and learning contexts. At the very best, after all, schools can never be more than restricted microcosms of wider society; classrooms can never become streets.
It is many years ago now that Macnamara (1973) appeared to take the contrary view, that attitudes were of little importance in language learning. His argument remains succinct and noteworthy, as well as one that is insufficiently borne in mind. It reminds us that language learning frequently occurs outside the academic precinct. It is instructive even where it errs.

Macnamara first noted that necessity may overpower attitudes: someone who moves from Birmingham to Berlin will probably learn German. Confirmation of this common-sense observation was found in the report of a large-scale Irish survey: the use of that language was more associated with ability than with attitudes (Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research, 1975). As I commented shortly afterwards, this suggests that attitudes may often assume significant importance only after some minimal competence has been achieved, and not before (Edwards, 1977), and that, in ‘real-life’ settings, attitudes may indeed be secondary elements in language learning. Macnamara’s second point also had to do with language learning in those larger settings. He cited the adoption of English by the Irish population, a massive 19th-century language shift not accompanied by favorable attitudes. (We might note here that, indeed, most historical changes in language use owe more to socioeconomic and political exigencies than they do to attitudes.) However, he acknowledged that explanatory room could be made for attitudes of a sort: not intrinsically favorable postures but, rather, ones arising from perceptions of practical necessity. For example, while many mid-19th-century Irish people disliked English and what it represented, they also grudgingly realized its utility. No ‘integrative’ motivation, then, to cite a term popularized by Gardner and Lambert (1972), but a reluctantly instrumental one.

A useful distinction may be made between attitudes that are favorable and those that are unfavorable but positive (Edwards, 1983). A positive position is, stricto sensu, one of certainty or assurance: it need not be pleasant or desirable. To stay with the Irish example, while bearing in mind that the essential element here is widely applicable, one might say that general opinions of the English language, and general attitudes towards learning it, were positive and instrumental but not favorable (and certainly not integrative).

A final strand in Macnamara’s assessment brings us back to the classroom. He made the familiar point that language learning at school has traditionally been an unreal and artificial affair, an undertaking in which communication is subordinate to an appreciation of language as an academic subject. It was this lack of communicative purpose, and not children’s attitudes, that he felt accounted for their poor language competence. However, while it is clear that a great failing in language classrooms has been the absence of any realistic usage, it does not follow that attitudes are necessarily of small importance. To repeat: the argument that the classroom is an ‘artificial’ context may reflect a condemnation of traditional approaches, but it does not of itself indicate that attitudes are trivial. In fact, attitudes may take on quite particular importance precisely because of the disembodied nature of the traditional classroom. That is, if a context is not perceived as pertinent to real life, or does not arise from necessity, then attitudes may make a real difference.\

With even a minimal sense of the interactions among attitude, motivation and perceived necessity, it becomes easy to understand the major problems associated with teaching and learning foreign languages in ‘big-language’ contexts and, conversely, the relative lack of them among speakers of ‘smaller’ varieties. Both relative ease and difficulty are importantly related to contextual conditions having to do with power and dominance. This explains why so many anglophones (for instance) are monolingual; it also explains, incidentally, why the vast majority of second-language learners are learning English. In a world made increasingly safe for anglophones, there is less and less reason (or so it seems to many) to learn other languages. Swaffar (1999: 10–11) made some suggestions ‘to help foreign language departments assume command of their destinies,’ and the usual suspects were pedantically rounded up: a redefinition of the discipline (‘as a distinct and sequenced inquiry into the constituents and applications of meaningful communication’), more emphasis upon
communication and less upon narrow grammatical accuracy, the establishment of standards, models and common curricula (for ‘consistent pedagogical rhetoric’), and so on. These points are all very laudable but hardly unfamiliar and—more bluntly—not very useful. It has always been difficult to sell languages in Kansas: wherever you go, for many hundreds of miles, English will take you to McDonald’s, get you a burger, and bring you safely home again. A thorough reworking of ‘pedagogical rhetoric’ doesn’t amount to sale prices.

