



Exploring Language Teachers' Evolving Conceptualizations of Language Variation

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Abstract

This paper examines conceptions that pre-service teachers of English bring to the term *language variation*, a crucial constellation of concepts in linguistics related to understanding the socioculturally variant nature of language. We review responses given to open-ended questions about language variation, focusing on statements made regarding this term at different points of professional development, looking particularly at how initial understanding of language variation evolves as a result of having multiple exposures to this linguistic concept across differing language courses. Survey questions related both to a definition *language variation* and to an assessment of the importance of this concept for the careers for which these respondents were preparing. Comparative content analyses of responses reveals that many pre-service teachers start their academic careers with differing preconceptions of language variation based on general use of the term. Though these pre-service teachers are sometimes reflective about aspects of variation, their early formulations are quite narrow in scope, often reflecting an incomplete or less sophisticated understanding of the term. Results suggest that, as these pre-service teachers extend their coursework, they also expand and refine their initial understanding of language variation, thereby gaining a discipline-specific and nuanced understanding of the term. Results also show broad appreciation for language variation, and development in the ability to articulate how awareness of variation might assist their teaching.

Key words: Language variation; Teacher education; TESOL; Awareness

INTRODUCTION

Curricula of language teacher education programs, including programs for English language teachers in kindergarten through high school and graduate programs in teaching English as a second/foreign language (TESL), reflect the assumption that knowledge of how language is structured, acquired, and used is fundamental to teachers' understanding of language learning and will in turn lead to more effective language teaching. These programs typically include at least one linguistics course that is designed to introduce students to variation in and across languages and help teachers meet the linguistic demands of ethnolinguistically diverse classrooms (cf. Adger, Snow & Christian, 2002; Bartels, 2005; Byrnes, 2000; Hudley & Mallinson, 2009) This assumption is further evidenced by the fact that the study of linguistics is among the core areas of knowledge typically offered to students in MA TESOL in the US and Canada (Garshick, 2002; Grabe, Stroller & Tardy, 2000) and also by the fact that there is a growing number of highly accessible materials designed to inform educators about linguistic diversity and variation (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007; Arndt, Harvey & Nuttall, 2000; Denham & Lobeck, 2005, 2010; Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Wheeler 2005; Wheeler & Swords, 2006) among others, as well as the popular television documentary 'Do You Speak American?' (MacNeil & Lehrer, 2005).

Despite the prevalence of linguistics courses in most teacher education programs and the said resistance of teachers to the relevance of linguistic study for their classroom practice (Curzan, 2002; 2013), there has been

little empirical research to examine how teachers use their linguistic training to inform their practice. One exception in the field of applied linguistics is Bartels' (2005) edited collection that examines how the study of linguistics and applied linguistics such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, second language acquisition, and the like, impact teachers' attitudes about language diversity and inform their pedagogy. The collective answer was that while in- and pre-service teachers of English as a first or second language clearly appreciate the information on language they receive as part of their professional development, questions of whether and how this declarative knowledge base is transferred to classroom procedures are quite complex. The findings reported in Bartels (2005) are corroborated by LaFond and Dogancay-Aktuna's (2009) survey of TESOL teachers' perceptions of the uses of core areas of linguistics for their classroom practice.

In this study, we focus on the learning of a core concept in the study of language—that of *language variation*—by language teachers and others taking linguistic classes. Our study is guided by the conviction that an in-depth, scientific understanding of the reasons, types, and systematicity of variation in language is crucial in learning to view language as a complex, socioculturally situated construct and for combatting stereotypes surrounding linguistic variation. This understanding is particularly important for elementary school teachers who are tasked with teaching standard English to speakers of non-standard varieties of English without conveying negative attitudes regarding the students' home languages/dialects. It is also important for those teachers working with students who speak a nativized variety of English at home, such as Indian English or Caribbean English. Furthermore, learning to see language variation and the resulting linguistic diversity as a natural sociolinguistic occurrence is an important step in combating the kind of negative judgments teachers can have of non-standard speech patterns as “restricted”, “wrong” or “inappropriate” (Haig & Oliver, 2003; Coelho, 1991) or their linking of students' cognitive abilities and work habits to the non-standard variety they use at home (Farkas, 1996).

