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The influence of first-language bidialectism in foreign-language classrooms: observations from Cyprus

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The sociolinguistic phenomenon of bidialectism can significantly influence foreign-language learning. This study provides empirical evidence (drawn from the Greek Cypriot bidialectal community) for this influence and it supports the recommendation that foreign-language educators be trained in language-variation issues. The study's methodological basis consisted of observations of lessons in which English is taught as a foreign language and of students' written tests in the Passive Voice (PV). The findings revealed that, despite the policy that the standard variety (Standard Modern Greek) should be the only first-language variety used, the nonstandard variety (the Greek Cypriot dialect) is also commonly used alongside English by teachers. This usage was adopted by students who then tended to form the PV erroneously because they systematically avoided grammatical aspects (such as the Perfect aspect) which do not occur in the grammar of their nonstandard variety. The study contributes to the emerging realisation that first-language bidialectal issues need to be addressed in foreign-language classes.

Keywords: bidialectism; EFL learning; language variation; standard and nonstandard varieties; teacher training

1. Introduction

Educational issues concerning language variation and, specifically, dialectal variation have been under the spotlight in numerous parts of the globe for a number of decades (Cheshire, Edwards, Münstermann, & Weltens, 1989). This attention undoubtedly stems from the fact that language variation can profoundly influence factors such as social and economic inclusion and successful communication between diverse speech communities (Atkins, 1993). Traditionally, nonstandard dialects have been viewed as less desirable and even unwanted in school environments whereas the standard varieties have enjoyed prestige and an assumed linguistic superiority. Throughout the twentieth century and up until the present day, linguists have emphasised the structural regularity of nonstandard varieties and their viability for communication. The myths and misinformation that surround language variation have been extensively discussed (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998). It should therefore no longer be necessary to repeatedly make the case that, in linguistic terms, non-standard dialects function like any standard dialect. However, this well-established

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understanding is often ignored in the debate on the use of nonstandard varieties in education because entrenched social attitudes create another biased impetus (Adger, 1997). In many cases, it is these social attitudes that determine which linguistic varieties are appropriate for classroom use (Valdman, 1988). In reality, linguistic diversity in educational settings is a more multifaceted phenomenon than many past investigations have acknowledged.

This study aims to investigate the role of first-language (L1) bidialectism (i.e. the use of two dialects of the same language) in foreign-language (L2) learning. Specifically, it explores the effect that failure to formally address L1 bidialectal issues in education can have on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning. This is a topic that has not received adequate attention. Previous studies have assessed what influence nonstandard and standard varieties of the same L1 have on one another in terms of learners' performance (Giesbers, Kroon, & Liebrand, 1998; Williamson & Hardman, 1997a). In contrast, the current study relates these two varieties (nonstandard and standard) to learners' performance in a foreign language (a third variety). The study, therefore, deals with both bidialectal and bilingual issues and is potentially of interest to foreign-language educators in bidialectal communities, as well as to those with an interest in the interface of bilingualism and bidialectism.

The study uses the sociolinguistic situation in Cyprus as the vantage point for investigating the role of L1 bidialectism in L2 learning. The bidialectal Greek Cypriot community is ideal because Greek Cypriots have the Cypriot dialect (CD) as their mother tongue while Standard Modern Greek (SMG), which is the official language of the country, serves as the medium of instruction. English is normally Cypriots' first foreign language: it is popular and is considered essential for Cypriots' career development. Exploring the role of bidialectism in Cypriots' EFL learning is particularly relevant at this time when Cyprus, which recently entered the European Union, is reconsidering its foreign-language policy and is striving to promote multilingual and multicultural awareness.

