Toward Template-teaching

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1 Introduction

Like our students, we teachers are liable to forget what we have learned when the time comes to put it into action. The literature of ELT never ceases reminding us that we, many of us, subscribe to student-centered classes and preparation for real-world communication. We celebrate diversity and champion the interests of each individual student. In service to those causes we are willing to do battle with administrators -- and yet we may be unconsciously losing the battle within ourselves. Recalling some things we have known since earning our professional credentials can help us focus on what our students need from us rather than what we need from them.

2 Imparting identity

Here in Japan, a certain secondary school used to send students to recitation contests year after year with different names and faces but the same English-speaking identity: the same eerie chest-voice, the same magisterial delivery, and precisely the same native-like accent (in this case, a certain UK variety). Then there are the college students who produce this kind of English: "My dream is still not decide, but I like English, so I wanna get a use English job". Both effects imply that the communicative tail is wagging the dog of identity.

Such an effect may come from the student's own desire to emulate a particular native type as nearly as possible. However, some reflection on the experience of teaching EFL reveals many examples of teachers' attempts to determine

their students' English-speaking personae: the chiding of students for saying *yes* ("Native-speakers say *yeah*"), and the striving to convert students from *How are you?* to *How're you doin'?*.

Let's clarify what is wrong here by making a quick review of our professional foundation, with attention to three areas: (1) fluency; (2) sociolinguistic issues such as code and style; and (3) pronunciation goals for non-native speakers of English.

3 Alice in Wannaland

As the English language stands now, *wanna* is not a word, but a feature of **fluency** in certain kinds of native speech. Granted, it is not strictly an Americanism or even a modernism. There are Americans today who do not say *wanna*, and there have long been non-Americans who do (D. H. Lawrence captured it in the speech of English coal-miners). The point, as the foregoing example demonstrates, is that it has a jarring effect when removed from the appropriate landscape of cadence and syntax: a landscape that most of our students cannot hope to reproduce during their time with us, if ever. The same holds for *How're you doin'?* or *G'day* or *I dunno*. If we try to give non-native students instant fluency and cultural entrée through top-down learning of native-like effects, we will probably succeed only in making them come across as funny foreigners.

The disservice may be less apparent in the case of the Japanese schoolgirl who is trained to simulate the august presence of a well-spoken elderly woman, but it is essentially the same: instruction that goes beyond common language-learning needs and meddles with identity. The non-native student who accepts such instruction is liable, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, to undergo transformations that tend away from a coherent sense of self in the world of the second language. That thought takes us into a brief review of code, style, and pronunciation.

There is a famous case in which one socially progressive educator offended

others, and thereby drove the discussion of language-teaching principles to new polemical heights, with a project as benign as many of our own. That was Basil Bernstein, who in the 1960s tried to help working-class youths in London improve their educaticnal and economic prospects by teaching them the middle-class language of success (see Stern 1983). Bernstein identified language **codes** that prevail in different social strata. He found middle-class speech to be characterized by the use of an *elaborated code* that acts to isolate the subject of discourse and thus facilitate abstract treatment, while working-class speech is characterized by the use of a *restricted code* that relies on a context of mutual assumptions. He wished to help students from working-class families break the cycle of disadvantage by strengthening their command of the valuable elaborated code. However, many educators who shared his concern for social reform took the opposite view, which soon became ascendant: rejection of the unequal valuation of codes. Their denunciations of Bernstein for proposing a "deficit theory" of his students' language code resound to this day. Teachers of EFL who hold the same egalitarian view need to bear in mind that all language codes are complex systems; that the comparatively informal, intuitive, context-dependent systems are bound to be the less accessible to foreign-language learners; and that there are no rewards for picking up a few of their surface features.

Within and across the communal lines of code, there run situational lines of **style** (a concept often conflated with **register;** see Bell 1997; Holmes 1992; Tannen 1986, etc.). People address each other now as strangers, now as neighbors, now as lovers; as lovers in private or as lovers observed. They wear the hats of bureaucrats or of customer-service representatives. We understand, if we have been attentive students of language ourselves, that a given speaker's manner of speaking will vary in politeness, syntax, idiom, and even pronunciation, according to circumstances and interlocutors. As language teachers, we should understand that unless we can leave our students with a varied and accurate command of styles, we will serve them best by helping them acquire a manner of speaking that is never glaringly inappropriate.

As for aims in **pronunciation**, it makes some difference whether we are charged with teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as an International Language (EIL) (Jenkins 1998). If we are teaching EIL -- English to be used for many purposes in many settings beyond the historical Anglophone societies -- it is inappropriate to aim at native impersonation. Jenkins suggests that the pronunciation goal in EIL should be to communicate effectively while accepting local variations (one's own and those of others) as legitimate English. To maintain enough common ground for mutual intelligibility, she proposes

> a universal, realistically teachable and learnable core, based on the native model ('model' being singular in the sense that the designated areas are common to all native varieties), which can then be fleshed out according to a wide range of acceptable, local non-native norms
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> (Jenkins 1998: 124).

Even in EFL, which admits of a more sustained pursuit of some native norm, it is difficult to see why we should try to take our students beyond an indeterminate native-compatible accent and into the realm of culturally marked effects.

The literature of linguistics and language pedagogy, for all its attention to codes and contexts, has very little to say about **personality** as a factor in language use (but see Larsen-Freeman 2003 after Widdowson 1996). That is unsurprising, since personalities do not lend themselves well to the distillation of general theories. Outside the academic frame, however, there is no doubt that the world at large, like the English-speaking parts of it, contains both "wanna" people and "want to" people; magisterial people and mild people; vivacious people and reserved people; and various cultural standards of self-expression. Unless we take a deficit view of our students' cultures and personalities, we cannot justify ourselves either in trying to shape their English-speaking personae or in measuring them against some favorite communicative type of our own. Students of EFL, no less than students of EIL, are presumably entitled to play themselves in any language they may speak. Let's consider what help they need

from us in order to play the part competently in English.