For the purposes of this study, variation refers to the mostly systematic ways that some units of language differ (phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, pragmatically, etc.) either due to sociological factors such as ethnicity, class, sex, geography, age, etc., or due to contextual factors in occasions of acquisition or usage (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007). An important point to keep in mind regarding language variation in linguistics is that the term variation is also used in everyday language in a non-specific sense of ‘difference’—one thing is slightly different of another thing of the same type. A general, non-specialized use of this term may in some cases be restricted to difference that is viewed neutrally; for example, it may apply to whether one identifies an

object as a “couch” or a “sofa,” while a form viewed non-neutrally (for example, “climbed” or “clumb” as a simple past participle for “climb”) may not be considered “variation,” but rather as “error”. Thus everyday usage of variation would not completely reflect the nuanced understanding of internal variation found in languages, that is, the property of languages having different forms for expressing the same meaning/function, the existence of dialects that are distinguished from one another on the basis of their phonological, syntactic, lexical and discourse features, or forms that might arise at various acquisitional stages.

The use of the term variation in a non-scientific sense in everyday language can act as a filter in the scientific study of language. The set of prior assumptions about language, referred to as “preconceptions” in the literature (Shulman, 1987), that students bring to linguistics classes can influence how they react to new meanings and ideas (Farrell, 2008) and how they perceive and evaluate scientific knowledge (Richards, 1998). It is for this reason that educators have been talking about triggering conceptual change in the learners and helping to shift their conceptualizations of the subject matter from the basic, naïve, and sometimes misconstrued notions to a more scientific and discipline-specific understanding (Davis, 2001). The first step in teaching for conceptual change is to reveal students' preconceptions about a concept and then trace how these initial preconceptions evolve through new information and discussions (Nussbaum & Novick, 1982).

1. THE PRESENT STUDY

We attempt here to explore teachers' initial and evolving perceptions of language variation and the importance they attach to this concept as part of their professional development. The approach we follow is similar to those reported in Bartels (2005), especially Attardo & Brown and Edwards & Owen. In a survey study, Attardo & Brown (2005) compared two groups of students, those who had taken no linguistics courses and those who have taken one or more linguistics classes, to learn how pre-service K-12 students' attitudes and beliefs towards African American Vernacular English (AAVE) changed as a result of taking an introductory language course that focused on prescriptive and descriptive grammars, language use and variation, language structure and the history of English. Their survey results showed that that mere exposure to factual information on language variation in a single linguistics course leads to a measurable improvement in teacher beliefs and/or attitudes on language variation. Furthermore, this change comes even in the absence of particular critical reflections by the teachers and is also heightened by taking further courses in linguistics. They thus maintain that, “even a limited exposure to linguistics and sociolinguistics (only

one semester/course) effects significant changes in the reported attitudes of the students, as far as AAVE (African American Vernacular English) goes” (p.95).

In a similar vein to Attardo and Brown, Edwards and Owen (2005) used an introspective survey to examine the views of graduates and near-graduates of an MA TESL program regarding their views on how the study of language variation as a component of a sociolinguistics course impacts their current/future practice. In their survey, Edwards and Owen asked teachers to rate all the courses they took in their TESL program, in order to see how the study of language variation was evaluated in relation to other course topics. Findings in that study showed that about 57% of teachers view sociolinguistic study as being “essential” to their coursework. They point at the study of cross-cultural communication within language variation as being especially useful or relevant to their teaching (versus awareness of pidgins and creoles and New Englishes, for example). Also important is Edwards and Owen’s finding that those respondents who displayed a more sophisticated understanding of language variation also had more positive views regarding its study.