2. The role of L1 dialects in L2 learning

The issue of dialect and education has been the object of intense passions and prejudice in different speech communities around the world: particularly active debates continue in African American (Mordaunt, 2011; Rickford & Rickford, 1995; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), Caribbean creole (Craig, 1981; Simmons-Mcdonald, 2004) and Australian aboriginal (Malcolm, 1999; Walsh & Yallop, 1993) contexts. In Europe, research mainly comes from the Netherlands (Hagen, 1989), Belgium (Van de Craen & Humblet, 1989), Switzerland (Ender & Straßl, 2009), Cyprus (Yiakoumetti, 2007a), and the UK (Cheshire, 1982; Williamson, 1990; Williamson & Hardman, 1997b). Despite the fact that considerable sociolinguistic investigation has demonstrated the benefits of incorporating dialectal variation into the classroom realm (Giesbers et al., 1998; Yiakoumetti, 2007b), educational policy-makers more often than not fail to incorporate this diversity into L1 and L2 policies.

As far as L1 policy and bidialectal learning is concerned, empirical work to date has mainly sought to elucidate the following research themes: the choice of which code (standard *vs.* nonstandard) to use as the medium of instruction (Siegel, 2007), teachers' attitudes towards dialectal variation (Haig & Oliver, 2003), students' attitudes towards their dialectal varieties (Papapavlou, 1998), and students' performance in the standard (Yiakoumetti, 2006).

L2 policy and bidialectal learning is divided into two main research themes: the role of linguistic diversity within the L2 itself and the role of L1 dialects in L2 learning. The former

has received a great deal of academic attention, especially in relation to the different varieties of English around the world (Adger, 1997; Kioko & Muthwii, 2003). The latter, the influence of L1 diversity on L2 learning, is an area that has received very little research attention. This neglect is largely the result of the fact that, in most past investigations, only one L1 variety (the standard) has been used in the L2 classroom. However, in this article, we deal with the way in which L1 bidialectism affects L2 learning. Previous studies which deal with this theme were mainly carried out in the 1970s and 1980s (Hameyer & Grosse, 1976; James, 1977; Karpf, Kettemann, & Viereck, 1980) and they focused on reporting the L1 dialectal features that were especially influential in L2 learner production. These studies dealt with both positive and negative transfer. More recently, research on the effect of L1 bidialectism on L2 learning has recommenced (Kouridou, 2007, Sittisakpaiboon, 2008).

Hameyer and Grosse (1976) showed that certain traits of Black English negatively influenced L2 German learning in ways that did not affect standard English speakers. The authors concluded that L1 dialectal influence is a factor that must be seriously and systematically considered when teaching foreign languages. They emphasised that attitudes towards L1 varieties are very important. In addition, they urged that appropriate teacher-training programmes be developed to familiarise teachers with the regional and social milieus in which nonstandard dialects are spoken.

In the dialectal setting of West Germany, James (1977) found that Swabian dialectal speakers had little trouble with certain English phonetic/phonological features that were difficult for Standard German ('Hochdeutsch') speakers. For instance, Swabians could effortlessly produce the English dark /ɬ/ which is a typical problematic item for speakers of Standard German, often pronounced as clear /l/. James (1977) explained that Swabians' positive transfer was the result of the phonological differences between Swabian and Standard German. Interestingly, his investigation also demonstrated that a number of potential positive transfers from Swabian to English were not realised because of Standard German influence. For example, a rising diphthong of Swabian, phonetically identical with English /əʊ/ was not transferred because it was perceived as sounding 'vulgar' because it is absent in 'Hochdeutsch'. James (1977) concluded that transfer into the L2 is a function of standard and nonstandard L1 varieties, both singly and in combination. He suggested that the interaction between Swabian and Standard German ought to be taken into account when preparing English teaching/learning materials. He consequently urged that a differentiated teaching approach to English phonetics be developed for Swabian and Standard German speakers.

Similarly, Karpf et al. (1980) aimed to show that source (i.e. L1) nonstandard dialects have an influence on L2 learning over and above the influence of the standard variety alone. Focusing on Styrian dialectal speakers learning English as an L2, the authors suggested that these speakers could positively transfer the Styrian diphthongs /ei/ and /ou/ which do not figure in Standard German, but which are target language phonemes. Karpf et al. (1980) emphasised the potential role of the teacher in transferring this knowledge in a systematic manner.

