

# Setting standards and language variation

## A dilemma for language education

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In recent years, the setting of standards or benchmarks for teachers as well as for learners has been brought into education as one of the key mechanisms for accountability and quality assurance. Language standards setting is one of the top priorities for policy makers. This paper points out that while standards setting in education raises issues that are largely educational and philosophical, language standards setting is often culturally and politically charged. This is particularly so in English standards setting because of the long-standing association between English and colonialism and cultural and economic domination. The paper outlines a number of complex issues generated by English standard setting, including whether native or non-native varieties of English will be used as the model for determining standards, whether the same standards should be used for first and second language learners, how one determines whether deviations from the standard English model are errors or variations, and the social and political implications for adopting the standard or the local varieties. A brief summary of how each paper in this Special Issue addresses these issues is provided.

In the last two decades or so, policy makers in many countries have expressed concerns about the quality of students produced by their education systems. There has been a world-wide trend of bringing into education the kind of accountability and quality assurance mechanisms commonly used in business management. One of the key mechanisms brought into education in recent years is the setting of standards or benchmarks for teachers as well as for learners.

Amongst the concerns expressed by policy makers, language standards have generally topped the list. Complaints have been made, particularly by the business sector, that English standards are declining and that the education

system has been producing students who are illiterate in English, irrespective of whether English is the first or second language in these countries.

The reactions to such perceived failures of the system have varied from country to country. In the United Kingdom, for example, when a series of reports in the seventies and eighties highlighted such systemic failure, leading educationists and linguists advocated the inclusion of 'Language Awareness' in the curriculum, one objective being that children should be helped to master the standard language variety through which the school curriculum is delivered and examined, in order to ensure equality of educational opportunity (see Hawkins 1999). In places like Canada and the Hong Kong SAR, considerable emphasis has been placed on setting standards for teachers, with language benchmark assessments acting as a quality assurance mechanism. In Australia, literacy benchmarks were set for both second and first language learners. In the U.K., although much of the interest in language awareness, or KAL, 'Knowledge About Language' (see, for example, Carter 1990) has focused on the knowledge or awareness required by children, there has also been a growing interest in the language awareness of teachers, reflecting a recognition that any changes in expectations about the knowledge to be acquired by learners have implications for the knowledge-base needed by teachers.

While standards setting in education raises issues that are largely educational and philosophical, language standards setting is very often bound up with issues that are socio-political and cultural. As Pennycook (1996) observes, "educational processes and contexts of use of languages are bound up with a range of cultural and political ways of doing and thinking." (p. 133) This is especially the case in English language standards setting because of the role English played for decades as a vehicle for colonization. The spread of English and the economic and cultural domination that often accompany it have not diminished with decolonization. On the one hand, English has continued to have a strong presence in many post-colonial countries as one of the official languages or as an additional language. On the other hand, it is increasingly used as the lingua franca for international trade and technological advancement since it is the native language of some of the most powerful countries in the world.

Kachru (1985) represented the spread of English in the form of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle includes countries in which the mother tongue is a variety of English, for example, the USA, Britain, Canada, Australia. The Outer Circle includes many of the former British colonies where English was imposed as the official language in colonial days and where it has remained one of the official

languages since independence. These include Asian countries like India, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, African countries like Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia, and also the former colonial territory of Hong Kong ( now a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China). The Expanding Circle includes countries in which English is becoming more and more widely used, while still remaining very much a foreign language rather than an official language or a second language, for example, Japan, Korea, the People's Republic of China, and the USSR. Estimates of the users of English worldwide range from a rather conservative 700 to 800 million to a more liberal estimate of two billion (see Kachru, 1992). The next few decades will witness an unprecedented rapid growth in the number of English speakers around the world, fuelled by the advancement of technology and the use of English as the *lingua franca* on the internet.