What about Spanish, in an America where the number of Hispanics has recently overtaken that of black Americans? The teaching and learning of it would seem obviously important. Beyond the implications of a very large Spanish-speaking presence (after Mexico, in fact, the United States is the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world), the language continues to be a major player on the world stage (its speakers constitute the third largest group, behind Chinese and English). Further, it has illustrious and ongoing cultural and literary traditions. It is the ideal American second language and, indeed, is the linchpin of modern-language teaching in the United States. For example, figures quoted in Edwards (2001) suggest that students of Spanish constitute more than half of all tertiary-level language learners. Everything is relative, however, and here one could cite other figures attesting to the very small numbers of language learners overall. Is the teaching and learning of Spanish in a healthy state in America, then, or does it only seem so in comparison with weaker sisters?

Just as it has often been thought right to work to eradicate ‘incorrect’ dialects and replace them with ‘proper’ standard ones (see below, this section and the following one), so schools have often considered, implicitly or directly, that the sooner foreign-language-speaking pupils engage with language shift, the better. At the same time, however, schools have always understood that the expansion of linguistic repertoires is an important facet of the educational process. Many obvious tensions arise here. For example, the same school that values and teaches French or Spanish may do little or nothing to recognize, adapt to, or build upon the Hausa, Turkish and Laotian that come in the door with new immigrant pupils. In scholarly eyes, all languages may be equal but, socially speaking, some are more equal than others. Social realities and widely held attitudes, and not any inherent linguistic features, dictate an emphasis on some languages and the ignoring of others. This in itself need not give rise to difficulties—unless, of course, the idea that those ‘others’ are intrinsically less important mediums is allowed to take root.

I now consider a little more closely the negative, unfavorable or ill-informed views that may be held by teachers, views that can hinder successful repertoire expansion or, indeed, efficient and supportive classroom communication generally—whether these desirable features are to occur in a language-focused classroom or whether we wish to encourage their emergence in all classrooms and with all sorts of instructors. I might also add at this point that all languages and dialects reflect and convey group identity. They are all markers of solidarity and belonging and, as such, anchor group members in the collective. We are not dealing solely with linguistic ease, or progress, or alleged amelioration; we are also dealing with symbols having considerable psychological and social potency. We should also remind ourselves that educational and social disadvantage underpinned by (among other things) inaccurate linguistic opinion and prejudice remains a great problem. Popular speech and language attitudes continue to hold certain dialects and accents as better or worse than others. There is no real difficulty, of course, in the possession of personal preferences, in the fact that I think Italian to be the most beautiful and mellifluous of languages, whereas you find the greatest music and poetry in Scottish Gaelic. But there are dangers when we imagine that we are arguing about substantive linguistic issues, about the inherent properties of one variety or another, or—worse still—about the cognitive attributes thought to accompany certain language forms. In all these ways, the so-called deficit theory of non-standard dialects and, indeed, of certain foreign languages continues to hold wide sway. The man or woman in the street may not be able to articulate this theory, may indeed be quite unaware that he or she has a theory, but it is the easiest thing in the world to demonstrate...
the continuing influence of a ‘deficit’ point of view: just ask people about ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ language (see, for instance, Lippi-Green, 1997; Trudgill, 1975). And, more to our purposes here, one would be naïve to imagine that this influence is absent inside the educational cloisters. Of course, I do not mean to single out teachers as the primary villains here, nor do I imagine that their attitudes and actions are anything but well-meaning. Beside the obvious fact, however, that they are members of society first, they are also on the front lines, so to speak, and their roles and their influences are incredibly strong in the lives of young children. This only strengthens the case for providing them with the most up-to-date and enlightened information about language and its ramifications.

Let me suggest, by the way, that ‘disadvantage’ is an accurate and useful term, provided that it is used properly as a reflection of group difference that is, itself, a product of social discontinuity and comparison. I have argued elsewhere (Edwards, 1989, 2010, for example) that it is simply incorrect to see social and educational disadvantage as having a genetic underpinning. Over the long historical haul, this has been the most popular view, but it is wrong: it is shot through with prejudice and inaccurate knowledge of the causes and ramifications of class and cultural variation. Nonetheless, precisely because the genetic ‘case’ has been such a longstanding one and, indeed, such a continuingly attractive explanation for group disadvantage, we have to recognize that it is hardly unknown for teachers to believe that the language ‘problems’ they encounter are of deep-seated hereditary origin, that these problems present obstacles to be overcome, that part of their job is to help their pupils replace ‘incorrect’ with ‘correct’ usage, and so on.

