



SOUNDING LIKE A NATIVE SPEAKER (NS): What for?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to re-evaluate one of the 20th century language teaching principles that states that the goal of language teaching is to become as close as possible to the native speaker (NS). Although the NS has become an unavoidable term of comparison in the context of second language acquisition (SLA), this essay argues that the image of the NS becomes a subjective model impossible to replicate or accomplish as a teaching goal. NSs display varied levels of L1 competence, knowledge or proficiency, for example, hard to define, achieve or assess as part of the task of language teaching. This paper also attempts to approach the current debate of usage of English that has broken down the barriers of geographical limits or a nation-linguistic right to serve to the purposes of world-wide users. An effective L2 user is also proposed as an alternative for the Colombian situation.

Resumen

Este ensayo intenta reevaluar uno de los principios de la enseñanza del siglo XX que establece que el una de las metas de la enseñanza de las lenguas es aproximarse al máximo al hablante nativo (HN). Aunque el HN ha sido un tema de comparación difícil de evitar en el contexto del aprendizaje de la segunda lengua, este documento plantea que la imagen del HN se constituye en un modelo subjetivo difícil de reproducir o alcanzar como meta de enseñanza. Los HNs demuestran diferentes de niveles de competencia, conocimiento o proficiencia de la L1, por ejemplo, lo cual es difícil de definir, alcanzar o evaluar en la tarea de enseñar la lengua. Este ensayo además intenta aproximarse al debate actual del uso del Ingles que ha sobrepasado los límites de las barreras geográficas o de propiedad exclusiva de algunos países, para servir a los propósitos de hablantes del todo el mundo. Se sugiere un hablante efectivo como alternativa para el contexto Colombiano.

This article attempts to re-evaluate one of most remarkable issues stated in most FI curricula: sounding like a native speaker. The paper enriches the major research field of the 'FL Teaching and Learning' of the UPTC Master Program in 'FL Teaching'.

Key words

Second Language Acquisition.

Palabras clave

Adquisición de la Segunda Lengua

INTRODUCTION

Although everybody is an NS in his own right, the first account of the concept seems to appear in Bloomfield (1933) who states that 'the first language a human being learns to speak is his native language' (p. 43). Although it does not include situations where a child acquires two languages simultaneously or a language that is 'acquired later' (Lee, 2005: p. 154) the concept of the NS has since then become a subject of analysis and research (Davis, 1991; Ellis, 1993). Being an NS has been widely accepted as something naturally inherited and where a second chance, to accept or reject it, does not exist. It simply means that an NS 'is an unalterable historic fact' (Cook, 1999: 185). But if a native language is a property shared by all human beings (I do not want to exclude people with articulatory or hearing limitations for example), the story of second language learning (SLL) has a different interpretation. There is always a topic of debate when scholars, researchers, practitioners or evaluators have to define, report, teach or assess an L2 learner. Categories such as bilingual, native-like, competent, advanced, intermediate, beginner, successful or incompetent are commonly a matter of identification.

There is an unavoidable distinction when

categorising a speaker of a language in terms of native or non-native. These two labels have echoed plenty of expectations, models to follow or teaching and learning directions. The image of the NS is then a paradigm that has been going round and round in second language pedagogy. The NS is acknowledged as one who: masters the rules of L1 subconsciously, is able to succeed in almost all the communicative settings or is fluent in discourse, among many others (Stern, 1983; Davids, 1995). Those features are undoubtedly over-generalised and make no distinction among natives in spite of obvious differences in language capabilities. On the other hand, a non-native speaker (NNS) is invariably acknowledged as somebody who is linguistically inferior in comparison with an NS. Even if he has a very good command of the target language, not being born as a member of the target language community creates certain sense of category discrimination.