This rapid spread of English has evoked different reactions among linguists and sociolinguists, as well as politicians and governments. Since the seventies, a number of liberal sociolinguists have called for the demolition of linguistic hegemony. Phillipson (1992), for example, coined the term "linguistic imperialism" to describe the spread of English as being analogous to economic and military imperialism. He saw the linguistic domination of English as not only economical but also cultural and ideological, and suggested ways of countering it by language planning policies. Others, however, took a more pragmatic view and saw the global spread of English as natural, neutral and beneficial. For example, Kachru (1986) maintained that the spread of English was a positive development in the twentieth century world context, regardless of the reasons for its earlier spread. For Kachru, the debate is whether a central standard should be maintained or whether different varieties of English should be legitimized. For many years, Kachru has been advocating the institutionalization of non-native varieties of English, hence the term World Englishes. According to Kachru (1992), the term "Englishes" "symbolizes the functional and formal variations, divergent sociolinguistic contexts, ranges and varieties of English in creativity, and various types of acculturation in parts of the Western and non-Western world. This concept emphasizes 'WE-ness', and not the dichotomy between *us* and *them* (the native and the non-native users)." (p.2). Kachru (1997) goes as far as to suggest that English is an Asian language.

The viability of World Englishes for *international* communication has been questioned, however. Quirk (1988), for example, maintained that if language spread is motivated by the econocultural model, that is, the spread of scientific information, technology, music and the conduct of multinational trade through

a specific linguistic medium, there is a need to establish standards that are “genuinely and usefully international” (p. 233). If a country’s long-term interest in English is econocultural, then the model of English that is needed is one which will not impede international communication. It is only when a country’s interest in English is merely for *intranational* communication that a local variety of English is feasible. Even then, argued Quirk, it is highly questionable whether any government would provide resources for teaching a model of English that can be used for internal communication only. Greenbaum (1992), arguing along similar lines, called on grammarians and lexicographers to research into the grammar and vocabulary used by educated speakers in countries where English is used as a second language, to make comprehensive descriptions of the variants of standard English that will not lead to misunderstanding in international communication, and to promote these variants.

In light of the debates surrounding varieties of English and the different reactions to the spread of English, setting English standards for learners and for teachers raises a number of complex questions:

- When setting English language benchmarks for teachers and learners, which variety is used as the model?
- Should the same benchmarks be used for first and second language learners?
- When policy-makers, educators and researchers talk about the importance of language awareness, what precisely do they mean, and of which language variety or varieties are teachers and learners supposed to develop an awareness?
- How do we determine whether a variation from the native standard variety is an error or a local variety in its own right?
- If the standard variety of English is the model for setting standards, are we not denigrating the local or the so-called “non-native” varieties of English (see Fairclough 1992)? As language educators and language teacher educators, by insisting that teachers and learners look to the standard variety as the model, are we not perpetuating the long-standing inequality between countries in the Outer and Expanding Circles and those in the Inner Circle brought about by the linguistic domination of English?
- On the other hand, will teaching a “non-native” variety of English disempower students, by hindering their access to higher education where knowledge is coded in the standard variety (see Hawkins 1999)? More importantly, will the adoption of a non-native variety of English actually disenfranchise its speakers from participating in the discourse of international politics and trade in which

standard English is the dominant variety, hence exacerbating the existing inequality? Would it not be more sensible to adopt Quirk's suggestion that non-native varieties should be used mainly for *intra*-national rather than *international* communication?

In this special issue, we invited contributors from countries in the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles to address the above questions.

Falvey and Coniam's paper outlines the process and mechanisms for setting English benchmarks for English language teachers in Hong Kong, the components of the benchmark assessments (the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers, or LPAT), and the criteria used in determining the benchmark level of performance on the LPAT test battery. The authors, who were responsible for setting the benchmarks, took care to ensure that they were not using the British or the American variety as the model against which teachers were benchmarked. They emphasize that the model used, which they refer to as an "educated" model of English, should be "fully acceptable to Hong Kong teachers of English and the Hong Kong public" and that it should be "wholly intelligible in an international context". They further clarify that an "educated" model of English for a Hong Kong speaker would be different phonologically from say, that, for an educated Singaporean speaker of English, but not so different as to impede communication. They also steer away from the distinction between native and non-native varieties of English, which could suggest the superiority of the former over the latter.

On the same topic of setting benchmarks for English teachers in Hong Kong, Bunton and Tsui address the question of the model of English that teachers are expected to measure up to by the community, including the government, the business community, the examinations authority, course providers and the English language teaching profession itself. They examine documentation as well as discussions amongst English teachers on a website set up for English teachers in Hong Kong, *TeleNex*, and report that there seems to be an implicit shared understanding that the standard variety of English is the norm. Upon analysing the English benchmark documents, they find that while the local community and government aspire to the standard variety, the English benchmark developers make a distinction between the standard variety and an "educated Hong Kong model". However, Bunton and Tsui observe that despite the efforts of the benchmark developers to dissociate their benchmark criteria from the native speaker norm, their descriptors for the highest level of attainment for the LPAT explicitly require teachers to produce language which

contains “no obvious L1 characteristics”.