In our study, we also examine respondents’ understanding of language variation and we extend our exploration to examine student teachers’ initial conceptualizations of language variation and how these initial conceptualizations evolve through multiple exposures to language variation from different perspectives through different linguistic courses.

We make several critical assumptions in this study: First, that some specialized views of language variation are present in all of our linguistics courses, whether overtly expressed or not, whether the main theme of discussion or incidental to the topics at hand. Second, that various linguistic treatments of language variation can and do differ, dependent on the specific subject matter. For example, the use of the term variation in a course on second language acquisition may denote something different from usage in courses on historical linguistics or sociolinguistics. Third, that awareness of the broader range of uses may result in a more refined understanding of the term language variation, thus formulations of this concept will change through multiple exposures to the term in differing contexts.

From these assumptions, the following specific research questions emerge:

- 1) What are the initial conceptualizations of “language variation” that students bring to the study of language?
- 2) How do initial conceptualizations differ from the conceptualizations of those who have taken linguistic coursework?
- 3) How does students’ appreciation of language variation change, if at all, through multiple exposures to this concept?

1.1 Participants and Study Contexts

Thirty-one (31) students (77% female; 23% male) enrolled in two introductory linguistic courses (courses open to beginning graduate students and junior/senior undergraduates) participated in this study. The students were not all in the same courses; the participants chosen were selected due to their willingness to participate in the study. As shown in Table 1, ten (10) students reported no previous coursework related to linguistics. Nine (9) had taken an introductory linguistics survey course before, and twelve (12) had completed two or more courses related to language analysis. 21 out of the 31 participants could therefore be expected to have had at least some discipline-specific familiarity with language variation before data collection.

Table 1
Previous Coursework in Language and Linguistics
(N=31)

| <i>Coursework in linguistics</i> | <i>#</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| None | 10 |
| One (introductory linguistics) | 9 |
| Two or more courses* | 12 |

Note. * These were participants who had taken at least one other linguistics course besides an introduction to linguistics. Courses listed were syntax, phonology, semantics and pragmatics, sociolinguistics, grammatical analysis, and second language acquisition.

Sixteen of the participants had traveled abroad, six were born and raised outside of the US, and the remaining nine had never been abroad. All respondents were either pursuing an undergraduate degree in English Education for K-12 (kindergarten through high-school) teaching or a graduate degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. In terms of their backgrounds, these participants can be said to be quite similar to prospective English language teachers who will teach Standard English to children speaking a range of varieties and to learners of English as a second/international language.

1.2 Context of Data Collection

Data was collected twice from the subjects: first at the beginning of the semester and then again at the end of a semester. Some subjects were enrolled in more than one linguistic course while others were enrolled in only one.

Data was collected using a short survey that consisted of questions on students’ backgrounds, including previous coursework in linguistics and extent of study/living abroad, as these were considered to be events that could expose subjects to language variation, followed by two open-ended questions on participants’ understanding of the concept of language variation and their views on the importance of an awareness of language variation for their careers (see Appendix) The first data collection took place at the beginning of a semester to obtain data from those participants that had no previous experience with linguistic study. A second set of data was collected at the end of the same semester. Participants’ responses were

analyzed qualitatively and comparatively to examine what types of initial conceptualizations students had of language variation and how these conceptualizations evolved in line with the number of linguistics courses subjects had completed.

The understanding of “variation” in the differing courses from which data was collected depended on the course. For example, a course on language and society had a primary focus on language variation as identifiable differences underlying the study of dialects, cross-cultural pragmatics, and language and culture relationships. By contrast, in a course on second language acquisition, variation or variability was viewed as an inherent part of the learner’s developing system, a “source of development and the indicator of a specific moment in the developmental process...” (Dijk, 2003, p.129). These somewhat differing foci on variation, dependent on the subject matter, were in keeping with our assumptions about the development of conceptual understanding, i.e., that awareness of a range of uses of a term might result in a more refined understanding of that term and that this awareness may grow through multiple exposures to the term in differing contexts.