Inaccurate ideas about disadvantage having an hereditary basis do not exhaust the possibilities for disadvantage-equals-deficit positions. Environmental factors have also been cited as another logically possible source. The ‘deficit theorists’ whose influence peaked in the 1960s and 1970s argued that certain social contexts produced real and longstanding deficiencies. ‘Cultural deprivation’ was a phrase often used in the literature, even though a moment’s thought reveals that it nonsensically implies that a group is being perceived as deprived of another group’s culture—after all, it hardly makes sense to describe a community as being deprived of itself. The implication, in fact, was that poor and lower-class sociocultural settings were deficient precisely because they did not exhibit middle-class values and practices. Social difference was translated, in other words, into social deficit. This, unsurprisingly, was the heyday of ‘compensatory-education’ initiatives. In most writing under this rubric, deficits were seen to be virtually as deeply rooted as if they were genetic in origin.

There is of course another environmental stance, one that accepts the existence of important class and cultural differences but refuses to see them as substantive deficits. Rather, it attempts to understand how environmental variations produce attitudinal and behavioral ones, and resists the temptation to make moral judgements solely from middle-class perspectives. I suggest that this environmental ‘difference’ position is the only logically tenable one, although the force of social pressure and prejudice that can turn difference into deficiency admittedly remains very powerful. If potent ‘mainstream’ sentiments hold that class and cultural differences are actual defects, then academic conceptions of right and wrong may seem rather insignificant. Perception is everything. But perception can be based upon misinformation (or worse), so my argument is that we should make the different-but-not-deficient ‘case’ wherever and whenever possible. I need hardly repeat that it is an argument to be stressed in all teacher-education milieus.

It is, after all, particularly in linguistic contexts where the general deficit-difference debate has been played out in more specific terms. Indeed, the historically prejudicial perceptions that saw class and cultural variations as based upon real genetic or environmental deficits also saw language and dialect variations in the same way. The work of the late Basil Bernstein—whether the ‘real’ Bernstein or Bernstein misinterpreted—unfortunately provided a contemporary reinforcement of these inaccurate perceptions. Working-class language ‘codes’ were seen to exemplify linguistic deficiency or deprivation, and their speakers to possess a repertoire distinctly inferior to that of their middle-class
counterparts. The implications of this theoretical position were particularly important, inasmuch as they encouraged teachers and teacher educators to carry on with programs of instruction based upon a continued disdain and rejection of dialectal variants.

Lippi-Green (1997: 111) writes about teachers whose views seem to have ‘effectively summarized all of the conclusions drawn from Bernstein’s theories of restricted and elaborated codes.’ Walsh (1991: 107) found teachers of Puerto Rican children who felt that their pupils come to school speaking a hodge podge. They are all mixed up and don’t know any language well. As a result, they can’t even think clearly. That’s why they don’t learn. It’s our job to teach them language—to make up for their deficiency. And, since their parents don’t really know any language either, why should we waste time on Spanish? It is ‘good’ English which has to be the focus.

Could we ask for a clearer or more succinct statement of the ‘deficit’ position?

A final point here: some have argued that the sort of attention to attitudes that I have been reporting on here is rather passé. The discourse-analysis emphasis that has gained recent prominence in several language fields and sub-fields, for example, has tended to downplay more empirical investigations. Nonetheless, it often has less to say than some of the ‘classic’ work in language attitudes and stereotypes, at least in terms of practical and generalizable information of interest to teachers and others. It undoubtedly has contributions to make, particularly in conjunction with more ‘traditional’ attention to perceptual matters. Rampton’s ethnographic treatment of classroom discourse, for instance, points out that—while the attitudinal atmosphere at school with respect to the tolerance and treatment of dialect variation is not the same as it was in the 1960s and 1970s—perceptions of social class, its linguistic accompaniments, and the attendant psychological stresses, remain important. Writing of two pupils, he writes that

both Hanif and Ninnette had fairly clear images of the kinds of disadvantaged lives they wanted to avoid . . . working-class pupils might not be quite as fragile as sociolinguistics has sometimes implied, but everyday experience and a huge non-linguistic literature on class provides [sic] ample reason for taking class-related insecurities very seriously.