While an NS becomes an ideal model for SLL, an NNS is seen as an user always being a subject for perfection. It has created, in my opinion, a big gap in the way the idea has been treated in SLA. If there is almost a unique chance to become an NS - with the only exception of bilingual children who acquire two languages simultaneously- there is no point comparing L2 users within

the same parameters of the NS. Former and current foundations that have arisen from second language acquisition research have extensively theorised about the process of L2 learning (see for example Krashen, 1981a; Krashen, *et al.* 1982; Myles & Mitchell, 1998; Pienemann, 1998; Cook, 2001), claimed that if the process of learning the L1 is significantly different from the one undertaken in L2, an L2 learner cannot sound like a native and it is simply a paradox that subjugates the potential of language learning to such an unachievable goal.

The NS becomes a subjective model impossible to replicate or accomplish as a teaching goal. If NSs display varied levels of L1 competence, knowledge or fluency, for example, (Rampton, 1990), it is hard to decide on what to achieve. Even if it is taken for granted that the NS is a perpetual user by right of the L1, an NS as a language model becomes a subjective concept hard to define and to accomplish in its own nature. Furthermore, while the views of an NS look at linguistic components most of the time, an L2 learner offers a more complex dimension including social, cognitive and multicultural magnitudes that could not be easily subjugated to the acquisition of native-like parameters of subjective proficiency. People learn languages for different reasons and purposes beyond the restrictions of communicating with NSs exclusively. There is a new reality to approach in language teaching: a world-wide community of users of English who have broken down the barriers of imposed linguistic geographical limits and use it as a lingua franca which serves multiple dimensions without any concern whether the speaker is a native or a non-native (Firth,

1996; Gnutzmann, 1999; Seidlhofer, 2003).

This paper briefly approaches the paradox of sounding like an NS as an aim for language teaching and supports the construct that it has 'little meaning as a L2 goal' (Cook, 2007: 240). Different alternatives have been suggested that could significantly represent a further step in moving from subjective achievements towards a more accomplished reality. Terms such as 'proficient user' (Paikeday, 1985); 'language expert' (Rampton, 1990); 'multicompetent user' (Cook, 1991); 'competent language user' (Lee, 2005) have emerged as constructs for theoretical re-evaluation. I do not attempt to enlarge the list by suggesting terminology and rather intend to expand on teaching goals that take into account Colombian needs, for example, a context where being able to use the language becomes much more relevant than measuring it in terms of sounding like a native. The Colombian Ministry of Education has adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFRL). Most of the criteria for the 'recognition' of a competent L2 user have a strong connection to how close or distant to an NS the user is. 'To have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed' (www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework.EN.pdf).

This paper first revises some general theoretical constructs from the perspective of a research background, then describes the Colombian teaching situation and intends to support the argument of the

paradox of sounding like an NS in such a context and finally draws some conclusions as a general contribution with the intention of furthering the debate of this 20th teaching and learning principle.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

How to understand the processes, variables or strategies in SLA has always been a matter of theoretical and research consideration (Corder, 1967; Bayley, *et al.* 1974; Ellis, 1985b; Gass, 1996; Cook, 2001). While first language acquisition has been seen by linguists as a complex system that includes the analysis of phonologic, syntactic, morphologic, semantic or lexic levels, for example, some others have focused on the kind of connection between grammar and meaning (Chomsky, 1975; Firth cited in Stubbs, 1996). It has undoubtedly influenced the conception of second language teaching and learning. In fact, the linguistic or communicative emphasis, that have characterised former and current trends and directions in SLA, have been determined by the prevalent construct of the particular epoch.

While the mastering of linguistic forms and model structures centralised the efforts of the L2 classroom by the 50's and 60's, some strong similarities between the process undertaken in L1 and L2, that were found by the 70's, influenced SLL strongly (Myles & Mitchell, 1998). The birth of error analysis, studies of morpheme sequences and Krashen's monitor model have undoubtedly marked both, SLA research and classroom practices. Krashen's theory is still a great source of contentious debate. The researchers of the late 80's and 90's

divorced themselves from previous findings and went on a more autonomous framework of reference. Issues such as language and cognition, studies of neuro and psycholinguistics or sociocultural domains have enriched and enlarged the foundations of SLA. The beginning of the new century has seen expansion on crucial facts where issues such as competence, language user, NS vs NNS as a teaching and learning paradigm, classroom interaction, the post-method era, corpus linguistics, content language integrated learning –CLIL- or the perspective of English as a lingua franca are central in SLA research and classroom experiences.