2. RESULTS ANALYSES

Our first research questions asked, “What are the initial conceptualization of ‘language variation’ that students bring to the study of language?” To address this question, students were directly queried, “What does the term ‘language variation’ mean to you, if anything?”

Exploring students’ understanding of any specialized concept that relies on terminology in common parlance is challenging. For example, most students had little trouble manufacturing educated guesses regarding a term such as variation. Most students, though not all, were able to minimally venture guesses that would be consistent with a general definition of the words language and variation. This is unsurprising. Unlike some academic fields (e.g., Advanced Physics, Chemistry, or Mathematics) a great many of the terms used even in specialized studies of language can be deciphered prior to instruction. The challenge remains to understand precisely the use of variation in a given context and this task may actually be exacerbated by the existence of previous knowledge. Attempts by students to define ‘variation’ in our study met, as might be expected, with differing levels of success.

2.1 Students Without Prior Linguistic Coursework

The responses to the question of what language variation meant to new students of linguistics varied from general, unclear comments on one end of a continuum, to somewhat more nuanced and articulated on the other end. One respondent stated, “Language variation means

the way we choose to communicate. This changes with audience, setting, subject, matter, and purpose.” This student was, in fact, naming the kinds of variation terms one might find in an English composition class. Another respondent focused on dialectal variation, albeit in an impressionistic manner based on hearing differences in speaking patterns in film: “Due to an interest in British literature and film, I have observed the differences between British and American English in general, as well as having heard a number of different British dialects.” Still another respondent demonstrated awareness of the multi-faceted use of ‘variation’ spanning different languages, contexts, and socio-cultural differences. Four of our respondents, in contrast, mentioned these same items but focused only on one specific piece of this multi-faceted usage. One respondent made specific reference to structural differences (“I think it means differences or variations from one language to another, for example one variation, between the Spanish and English language is syntax,”), while another respondent viewed variation as differences in the acquisitional process (“Language variation means that there are differences in language or learning itself. It is different for everyone in how they acquire it”). Yet another respondent made reference to broader communication differences in, for example, non-verbal behavior or in differing communicative choices for expressing meaning.

Thus, the range of responses was quite broad, some viewing variation internal to a language (or a learner), some viewing it as differences between languages or how languages are learned, some focusing on sociolinguistic factors, and others focusing on variability of tasks of capabilities of learners. It should be noted that none of these answers are necessarily wrong. “Language Variation” is a large term and has been applied in different ways, at different times, by different people. Our interest here was in the kinds of definitions our respondents would give at this early stage of development; nevertheless, although not specifically formulated as a research question, we also wondered whether the context in which respondents were being asked about language variation would affect their answers. The definition that we as teachers might use in our course on “Language in Society” (ENG 416 in the current study) (which would involve the way languages are formed and used, including matters of age, gender, communities of practice, education, and identity) would very likely differ in emphasis from a definition that we might give in a course in “Second Language Acquisition” (ENG 468 in the current study) (one that might include external sociocultural variables, but highlight variability that appears during acquisition due to—depending on one’s theoretical perspective—parameter resetting, constraint re-ranking, transfer, strategies, aptitude, etc.)

2.2 Students Who Had Taken One Course in Linguistics

Contextualization of responses regarding language variation does show up in our data set, but only among those who have already taken at least some coursework in linguistics. Presumably, students who have taken linguistics courses would be more likely to possess a more refined understanding of the term language variation, or at least have a more capacious semantic set related to this term.

Evidence for the assumption of terminological growth is revealed by data in our study, since among this group we find more expansive and insightful responses. One respondent highlighted that "...variation is a direct result of different factors such as social and economical level, education, origin of birth place, gender, age. All these factors affect the way people say things," while another stated, "Language variation can be explained from different perspectives: dialect variation, historical (etymological) variation, variation from language to language." Most responses within this group were answers that were less restrictive, revealing acquaintance with specific terminology associated with linguistics, concepts such as, "lexicon", "etymological", "system", "sociolinguist variables". One step along the way of a more carefully articulated discussion of language variation appears to be the ability to describe variation accurately using the terminology of the field.