In a recent study, Kouridou (2007) provided preliminary results that demonstrate the pedagogical potential of bidialectism. She compared the English (L2) performance of two groups of Cypriot students, one of which was consciously exposed to both the CD and SMG and the other to the standard alone. The former group performed better in terms of both oral and written English performance.

Similarly, a more recent study carried out in Thailand (Sittisakpaiboon, 2008) also showed that Nyo dialect speakers could correctly pronounce the English phoneme /s/ which exists both in their native dialect and in standard Thai, but were unable to readily

pronounce /ʃ/ which exists in standard Thai alone. The studies above suggest that utilising both standard and nonstandard L1 varieties for learning a foreign language can have positive effects. The need for research in this field is just as pressing today as it was when James (1977) first directed our attention to the area in the 1970s. In the present study, we aim to contribute to the reinvigoration of research interest in this topic and to report the results of a study which illustrates how exploiting the pedagogic potential of L1 dialectal diversity in the L2 classroom could have beneficial effects for bidialectal learners. These benefits come about because bidialectal learners are placed in a position from which they can draw on relevant information from both of their L1 dialects while learning their L2.

3. Setting and significance of the study

Some familiarity with the Greek Cypriot sociolinguistic landscape is useful when considering the significance and generalisability of our findings. SMG and the CD mainly differ at the lexical level: words are found in the dialect that bear no linguistic relation to corresponding words in the standard. The two varieties also differ very significantly at the phonological and morphological levels and, to a lesser degree, at the syntactic level. (For a discussion of linguistic features of the CD, see Newton, 1983, 1983–1984.) SMG is mainly used in education, administration and the media and is generally associated with written production. The CD is mainly used in informal interactions with family and friends and is generally associated with oral production. (For a discussion of the domains of usage of each of the varieties, see Papapavlou & Pavlou, 1998.) The Greek Cypriot educational system formally requires the exclusive use of the standard variety in the classroom context and excludes students' actual mother tongue. In short, the fact that Greek Cypriots are bidialectal is effectively ignored in the educational system.

The role of English on the island adds to the linguistic complexity of the Greek Cypriot speech community (Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004). Cyprus has intimate historical links with England: in 1878, Cyprus was ceded to Britain and it was declared a British Crown Colony in 1925. British colonial rule lasted until 1960 and, as Swanson (1958) explains, it was during this time that many British English words were incorporated into the CD. More recently, Papapavlou (1994, 1997) demonstrated the lexical influence of English on the CD by providing a large corpus of English loanwords found in the dialect.

Nowadays, the perceived value of English for economic and professional advancement is recognised by all. English is a compulsory subject from the age of nine (i.e. from the fourth grade of primary education). More importantly, parents opt to extend their children's English learning beyond that provided by the state school instruction by registering their children for private tuition in English at afternoon language institutes. This private tuition is the norm, with the majority of children aged eight and above attending the institutes. The aim is to create learners who can perform to a high standard in international examinations. High achievement in such tests (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, GCE English) is coveted.

4. Research methods

The study was conducted in two classes in each of two private afternoon schools in the towns of Limassol and Larnaca between 2006 and 2007. These schools are broadly typical of private EFL schools on the island in that the teaching staff are all qualified EFL teachers and that there is EFL provision at all levels (i.e. elementary, intermediate, and advanced). Previous research on the island has demonstrated that students who

receive formal (linguistic and sociolinguistic) instruction on bidialectal issues fare better in both oral and written production in the standard educational variety (D2) than students who do not receive this formal instruction (Yiakoumetti, Evans, & Esch, 2005). Our assumption is that the effect of such formal instruction on D2 performance also extends to L2 performance.