(Rampton, 2006: 320)

Generally speaking, it seems obvious that sensitive attention to the details of discourse and conversation can reveal many things of interest. Studies of gender differences in the classroom provide another good case in point here. Close analyses of verbal exchanges, of variations in the question-and-answer patterns of girls and boys, for instance, or of differential attention provided by teachers—these can be very illuminating (see Carr and Pauwels, 2006; Julé, 2004; Sommers, 2000).

Even some of its most fervent advocates admit, however, that discourse studies do not always reveal much that is new (an early critic here is Stubbs, 1984), and the level of detail in which they often revel is usually unlikely to lead to helpful educational actions and amendments.

As noted, small-scale enquiries can inform broader matters, and, to their credit, discourse analysts of most stripes are highly sensitive to cultural and class variations. Indeed, such variations are the very substance of their métier, particularly when we look at discourse-analytic work in its ‘critical’ versions. Nonetheless, my general contention is that the micro-level perspective associated with discourse analysis is not of the greatest or the most immediate value for the matters under discussion here. Further, I find that discourse analysis and its various offspring have become very inward-looking, increasingly tricked out in noisome jargon and much given to the highly specialized theorizing and fissiparous debate that one associates with weak disciplinary areas.
I am heartened to find, therefore, that the careful study of language beliefs and attitudes has not quite disappeared; edited collections by Kristiansen et al. (2005) and Garrett et al. (2003) are exemplary here, as is the work of Ladegaard (2000), Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006) and Garrett (2010). Many other scholars could have been cited; I mention these in particular because they cross many linguistic, geographic and demographic boundaries. There are also new (or revived) approaches that complement ongoing work on language attitudes, motivation, and the like. The emphasis upon ‘folk linguistics’ and ‘perceptual dialectology,’ which often represents a desire to get to grips with more fully fleshed language attitudes, is a vital modern sub-discipline, for example; see the overviews provided by Preston (1999) and Long and Preston (2002).

Classroom Dynamics

L’école est un curieux lieu de langage. Il s’y mélange les langues officielle, privée, scolaire, des langues maternelles, des langues étrangères, de l’argot de lycéen, de l’argot de la cité. À considérer toutes ces langues qui cohabitent, je me dis que l’école est peut-être le seul lieu où elles peuvent se retrouver dans leur diversité et dans leurs chevauchements. Mais il faut être très vigilants et justement tirer partie de cette belle hétérogénéité.

This quotation (from Steiner and Ladjali, 2003: 83–84) refers to the interesting and varied mixture of languages and language varieties that is found in the classroom. More pointedly, the authors suggest that it may be the only setting in which so many varieties exist and often co-exist, and that we should take advantage of this striking diversity. While the sentiment is one that most teachers and scholars—most enlightened people, indeed—would immediately endorse, we have already seen that the belle hétérogénéité of the classroom has not always been viewed in such a favorable light. In this section, then, I focus once more upon teachers: how do they interpret the sociological setting in which they work, and what do they take their roles to be? We are still, of course, essentially in the realms of perception and attitude. I begin, however, with a general and contextualizing observation.

Among my other academic activities and duties, I have often given talks to teachers and teachers’ organizations. These have typically dealt with the points of intersection among education, social class, language and identity. Such topics have always been of great relevance for teachers, however (or, indeed, whether or not) they understood them. Putting aside language teaching per se for a moment, and simply considering classrooms (most classrooms now, I suppose) as those sites of linguistic heterogeneity commented upon by Steiner and Ladjali, one might argue the following: whether it is a matter of accepting or rejecting non-standard dialects or foreign languages at school, of adapting classrooms to language diversity or attempting to maintain a strict monolingual regimen, of seeing school as a contributor to social change or as a supporter of some ‘mainstream’ status quo, of arguing the merits of ‘transitional’ versus ‘maintenance’ bilingual education, of promoting immersion programs or endorsing the neglect (often benign in intent, admittedly) that is submersion, of embracing multiculturalism or recoiling from it—in all these matters, the knowledge, sensitivities and postures of teachers are of no small importance.