The benchmark assessments discussed in Falvey and Coniam’s paper focus on teachers’ language proficiency. Andrews’s paper addresses another important dimension of language standards setting: language awareness or knowledge about language. He focuses on teachers’ language awareness (TLA) and discusses in detail the definition and measurement of an acceptable level of TLA. He then goes on to address the question of the model of English that should form the basis for the TLA of teachers of English as a second language. Andrews provides data from a survey of close to one hundred serving teachers on the use of the local variety of English as the pedagogical model. The analysis suggests that the majority had a negative attitude towards Hong Kong English, while over half of the teachers chose British English as their pedagogical model. This corroborates the findings reported in Bunton and Tsui’s paper. Andrews points out that the idealization of the “native speaker” teacher is a fallacy. However, he cautions against idealizing the “non-native speaker teacher” out of political correctness and post-colonial guilt. He calls for improvement of the English standards of teachers by helping them develop and broaden their language awareness to include language varieties that are accepted by the society as the appropriate target norms.

Davison and McKay focus on language benchmarks for learners and discuss in detail the common Literacy Benchmarks established by the Australian federal government for all learners irrespective of whether English is their mother tongue (referred to as “mainstream”) or their second language (ESL). They criticize such standards setting for all as reducing linguistic and cultural diversity into a standard Australian English norm, ignoring the very different language socialisation experiences that ESL students have and overlooking the interaction between their first and second language in the learning process which complicates but also enriches their literacy development. This kind of common literacy benchmarking reflects and propagates deficit views of ESL teaching and learning. The direction taken by the federal government, Davison and McKay point out, goes against the widespread recognition amongst teaching professionals in Australia of the reality of language learner variation and the need for separate standards to monitor and support literacy development for “mainstream” and ESL learners. They call for the development of an agreed set of standards for ESL learners that will provide teachers with a common language to engage in a discourse about ESL students’ learning in a supportive and productive fashion.

Davison and McKay’s paper cautions against a deficit view of ESL learning.

Similarly, it is all too easy to adopt a deficit view when dealing with deviations from the standard variety and to consider them as errors without trying to understand their underlying cultural meaning. Svalberg's paper reports on an in-depth study of the perception of the meaning of *would* by university students in Brunei Darrusalam, which showed that highly proficient Bruneian students perceive "would" to carry the meaning of non-factivity and hence non-assertiveness. This deviates from the perception of the meaning of *would* by their English native speaking counterparts. This deviation, however, has its roots in the Brunei culture, in which to speak too confidently about future events is considered arrogant. Therefore, *would* is used in the same way that Malay speakers use the expression "God willing" to express social distance. On the basis of the findings and her previous findings on the use of *would* by Bruneians (Svalberg 1998), Svalberg proposes the emergence of a nativized variety of English in Brunei Darrusalam (BNE) with discernable features which, though not institutionalized, already exists in practice in its own right. She concludes that the construal of the meaning of *would* is not only dependent on the linguistic input but more crucially on the cultural context in which the language use is embedded. Her conclusion has important implications for standards setting.

Gill's paper on the change in language policy in Malaysia since independence provides an interesting perspective from a nation which has tried very hard to rid itself of the colonial past, to build up its national identity, and to develop into an economically powerful country in Asia. It is the ambition to compete on an equal footing with the most advanced countries that has motivated Malaysia to move towards pragmatism, and away from nationalism, the dominant ideology for more than two decades after the country gained independence from British rule. In terms of language policy, such a move means reviving the status of English from mere school subject to a very important second language which the nation as a whole has to master in order to compete economically with the rest of the world. The result is an inevitable tension between nationalism and pragmatism. The following citation in Gill's paper shows how the Prime Minister of Malaysia has tried to deal with this tension:

Learning the English language will reinforce the spirit of nationalism when it is used to bring about development and progress for the country. ... True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language. (Mahathir Mohamad: The Sun, Saturday, September 11, 1999)

To ensure that learning English will not compromise national identity, Mahatir puts to his people that one reinforces the other. Yet, despite his efforts to portray the two as complementary, he betrays the tension between nationalism and learning English in the last sentence when he uses the phrase “even if”, which carries the presupposition that learning English is not desirable. In spite of this tension, the pragmatic concerns of Malaysia have motivated the country to move away from using non-native varieties of English to the standard variety. In her paper, Gill explains the change in language policy as follows: “Underpinning this complex journey is the constant pragmatic reminder of the crucial need for Malaysia to have a generation of people fluent in English as an International Language to help it realize its aspirations.”