We opted for an exploratory study that included observation of natural classes. In addition, we tested students' performance in the L2. During observation, teachers maintained their usual teaching style and were unaware of the precise aim of the observation. Three English lessons (of one hour each) on Passive Voice (PV) were observed for each of the four classes. Three teaching hours are normally devoted to teaching the PV in private afternoon schools on the island. Students were being exposed to the teaching of PV for the first time. Data were collected in the form of field notes and audio and video recordings. Students' immediate performance in the PV was measured through a test, which was administered after the completion of the PV lessons. The test was initially developed by the researchers and approved by the teachers who were invited to make changes to take account of issues such as students' level of competence, age, and the usual style of testing. The test included transformation exercises, which required students to transform entire sentences from the Active to the PV. This type of activity allowed for evaluations of students' ability to verb-transform and to identify the appropriate word order (*via* grammatical and semantic clues). One might argue that transformation exercises of this type do not satisfactorily measure learners' ability to use the PV appropriately. These exercises are sometimes deemed unsatisfactory because they assume that passive structures are generated in a mechanical fashion when we use language. These exercises were nevertheless used so as to be consistent with the activities with which students (and teachers) were familiar. Because students were accustomed to this method of testing, they were unaware that they were being tested for the purposes of this study.

The two schools were selected because of the availability of at least two classes of the same EFL level within each school. Students in two classes received EFL teaching through the use of both the L1 and L2 (Group A) and the remaining two through the use of L2 alone (Group B). The performance of students from each group was statistically similar prior to the commencement of the study. Controlling for EFL performance in this way facilitated valid comparisons among groups. The 32 Greek Cypriot students who participated in the study were aged between 12 and 13 years and all had been learning English for the same period of time at the private afternoon schools in question. The four participating teachers were also Greek Cypriot and had been teaching at the schools for a number of years. They had received qualifications in EFL teaching at the tertiary bachelor level, which is the norm for EFL teachers at Cypriot private institutes. The teachers were chosen based on their evaluations of their own language use: two teachers who claimed to use both the L1 and L2 and two teachers who claimed to use the L2 alone were selected. Prior to the commencement of the study, the Directors of Studies, the teachers, students' parents and students themselves granted permission for the study to be carried out. Student anonymity was fully preserved.

5. Findings and discussion

The findings relate to students' performance in PV transformation. This performance was measured via the written test described above after exposure to both the L1 (first and second dialect) and L2 in the first group (Group A) and exposure to the L2 alone in the second group (Group B). Overall, Group A fared better than Group B (a *t*-test showed a

difference that was highly significant, $p < 0.001$). Typical instances of Group B's underperformance related to subject–object inversion, and lack of recognition and consequent ill transformation of phrasal verbs. However, this paper focuses on the EFL performance of Group A and our discussion relates mostly to L1 dialectal issues affecting EFL performance. Data obtained from observation (in the form of video recordings) were consulted to complement the test results.

A distinct error pattern appeared repeatedly in Group A tests (but not in Group B tests, $p < 0.001$): the Perfect aspect was usually transformed erroneously. In cases in which the use of the Perfect aspect was necessary, students systematically avoided using it. We suggest that this specific error pattern may be the result of lack of instruction/training in bidialectal issues. Because policy has failed to address L1 bidialectism and the way it can influence EFL learning, avoidable negative transfer from students' first dialect (D1) to their L2 appears to have occurred. In principle, the CD, unlike SMG, does not utilise the Perfect aspect (Χατζηιωάννου, 1999). Unlike Greeks, Cypriots almost never employ the Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses. An example is given below to familiarise the reader with the way the Perfect aspect is used in SMG and the way it is avoided in the CD:

SMG: Έχω γράψει την έκθεσή μου

I have written my essay (Present Perfect tense)

CD: Έγραψα την έκθεση μου

I wrote my essay (Past tense)

SMG: Είχα ήδη φτάσει στο σχολείο όταν με πήρε τελέφωνο

I had already arrived at school when he called me (Past Perfect tense)

CD: Έφτασα στο σχολείο άμαν μ' έπιασε τηλέφωνο

I arrived at school when he called me (Past tense)

Careful analysis of the video recordings revealed the reason for the existence of the specific error pattern: contrary to educational expectations, the teachers used the CD more than SMG in their lessons. In addition, they never used the Perfect aspect in their interaction with the students. In fact, besides the Active/PV activities that required use of the Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses, teachers never used these tenses in either the CD or English. They always chose to use the Past tense. The language behaviour of the teachers clearly shows that they brought D1 habits into the classroom and avoided the use of the specific tenses. Moreover, they transferred these habits into their L2 usage which, in turn, influenced students' production. The specific error pattern indicates that teachers' and students' native dialect became the model in the classroom.