Among this second group of respondents we also begin to see some signs of cognitive development related to linguistic terminology and other evidence of specialized vocabulary and more nuanced meanings. For example, one respondent focused on variation as differences in "parameter setting" realized by differing languages. Nothing similar to this kind of response was found at the earlier level. Other specialized terms appearing included "jargon", "speech communities", "syntax", "typology", "semantics", "linguistic determinism", and "communicative purpose".

As noted, responses in this group were more likely to highlight a range of variables, rather than any one feature of variation:

Language variation to me means not just a variety of which language is spoken but how it spoken, why word orders are chosen, different dialects, styles, and regions. It also indicates the difference across cultures, context, and meaning.

Nevertheless, it is also apparent that while these learners are developing their personal linguistic lexicon regarding variation, many have not yet gained full control over these terms, as evidenced in the following student's gratuitous use of the terms, 'illocution' and 'perlocution.'

The term language variation means the many differences throughout culture, subcultures that apply to linguistic function. Although English is a global language, through things like illocution and perlocution, it is obvious that people who speak the same language may not understand each other due to facts

like this. Language variation has come about the linguistic varieties among cultures and subcultures.

Some of the gaps of understanding, revealed at the second level, begin to resolve at later levels of training, as we shall now see.

2.3 Students Who Had Taken More Than One Linguistic Course

Students in our study who had previously taken two or more linguistic courses gave markedly different responses to our question about language variation. Their responses may touch on many of the same kinds of elements mentioned at the previous level; however, the manner in which these elements are discussed usually revealed greater sophistication. For example, as with some respondents at earlier levels, these respondents also mentioned sociolinguistic variables, but the language used to reference these variables displayed more scholarly, reasoned discourse. Consider these three responses that make reference to sociolinguistics, dialectal variation, pragmatic factors and structures of power:

Language variation to me is the umbrella term to most of the subcategories of sociolinguistics. Language variation can be used as a explanation for many differences in the speech, communication breakdown, word preferences and dialect/accent, to name a few.

Language variety is a linguistic term used to describe diversity in regional or social dialects that exist in a particular country. Second, it is a very important for us, future teachers. The U.S. is a very diverse country and we will have to deal with multiple languages our students use. This term means all the varieties at the same language dialects, accents, and slang.

It is not only variation of the kinds of languages or varieties or dialects, but also variation of language use. It goes beyond acknowledging or documenting variation and considers the effects of positing one variation as better than another, perpetuating a notion of a hierarchy and of power.

Nothing similar to these ways of talking about variation was found at the earlier levels. It appears that repeated exposure to linguistics concepts has enabled these students to build a cognitive framework that informs the discussion of this term and allows the student to access the term from multiple angles.

Contextualization, mentioned earlier, was also much more obvious at this level. For example, responses collected from students taking a course in second language acquisition articulated understandings of variation that would be relevant to that course. Some of these responses were rather broad, but still quite different from the more sociolinguistic answers of other students. Two broader responses:

Not only do languages vary from one to the next phonetically, semantically, syntactically, morphologically, etc. but even within a particular language there is great variation occasionally resulting in mutual unintelligibility. The factors that influence these types of variation are often inter-related and working

simultaneously making them difficult to separate, define their depth and range, and/or study.

Language variation refers to differences within a language; the differences can appear in pronunciation, lexicon, morphology, or syntax as well as in how speakers use their language, such features as terms of address, expectations, the directness in discourse, etc..

Other contextualized responses were far more focused:

In line with Dynamic Systems Theory, there is a lot of variation in a learner's speech. They might make many mistakes before a breakthrough.

Language is constantly changing shape in the mind, going through periods of great variation immediately before this change occurs.