Over several decades, however, I have been amazed and disappointed at how ill-prepared teachers typically are with regard to linguistic and cultural variation in the classroom. (This extends beyond ‘ordinary’ teachers, as we shall see, and takes in those trained specifically as language teachers; see below, this section.) The education of teachers often involves limited attention to such variation; even where it is considered, misconceptions persist. It is important to mention here that broadening
teachers’ linguistic awareness is not difficult to bring about. The evidence, for example, that Black English dialects are just as valid as any other English variants, that they are just as rule-governed, that their patterns of pronunciation and emphasis are just as regular, that they serve the cognitive needs of their speakers just as well as does any other form of speech—all this and more can be presented to, and easily understood by, anyone who has an open mind. So much the worse, then, that so many are still left to labor under stereotyped, inaccurate and potentially harmful illusions.

Andersson and Trudgill (1990: 179) write that ‘teachers who are prepared to take an open-minded, unprejudiced attitude towards the varieties of language spoken by their pupils will be the ones who also succeed best in fostering and developing children’s linguistic interests and abilities.’ We should expand upon this, and say that such teachers are likely to succeed best in developing all of their pupils’ potentials, but the observation also prompts us to consider how best we might facilitate the development of open-mindedness, linguistic and otherwise, among teachers (and others, too, of course). It is obvious that any approach must be based upon the appropriate presentation of up-to-date evidence bearing upon linguistic and cultural issues; for some specific perspectives, in a range of locales, see Beykont (2002), Gaine (2005) and Pearce (2005).

So, contemporary linguistic and cultural insights should be made available to teachers. However, while the ruling in the famous Ann Arbor Black English trial that required them to take courses in sociolinguistics may have had a useful influence on subsequent programs of teacher education, I don’t think that that judgement was necessarily the best precedent for all future procedure; see Labov (1982) and Lanehart (2001). Rather, I believe that careful and regular attention to basic language matters is the soil in which the sensitivities of teachers and teachers-in-training are most likely to grow and thrive.

In a lengthy review, Brouwer and Korthagen (2005: 153) point out that ‘occupational socialization in schools is a known factor counteracting attempts at educating innovative teachers.’ Like the rest of us, teachers are very susceptible to the cognitive and emotional tone of their surroundings. It is not to be doubted that such susceptibility is correlated with vagueness or ignorance, so that the issues on which one is least informed are likely to be those most prone to influence. A corollary is that attempts to replace ignorance with awareness are likely to act as inoculations against later susceptibility. To make this more specific: providing new teachers with accurate linguistic information about the competence of their pupils may disrupt a chain of ignorance and misinformation that is otherwise likely to continue.

A reasonable suggestion, often made, calls for the recruitment of more teachers who are from non-standard-speaking (or ‘foreign’) communities themselves. Quirocho and Rios (2000), for instance, suggest that teachers who are from minority groups will be more likely to demonstrate linguistic and cultural sensitivity in the classroom. But it is important to point out that minority group members who become teachers may, by that fact alone, be atypical of the group. Relatedly, the process of teacher training may tend to accelerate their middle-class socialization. (Rather more pointedly, Grinberg and Saavedra [2000: 436] note that once Latinos and other minority-group members ‘enter the system, internal processes of colonization take over.’) It is by no means clear, then, that increasing the number of teachers from particular ethnolinguistic or social-class communities will produce a commensurate increase in desirable classroom perceptions and reactions.

Some of my own research in Nova Scotia made it quite clear that prevailing perspectives made little room for non-standard English in the classroom (Edwards and McKinnon, 1987). In some schools there were sizeable groups of African-Canadian youngsters, descendants of those who came to Canada during the American civil war, along the ‘underground railroad,’ or who had been given land grants in return for service in the British army; in others, there were Acadian children of French-speaking background. An inability or an unwillingness to see such groups as anything other than aberrations in an essentially English/Celtic mainstream had the predictable consequences. They continue today, and not just in rural maritime Canada.
Flores (2005), for instance, presents a rather chilling chronological table showing that educational assessments of the 1920s—a time when Spanish speakers in the United States were sometimes judged to be mentally retarded—have now become condemnations of bilingual-education programs that prevent the most efficient acquisition of English. In another setting, Hélot and Young (2005: 242–244) show that, since the French educational system is still largely ‘envisaged from a monolingual point of view . . . it is difficult for most teachers to view the different languages and cultural backgrounds of their pupils as other than problematic.’ The authors suggest that, where linguistic diversity does seem to be mildly encouraged by the education ministry, this is ‘mainly as a policy to counterbalance the hegemony of English.’ Zientek (2007) has written about the general shortcomings of teacher-preparation programs in America; more specifically, she discusses the inadequate information provided about cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Work by Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) has also demonstrated the varied expectations that teachers have of children: Asian pupils were expected to do best at school, followed by European American children, then Hispanics and, finally, black children. Teachers were also found to be more encouraging in their interactions with those of whom they expected the most. The dangers of such stereotypic preconceptions are obvious, contributing as they easily can to self-fulfilling prophecies.