It must be noted here that both the Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses had been learned by the students before instruction in use of the PV. There was, therefore, no obvious reason to expect students to have a systematic difficulty with these two tenses. It must also be noted that other tenses that did not relate to dialectal differences did not pose difficulties for students. We would like to stress that this error pattern cannot be explained on the grounds that even L1 children or language learners in general make similar errors because the students of Group B did not commit such errors in their tests. Nor can it be explained on the grounds that even L2 learners who have a corresponding

structure in their L1 make such errors because, again, Group B students did not make such errors.

Examples 1–5 below demonstrate the negative transfer from students' D1 to their L2. The first sentence of each example provides the Active Voice sentence which students were asked to transform into the PV. Subsequent sentences (which commence with asterisks) set out typical erroneous student attempts at transformation:

(1) I have told the children about the party
*The children were told about the party / *The children have told about the party
(2) The secretary has given Mrs Jones some letters
*Mrs Jones was given some letters by the secretary / *Mrs Jones has given some letters by the secretary
(3) They have elected a new president
*A new president was elected
(4) We had warned him the day before not to go too near the canal
*He was warned the day before not to go too near the canal
(5) The traffic warden had already given him a ticket for illegal parking
*He was already given a ticket for illegal parking

It is obvious from the above examples that students had systematic difficulties with the transformation of the Present Perfect and Past Perfect tenses (examples 1–3 and 4–5, respectively). Most of the students drew upon the principles of their native Greek CD and incorrectly used the Past tense when attempting to form the PV sentences. The Past tense is used by a majority of students in all five examples, but it should be noted that, in examples 1 and 2, a minority of students did make attempts to use the Present Perfect tense that are closer to being successful. It is clear that students were aware that the sentences related to actions that occurred at some time in the past (as no student attempted to use the Present or Future tenses), but they were not in a position to identify and successfully form the appropriate tenses.

We argue that, if bidialectism is harnessed appropriately, it can have profoundly positive effects. The bidialectal students of the current study had two linguistic codes that teachers could have utilised to facilitate L2 learning. In fact, teachers could and should have provided students with examples from SMG, a variety that employs the Perfect aspect, to better explain the transformation of such tenses in English. As far as utilising the CD is concerned, teachers in Cyprus could draw from some common CD phonological items that do not exist in SMG (such as the affricate /ʤ/ and the fricative voiceless /ʃ/) to explain English pronunciation. In addition, they could take advantage of the vast number of English loanwords that again exist only in the local dialect. However, if bidialectism is not harnessed and students (and teachers) are not aware of the similarities/differences between D1 and D2 and how each could be used to facilitate the learning of English, tense errors such as those just described may appear. Teachers' understanding of dialectal variation is therefore essential for the support of students' L2 learning.

Regardless of the generalisability of the results to all Cypriot foreign-language classrooms, our findings are almost certainly indicative of the manner in which bidialectism may affect the foreign-language learning of other bidialectal students. Previous studies have shown that L1 dialects affect EFL learning around the world. The studies we cited earlier draw from German dialects (Swabian, Styrian and Standard German) and Thai dialects (Nyo and Standard Thai). Our research in the Greek Cypriot setting has added to this list with the aim of emphasising the need for EFL educators to be exposed to formal training

in L1 variation. It is thus becoming increasingly apparent that, in countries such as Cyprus, issues such as the regional dialect of teachers and students, the standard variety mandated for school use, and the policy regarding the role of the dialect and the standard in teaching/learning of a foreign language have the potential to complicate learning in the EFL class.