Common to these responses were an expanded definition of variation, a more nuanced definition, or both. Respondents demonstrated a tendency to contextualize language variation in terms of the specific themes discussed in the particular course during which the data collection was conducted. For example, when responding to questions regarding variation in the context of the SLA class, respondents tended to link language variation to variation in learner interlanguage, the variable input learners need to receive, or high variability in output that preceded a shift in the learner's grammatical system.

2.4 Comparing the Levels

Viewing the three levels in our study more holistically, it appears that conceptual development of the term language variation takes place in learners over time and exposure. Respondents who encountered the concept of language variation in differing ways in multiple courses gave richer and more robust definitions of language variation than their novice counterparts and these more advanced students also displayed greater likelihood to contextualize their responses.

Novices rarely provided contextualized responses when questioned about this variation, and in fact, a few students, even after their first course, were astonishingly generic in their responses: "Language variation means that there are differences in language", "Language variation refers to the many 'codes' used for communication in human language", and "Language variation is the variation found within one language."

In contrast, those students who had completed significant linguistic coursework typically demonstrated ability to situate the concept of variation within a particular academic field of the courses they were taking. Students responding to the variation question administered in a sociolinguistics course gave responses such as, "It means languages and types of language used can vary mostly from one society to another. English is spoken in many different places, but each place has a different dialect and way of speaking. Indian English is different from Nigerian English", "Different people use

languages in various ways. This may depend on context, cultures or language", and "It is not only variation of the kinds of language or varieties or dialects but also variation of language use. It goes beyond acknowledging or documenting variation and considers the effects of posting one variation as better than another perpetuating notion of a hierarchy and of power". The same question administered to advanced students in a Second Language Acquisition course, elicited answers such as "In line with Dynamic Systems Theory, there is a lot of variation in learners' speech..." "Language is constantly changing shape in the mind..." and "That one's complete language repertoire and proficiency level of a given language varies."

3. STUDENTS' APPRECIATION OF LANGUAGE VARIATION

Our third research question asked how students' appreciation of language variation changes, if at all, through multiple exposures to this concept. Once again, students were directly queried, "Do you think awareness of language variation is important for your career? Why/Why not?"

Responses to this question from all study participants were overwhelmingly positive, displaying enthusiasm by word choices such as "essential", "crucial". Many respondents felt that awareness of linguistic and cultural variation would help in their understanding of the language issues encountered by students who spoke varieties different from the standard and those who were using English as a second and/or foreign language. Others pointed to an appreciation of the legitimacy of non-standard varieties as a result of beginning to see them as systematic variations of the language or they emphasized the importance of an awareness of variation as a natural part of acquisition. Some other respondents linked language variation to pedagogical approaches, suggesting that both the emergence of variation and the type of variation may help teachers select strategies, methods or techniques that may help their students.

Responses such as the following from subjects at the end of their first linguistic course show that some of them were beginning to develop an appreciation of awareness of *language variation* as background knowledge that would impact their approach to their students and inform their choice of appropriate teaching approaches and materials.

Awareness of language variation is important to me as a bilingual teacher. It will allow me to be aware of dialect differences and how to handle encouraging students in Standard English.

Yes, knowing cultures show language variations is important as a future teacher because it could present pragmatics failure as well as help me to understand that learning disabilities may not be the problem.

If my understanding of the term is correct, then I think it is important. Recognizing these variations helps us see the multiplicity and “color” of a given language. It helps us to realize there is often more than one way of expressing an idea, and different doesn’t necessarily mean wrong.

Yes, because ELLs [English language learners] will be encountering these different language variations and they should be aware that certain situations/interactions require different manners of speaking, i.e., formal or informal greetings.

The responses of some other subjects at the end of their first linguistics course, on the other hand, fell short of providing specific examples of how these modifications might take place, despite their offering of enthusiasm.