As parenthetically noted above, there is even evidence that the more specific training of bilingual-education and other language teachers has been less than adequate. Grinberg and Saavedra (2000) cite some representative comments that reveal how university courses leading to teacher certification are often of ‘little relevance.’ One trainee wrote that ‘in my preparation as a bilingual educator I was not prepared for the reality in the school’ (433). Another relevant observation: ‘living here in the heart of New Mexico, we have very fertile grounds to develop strong, effective bilingual programs . . . [but] the university does not have a good program to prepare teachers . . . there is no rigor . . . the content of the classes is minimal, at a low level’ (434).

If we turn to non-standard dialect varieties, we find that increased attention has indeed been given to a fuller understanding of their intrinsic validity; much of it, however, has remained within academic groves. A discussion by Siegel (2007: 76) shows how little ground has often been gained. Describing creoles and non-standard dialects in education, he points out that, despite several decades of sociolinguistic insight, accurate depictions of such varieties ‘have not filtered down to many educators and administrators.’ Zéphir’s work (1997, 1999) is also important here, as she draws explicit and telling parallels between the educational reception of creole and that of Black English. In a review of a book on Black English, Kautzsch (2006) points to the necessity for more open-minded and well-informed teachers, and for educational systems committed to ‘difference’ rather than ‘deficit’ stances on cultural and dialect variations. Godley et al. (2007: 124) provide a very recent classroom demonstration of the continuing assessments that equate ‘standard’ with ‘correct,’ and Black English with ‘incorrect, ungrammatical English.’

I don’t want to multiply examples unnecessarily, but an interesting longitudinal perspective can be found in the reports published by the American Dialect Society at 20-year intervals (1943, 1964, 1984; and Preston, 2003), reports outlining ‘needed research’ in dialect studies. In the latest of these, several authors write about the important linguistic demonstrations of the validity of Black English and other non-standard dialects, about the useful developments in language-attitude research, as well as progress in the ‘perceptual dialectology’ and ‘folk linguistics’ mentioned in the previous section. While virtually all scholarly writing about Black English has argued for the greater sensitivity to black culture and lifestyles that should logically accompany demonstrations of the validity of black dialects (the work of Smitherman [1981, 2006] is noteworthy here), it is sad to find that unenlightened stereotypes continue their baleful course. Relatedly, Wolfram and Christian (1989) note that, while researchers and those who teach teachers agree on the importance of information about dialect variation in the classroom, they have been hindered by the lack of appropriate texts. It is interesting,
to say the least, that during the years following Labov’s (1969) classic demonstration of the ‘logic of nonstandard English,’ little suitable teacher-training material was apparently developed.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has emphasized the importance of attitudes and motivation, and the ways in which they interact with perceived necessity. Such an emphasis can apply to virtually all classrooms, of course, because in what educational setting are perceptions and their consequences unimportant? Language and dialect at school, however, cannot be understood in quite the same way that we think of the useful contributions that ability and attitude can make to learning trigonometry, or botany, or even literature. There are several reasons for this. Children come to school with particular linguistic fluencies that are already more than mere instruments of communication: they are also elements of personality and social identity. Thus, when teachers wish, quite reasonably, to broaden the repertoires of children whose speech is non-standard, they run the risk of creating difficulties at home; where they hope to expand, their efforts may be seen as attempts at linguistic replacement. It is, after all, a delicate exercise to help children become bi-dialectal, to better face a world in which their maternal forms may be stigmatized, without implying that there must, after all, be something wrong with those forms.