4 In search of a language, not a voice

Near the beginning of this article there is an example of learner English. Here it is again:

My dream is still not decide, but I like English, so I wanna get a use English job.

Readers with experience of teaching English here in Japan may suspect that that example is a composite of common errors. In fact it is an excerpt from the written self-introduction of one college student, and yet it does illustrate two very common types of error:

- *is ... decide.* This is not just any faulty verb form, but one that points to a chronic and widespread habit among the intermediate learners at this student's school: trying to manage verbs by using their simple forms with various forms of the verb to be, as in *They were go home* or *She is live in Osaka.*

- *a use English job.* Formulating a correct alternative, such as *a job in which I can use English* or *a job that involves using English*, would be very difficult for this student or her peers. Even when the difficulty is less, many show a tendency to neglect relative pronouns and simply arrange bits of English in Japanese order.

When teachers compare notes, it seems that problems of this kind are indeed widespread among the intermediate learners who fill college classrooms in Japan: young people who have had at least six years of English study, some of whom have spent time in English-speaking countries where they may have picked up more of the style than the substance of the local language. Ironically, the presence of these illusory achievers can heighten the temptation to set premiums on fluency, verisimilitude of style, and output *per se*, and to set our- selves the facilitator's task of helping students "find a voice" in English when many are having trouble finding the English language itself.

With such tenuously intermediate learners, the need for vocabulary-building can hardly be overstated, and in Japan it is increasing. Under new guidelines introduced in 2002, the national government directs middle schools to teach 900 words of English (as opposed to 1,000 previously), of which only 100 are uniformly required. Students are to have learned 2,200 words by the end of secondary education: a narrow basis for communication, even for those who have thoroughly acquired all the words taught. Many students advance to the college level because, on a test or at a teacher's prompting, they can recall basic knowledge and functions which they have not really internalized for ordinary productive or receptive purposes. Nevertheless, at the two-year college in question here, more than 80% of incoming students express a desire to work in air-travel-related service industries after graduation. Some hope to work overseas, without any way of knowing whether their jobs will take them to Los Angeles or Singapore or both. They enter college to study general English and leave with the imprimatur of an associate degree in the language. If they do go on to the lives they envisage, they will not be needing decorative nativisms. They will likely need the ability to understand all the world's English on various practical matters and to address all the world in English that is both intelligible and accurate. That implies, above all, a much larger accessible vocabulary than most students bring to college. It also implies a command of essential verb forms and grammatical patterns, as well as pronunciation that is fairly transparent to all hearers. For teachers, it implies a general view of ELT that expands on Jenkins's view of pronunciation instruction in EIL: the view that we can best serve our intermediate students by helping them become firmly grounded in the core resources of English, and letting circumstances and personality develop that core in a manner appropriate to the experience of the individual. While this is by no means a new conception of a language teacher's mission, it may be due for a convenient name, such as "template-teaching".

Given a set of challenges and needs similar to those mentioned above, and given a decision to respond to them with template-teaching centered on vocabu-

lary and applied grammar, teachers can readily find a wealth of theoretical and practical guides. These include discussions of such matters as the mental lexicon (Aitchison 1987); pedagogical issues related to vocabulary-learning (Schmitt and McCarthy 1997); lexis-based views of grammar and language-learning (Hudson 1990; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992); and a basis for helping students learn grammatical language use rather than rules of grammar (Larsen-Freeman 2003).

Teachers who are free to choose or supplement their classroom materials and procedures can make a principled start with the aid of a handbook that moves quickly from theoretical considerations to concrete ideas for teaching and assessment (an example: Thornbury 2002). They might also design original materials based on a combined and modified collection of words from available lists such as Ogden's Basic English Word List and one or more of the most-frequent lists from the Brown Corpus (see Notes for sources). This will be partly a matter of making sure the student thoroughly understands those words that appear well up on the frequency lists by virtue of covering multiple meanings or parts of speech, such as *matter*, *set*, and *place*. In any case, it is important not to rely implicitly on frequency as a guide to vocabulary selection, since frequency-based lists tend to be long on function words and short on content words. It will be necessary to enrich any such collection with nouns and verbs.

The use of word lists as resources does not dictate a flash-card presentation; it does necessitate a conscious shift in the aims of materials and procedures toward intake of vocabulary and related syntax, at some sacrifice of attention to communicative performance. Template-teaching does not mean draining all the color from our classes. As the name implies, it does mean aiming to help students obtain a roughly coherent layout of the English language, fairly broad and fairly rich in elements but not peculiarly finished in any area, on which they can build according to future needs and tastes.

Nearly 100 years ago, the historian Henry Adams wrote (in the pronouns of the time), "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence

stops." It is a corollary of that statement that we teachers can never be sure what eternity will vindicate. We cannot even be sure what our present students will be glad to have learned, when their particular English-speaking roles in life have become clearer to them or when a few years have made them more discerning people. However, we can make sure here and now that we are working, not to produce sympathetic speech-mates for ourselves or conspicuous performers who will give our teaching the smell of success, but to help our students prepare for an extemporaneous drama in which they will step out on the world stage and play themselves in English.

Notes: Internet sources

Ogden's Basic English Word List:

(http://ogden.basic-english.org/basiceng.html)

Brown Corpus word-frequency lists:

(http://www.edict.com.hk/textanalyser/wordlists.htm)

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