A greater number of respondents who had completed two or more linguistics courses offered more nuanced responses regarding how awareness of language variation would be helpful to them. As previously mentioned, those with greater exposure to linguistics through coursework were better able to view language variation from different angles and contextualize it in terms of language and society connections, besides seeing variation as integral to language learning and teaching.

Yes (awareness of language variation is important for my career). It is important to approach ESL (English as a second language) teaching from the standpoint that Standard English is just one way among many, one language among all other legitimate languages.

Yes. I think it is very important to know that aspects of languages in different contexts differ and the way learners learn a language is different. When teaching it is important to remember that there is variation within language.

Yes, because I need to be aware of language varieties in the classroom. Students use different forms of language especially when learning a language. They will have an interlanguage before reaching L2 acquisition and this will not look like a native speaker’s L1.

Some of those subjects who had completed two or more linguistics courses also maintained that awareness of language variation was a step towards increasing their cross-cultural and cross-linguistic awareness, further aiding their work with English language learners.

Yes as an ELL (English language learners) teacher it is important to understand that language norms differ across cultures as it may be helpful in communication between students and teachers.

Everyone is speaking from a different perspective. These perspectives influence thought and learning. A better understanding enables a less generic, more authentic learning experience.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

In this study we sought to learn prospective teachers’ understanding of what is meant by the term language variation previous to their linguistic training and also

explore how this initial conceptualization developed as a result of taking linguistics courses. Similar to other studies that looked at the preconceptions teachers bring to their professional training (Richards, et al. 2001) or examined the naïve, non-scientific, and experience-based theories that students’ of science have developed previous to their academic training in scientific concepts (cf. Vosniadou, 2007), we have also seen that students bring to the scientific study of language a set of understandings about language, language learning and use based on their observations.

The explicit study of language variation throughout a course on language and society as well as its implicit study in a second language acquisition course positively impacted students’ training to become English language teachers in US schools and those training to teach English as a second language. Not surprisingly, more explicit discussions of different types of language variation and their impact on communication and education led to more nuanced understanding of this concept. The greatest impact was on those students taking both courses. This leads us to speculate that it may not be the way language variation is addressed within a single course that has the greatest impact on pre- and in-service teachers, but their exposure to different components of language variation within the body of a range of courses. As shown by the responses of those subjects who had taken two or more linguistics courses, exposure in multiple courses allows teachers to contextualize and gain a deeper understanding of this concept.

As we have seen, students have little trouble manufacturing educated guesses regarding a term such as “variation.” Some were able to expand this definition to fit the discipline they were studying, but even in such instances it is not always clear how well student understanding of this terms aligns with the specific disciplinary usage in a given context. This suggests the need to reinforce the conceptual/theoretical value of concepts that rely on terminology in common parlance. Such reinforcement can also help in reducing teachers’ resistance to the study of linguistics as part of their education (cf. Curzan, 2013) and help them in making decisions regarding what to teach and how to present it to students (Ann & Peng, 2005). Students may benefit from greater attention to core terminology as specialized knowledge with specific implications and applications, not to be confused with a generic definition that is likely to be lost in conversation.

It appears that this reinforcement of core concepts of a discipline *in a variety of courses* does more to impact teacher learning than an overview in a single course. In other words, if language teacher educators and curriculum planners want teachers to understand and appreciate the value of what is presented as declarative knowledge, and for teachers to use their understanding to inform their

practice, then it may be necessary to make sure that they are given adequate exposure to the essential components of this knowledge through a variety of course themes and examples. Therefore, instead of starting with a list of required courses for a teacher education program, we need to start from a list of required themes/concepts and then find ways of integrating these concepts into the various courses we offer. This might be the best way of ensuring that the pedagogical content knowledge students receive is internalized, valued and used to inform teachers as they plan, deliver and evaluate their lessons.