6. Pedagogical implications for foreign-language educators in bidialectal communities

Historically, in foreign-language teaching, the standard L1 has been assumed to be the source language and, consequently, contrastive materials have been based on a comparison of standard L1 and standard L2 (James, 1977). This study provides empirical evidence that L2 teachers would benefit from training in language-variation issues. The objective of such training should be to free educators from the limitation of using only the standard. Regardless of the pedagogical approach a teacher chooses to employ, all language educators need to be aware of the complexities of the linguistic context in which they operate. Teachers need to be properly trained in how to incorporate the linguistic codes of their speech communities into the L2 classroom for their students' benefit. To optimise the efficacy of this training, the role of students' mother tongue(s) must be emphasised. This issue seems to be especially relevant in bidialectal settings in which learners have two related varieties on which to draw. It may appear that the differences between standard and nonstandard varieties are minimal and thus that no formal instruction on their similarities/differences is necessary. This is to assume that, by simply avoiding drawing attention to standard/dialect differences, students will naturally tend to adopt the correct usage of the code that is endorsed for use in education. As our study and others have clearly demonstrated, this assumption is, of course, unjustified.

Can nonstandard dialects be used alongside the standard to draw comparisons with the L2? For the Cypriot setting, the answer is affirmative simply because everyone's mother tongue is the CD. It should not be difficult to introduce formal treatment of the local dialect into education because both teachers and students speak the CD. A consequence of such an introduction is that a greater amount of time will be spent reinforcing language variation. Sensitivity to language variation is a skill that Greek Cypriot learners already possess by virtue of their bidialectal abilities. In other linguistic settings that involve numerous dialects, it may be impractical to allow all dialects to be used in the classroom. In such cases, educators and policy-makers must carefully consider which dialects and, equally importantly, which combination of dialects can be harnessed most effectively for foreign-language learning. Additional factors such as speakers' language attitudes, whether the dialects involved are regional or social and whether the nonstandard-speaking population forms the majority or the minority of a country should also be taken into account (Yiakoumetti & Esch, 2010). However, not all language-variation policy decisions are setting-specific. Many of the more fundamental decisions such as the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and the development of multiliteracy are applicable to all countries with multilingual and multidialectal populations.

More substantive sociolinguistic education and training will also lead educators to the realisation that their own regionality is apparent in their classroom speech. The error pattern identified in students' performance in this study occurred because teachers, as they themselves readily acknowledged, were not sufficiently aware of issues of language diversity and of how their own dialects could affect students' performance. An appreciation of their own regionality should not cause embarrassment to teachers, but rather should be seen as a natural competence which can be effectively harnessed for pedagogical purposes.

7. Conclusion

The issue of dialect and education is not new. The current work represents an initial step in exploring this topic in the context of foreign-language learning. It has also examined some of the specific complexities of the issue as they manifest themselves on the island of Cyprus. One would readily anticipate that it is unrealistic to expect a 'dialect-neutral' (Wolfram, 1995) version of Greek in Cyprus. Nevertheless, Cypriots from different backgrounds (policy-makers, teachers, and parents) claim that schooling operates in the standard variety. In actuality, both teachers (Pavlou & Papapavlou, 2004; Sophocleous & Wilks, 2010) and students (Ioannidou 2009; Yiakoumetti, Papapavlou, & Pavlou, 2007) depart significantly from such practice in public-school SMG lessons. This study revealed that the dialect is also prevalent in foreign-language lessons. Teachers will be in a position to improve their support of EFL learners only once they have gained a greater awareness of the fact that the CD exists as a significant influence on foreign-language learning. Both teachers and students tend to fall back on any variety that is intimate to them. For this reason, conscious and explicit understanding of the connections among the different linguistic varieties is a prerequisite for optimising the learning of languages in the classroom environment. L2 teacher-training programmes that celebrate language diversity are thus required (Yiakoumetti, 2010).

Further work is needed to build on the current findings regarding the role of bidialectism in foreign-language learning. Research on students' L2 performance after they have undergone systematic and conscious exposure to L1 dialects in the classroom is now needed. Studies designed to inform on the eventual (rather than immediate) learning of the targeted linguistic features will play a critical role in facilitating our understanding of the effects of bidialectism. Students and teachers of foreign languages will enjoy compound benefits resulting from greater knowledge of the role of language diversity in education.

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