It is perhaps ironic that while liberal sociolinguists keep pushing for the recognition of non-native varieties of English on moral high grounds of social justice and equality, this is not something that is welcomed by the governments in those countries where such varieties are found. For example, the Singapore government has battled against Singaporean English for years. Some of the people in these countries, particularly those in the business sector, are not at all keen to accept the teaching and learning of any varieties of English other than the standard variety. The reason is pragmatic: English is the language for economic development and technological advancement. These countries do not wish to be disadvantaged by the lack of access to a language that has international currency. Nor do they wish to pour money into educating their children to learn a language that has limited currency. Their sentiment is captured by an interesting commentary from the *Economist*, cited in Greenbaum (1992), on proposals to teach local variants of English in countries like India and Japan:

The English that such countries want is one that enables Indians to communicate not just with each other, but with the English-speaking world. Thank you for your tolerance, they say, but we'd prefer your standard English. (p. 23)

Shim's paper, however, provides a different perspective, from a country in the Outer Circle, Korea, which has been under heavy American influence for decades. The linguistic hegemony of American English over other varieties of English in Korea can be seen from Shim's 1995 survey data, which show that American English was considered the best model by Korean students. In the same study, speakers of Australian and Pakistani English were identified as students whereas those of American English were identified as teachers, suggesting that other varieties of English were viewed as learner English that needed improvement. Shim notes that, as recently as 1998, internationally



famous movies were rejected as teaching resources by university professors in Korea because the characters spoke non-native varieties of English. In the past four years, however, wider international collaboration and the rapid transmission of international news and events by means of electronic media have exposed Koreans to varieties of English other than American English. This has led to the realization by Koreans that the former are just as acceptable and respectable for international communication as the latter. Shim is hopeful that the concept of English as a World Language will be widely accepted in Korea.

Finally, Adamson and Kwo's paper tells a fascinating story of the changes in the English curriculum in the People's Republic of China and the ways in which these changes were tied to the political directions and sentiments of China's leadership, and its domestic and international policies. The paper traces various phases of China's history since 1949 and shows how the political characteristics of these phases were reflected in the English curriculum materials. In Gill's paper, we see how the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammed, deals with the tension between nationalism and pragmatism by trying to reconcile the learning of English with patriotism. In Adamson and Kwo's paper, we see a similar tension in the People's Republic of China, but on a much bigger and more intensive scale. On the one hand, English has always been viewed with mistrust by the Chinese central government and the Chinese Communist Party: it symbolizes imperialism, and learning English has an undesirable effect of polluting the minds of the Chinese people with western capitalistic values. On the other hand, it is something that China as a nation needs to master if it is to "play a role on the international stage", as a popular Chinese saying goes. This is why, as Adamson and Kwo observe, English remained part of the school curriculum even during periods of politicization, except for times of severe political turmoil dominated by extreme left-wing ideology, such as the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese way of resolving the tension was most remarkable: it appropriated the English curriculum to serve political goals, as shown in Adamson and Kwo's detailed analysis of curriculum materials. In heavily politicized phases, curriculum materials were vehicles for transmitting political messages and little attention was paid to the pedagogical rationale. In phases where economic development and international diplomacy were high on the central government's agenda, less tight control was imposed on the curriculum content and more room was given for exploring different pedagogical approaches. With the open door policy of the People's Republic of China and its participation in the World Trade Organization, English has become increasingly important in the school curriculum, and proficiency in English is now seen as

a desirable commodity by the government as well as by its people. The model of English to which they aspire is the British or the American model. There is as yet no question of a Chinese variety because the spread of English on a national scale in China has only just taken off. All deviations from the native standard variety are considered errors. However, this is a question that will emerge sooner or later, as English is more widely used in China for a wider range of purposes.

In this special issue, we have raised a number of questions relating to language standards setting. Contributors from countries of different socio-political and linguistic backgrounds have tried to address the questions from academic as well as political perspectives. We hope that this issue will generate further discussions on language standards setting, which is here to stay as long as education is in the hands of business-minded and managerial policy makers.

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