Expanding the picture from dialect to language, it is easy to see that linguistic facility and flexibility underpin all other elements of education; they are, quite simply, more fundamental than anything else. While the learning of all subjects at school may provide specific tools for further progress, language is the general one that underpins all others. One may consider the existence and enlargement of maternal varieties, or issues surrounding dialect expansion, or the acquisition of second and subsequent mediums of communication—in all, language is the essential key for opening social and personal doors, preferred or required. Such observations are nothing more, of course, than the most familiar of truisms about human life, and this is hardly the place for trite statements of the obvious. Nevertheless, all teachers—not just those who are focused upon language learning per se—are necessarily deeply involved in language matters. It follows that the sociology of language teaching and learning has primarily and most importantly to do with the atmospheres in which they occur, contexts created or restricted by the perceptions of all participants. This is clearly the case in more ‘artificial’ and self-conscious settings. It is also true, however, in what seem to be the more ‘natural’ ones where didactics are (or seem to be) absent—because the behavioral effects of even real and pressing necessity are underpinned by perception.

**Notes**

1. Some of this chapter draws more or less directly upon Edwards (2010).

2. It is also worth recalling that the initial use of language-laboratory technology was often simply to individualize previously existing grammar-and-pronunciation exercises.

3. The results of my lengthy school language-learning efforts—exhaustive in many areas, exhausting in almost all—were surely like those of a great many other students. I became a dab hand at recognizing and reciting the *plus-que-parfait* du subjonctif but couldn’t understand bus drivers in either Paris or Montreal, nor (more importantly) order a *croque-monsieur* and a *bière* with any unselfconscious ease.

4. I am referring to English only here, but the points made can be extrapolated to other linguistic settings. I should reiterate, too, that the linguistic (and other) variants that children bring with them to school are things which virtually all teachers encounter. We are not dealing here with matters relevant only to language teachers.

5. I prescind here from the obvious point that ‘necessity’ may take many forms, not all of them instrumental in an immediate, practical or applied sense. What is instrumental is not merely that which emanates from or is necessitated by ordinary quotidian requirements. The language-learning efforts of scholars—or, to strengthen the point, of academic eremites—are just as instrumental for them as are those of the job-seeking immigrant. I should also add that, in any event, the traditional distinction between ‘instrumental’ and ‘integrative’ motivation is neither a firm nor a necessarily permanent one.
6. As of mid-2014, there were some 54 million Hispanics in the United States; this represents about 17% of the overall population (of 319 million). They constitute the largest minority group, with the black population standing at about 45 million. One estimate suggests that, shortly after mid-century, the Hispanic population will represent almost one-third of the country’s total. (These are U.S. Census Bureau figures; see www.quickfacts.census.gov.) The population of Mexico, incidentally, is about 122 million, and that of Spain is about 47 million.

7. Mackey (1978: 7) observed that ‘only before God and the linguist are all languages equal. Everyone knows that you can go further with some languages than you can with others.’

8. I use the term disadvantage advisedly. As long as we understand that it need not refer to innate linguistic ‘deficit’—and therefore has inaccurate and ill-informed connotations—then we reasonably revive its use. There is no question, after all, that individuals can be importantly disadvantaged in certain social contexts. This has nothing to do with inherited and unchangeable characteristics and everything to do with the power of social convention. For fuller discussion here, see Edwards (1981, 1989).

9. I feel quite strongly about this, particularly when discourse-analytic work purports to have applied educational value—so much so that, in my 2010 book on languages at school, I devote a chapter to ‘discourse analysis and its discontents.’

10. Even if there were no great likelihood of teachers encountering linguistic diversity in their classrooms (increasingly implausible as this would seem), I think that a good case could still be made for giving much more attention to it. All good education worthy of the name must surely be multicultural, and a logical implication is that any heightening of teachers’ linguistic awareness and sensitivities is a good thing.

11. It was in the context of large-scale immigration to the United States that Florence Goodenough (1926: 393) pointed out that ‘the use of a foreign language in the home is one of the chief factors in producing mental retardation.’ Having been a doctoral student under Lewis Terman—who developed the Stanford-Binet IQ test—Goodenough became a respected and prolific scholar.

References