While exposure to concepts across a range or variety of courses may be critical, we also do not wish to lose sight of the finding that explicit and implicit attention to language variation, together with multiple exposures to a concept from differing perspectives, may have combined to heighten students' awareness and better enable them to contextualize responses. Since comparison of students' definitions at the beginning and the end of their respective courses showed that many of them developed or were enabled to give more expanded and nuanced definitions of language variation, we may consider the value of intentionally reinforcing the acquisition of core concepts that all students need to learn. This could involve designing activities, tasks, and/or assignments that may deepen teachers' understanding and reflection. Ultimately, we would like to see all students who are taking a course develop a greater understanding of these concepts, not simply those who are most diligent or gifted at extrapolating meaning from a limited set of exposures.

Regarding the question of whether pre- and in-service teachers see an awareness of language variation as important for their careers, we see that most respondents have overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards the study of language variation. Many believe that awareness of linguistic and cultural variation will help them to understand the language issues encountered by students who speak varieties different from the standard and those who use English as a second or foreign language. Positive attitudes regarding the importance of awareness of language variation were found both in the responses of all subjects, regardless of the type of course taken and, once again, the pattern that was evidenced was that students who completed more linguistics courses were better able to articulate the ways in which awareness of *language variation* could help them in their teaching.

Finally, one would hope that the positive attitudes reflected by respondents would translate into positive behaviors, such as greater attempts at understanding interlocutors whose language variety and/or level of proficiency differ from one's own; such attitudes and actions are particularly important for teachers of English as a second or an international language and for all involved in intercultural communication via English. Acceptance of linguistic variation at the level of language form and use can facilitate communication greatly in

linguistically diverse communities. To help students of language variation explore how such knowledge can aid with communication or language teaching, teacher educators can provide them with scenarios depicting communication problems that can be solved by using notions of language variation or strategies for varying the language forms one uses.

This study corroborates research by Attardo & Brown (2005) and Edwards & Owen (2005); however it also problematizes awareness of language variation by grounding this concept in different contexts of exposure/analysis. This suggests a methodological issue—we can not be satisfied asking decontextualized questions, for these do not lead us to the heart of the matter. While this study queried respondents about language variation in a rather blunt and direct manner, what we are ultimately interested in is how teachers use what we teach them to solve problems in the classroom. Future study must extend this work, perhaps by providing students with pedagogical scenarios where knowledge or awareness of a concept such as language variation would be a key feature. Respondents could then be asked what linguistic concepts they view as important considerations in these scenarios and/or how and why knowledge of language variation can aid in conceptualizing and remedying a learning/teaching problem.

While we have focused on awareness and understanding of a single concept—"language variation"—and views of the importance of this awareness, this work may certainly be extended to a larger range of concepts, especially those that have non-scientific uses in everyday life or are heavily burdened by negative attitudes, like "dialect" or "jargon" for instance. With a better understanding of how conceptual knowledge and terminology is learned, extended and applied, we may be better equipped to assist language teachers make important connections between the classroom training they receive and the classrooms they will inhabit as professionals.

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APPENDIX: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Initial survey:

Part I: Background Information

1. Which of these courses you are taking this semester? ENG 416 _____ ENG 468 _____
2. Undergraduate: _____ Graduate: _____
3. Major: _____
Minor: _____
4. Have you ever taught English/any other subject abroad? If yes, indicate the subject and location.
5. Have you ever lived abroad? If yes, indicate where and how long.
6. What linguistics courses have you completed before this one? Name all.

Part II: Please Answer the Following Questions in As Much Detail As You Can:

7. What does the term 'language variation' mean to you, if anything?

8. Do you think awareness of language variation is important for your career? Why/Why not?

B. End-of-semester survey:

At the end of this course, I would like to ask you to reflect on the following questions again and answer them in as much detail as you can to give me, as the course designer and instructor, valuable feedback on the impact of this course on student learning. Please remember that this reflection is not a graded part of this course and your answers will in no way influence your course grade.

Please Answer the Following Questions in As Much Detail As You Can:

1. What does the term 'language variation' mean to you, if anything?
2. Do you think awareness of language variation is important for your career? Why/Why not?