The image of an NS has explicitly or implicitly guided most of the SLA directions. When language learning was hypothesised as a complex system of structure mastery in the early 50's, the methodology of L2 turned its attention to linguistic forms as a paramount goal to be achieved. Plenty of instructional materials and the proliferation of audio-equipment in the form of expensive language-laboratories, for example, were some of the expressions of language classrooms. Teacher training was carefully planned with the intention of achieving a native-like linguistic command. Learners were also expected to be as close as possible to the parameters of natives. The audiolingual method signalled an epoch where successful language learning was ruled by the acquisition of the skills that a standard NS possesses.

A second influential SLA theory accounted for more cognitive-oriented perspectives. The learner was viewed 'as an autonomous actor, processing language data available in the

environment' (Myles & Mitchell, 1998: 121). The binomial connotation of 'input-output' was assumed to explain the process of SLA. Once again, the efforts of the language classroom turned to this direction. Although the image of the NS was not explicitly highlighted, it drove most of the teaching goals indirectly. Fluency development retrieved, to some extent, the image of the NS. A new theory turned the attention of theoreticians and practitioners towards the hypothesis that SLA was driven by 'the urge to communicate meanings, in social settings' (*Ibid*). This particular view of SLL also paved the road for classroom actions and achievements. Although the image of the NS dropped significantly as a teaching goal, the functional/pragmatic study of learners' interlanguage revived its image behind the learning and teaching scenario. The way learners cope with the demands of communication forms part of some of the framework of this theoretical construct.

To view SLA as the result of social processes that are determined by interaction was crucial in the theory of SLL. Michael Long in the early 80's stated that in order to understand the effect of input - as Krashen's input hypothesis claimed - the interactions for the negotiation of meaning, in which learners were engaged, were also crucial. This new perspective of SLA led plenty of research studies (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Pica, 1994). The image of the NS served again as a point of reference. In fact, Long, in his doctoral research conducted a study of face-to-face oral tasks to analyse the interaction that resulted from NS-NS exchange in comparison to those of NS-NNS. Although some similarities were found, some distinctive differences were

also identified. It reveals to some extent that the model of the NS is a task almost impossible to achieve as a goal for SLL.

This simplified overview of the background of SLA research portrays an image of a NS that is difficult to avoid in language teaching. Nevertheless, the argument of this paper speculates that sounding like an NS is a paradox hard to accomplish as a teaching goal. It seems to me that some of the distinctive components to measure SLL to the parameters of a NS are concerned with the learner's mastering of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, among others. Although research on the L2 learner's grammar has been extensively hypothesised, pronunciation, vocabulary and writing have not been a focus of attention (Cook, 2001: 46). In the case of pronunciation, Cook provides a good set of phoneme samples which are very close to each other and that are the cause of trouble for many L2 users, like *ship* and *sheep*, for example. Although he asserts that 'the habit of producing the sound // is acquired by repeating it over and over again and by being corrected when it is said wrongly' (p. 48), my experience as a L2 learner first, and as a language teacher secondly, has showed me something different. There is no doubt that the problem can be substantially improved by repeating it several times, but it does not work for every single learner, or not with the same effectiveness, at least. If the problem is overcome in several occurrences of the phoneme, it does not mean that it is going to happen every single time that it arises. With such a vast source of problems, the chance of sorting most of them out is simply an impossibility. Because of the limits of this paper in terms of word-

length, I can not expand on even more complex matters, such as stress or intonation which are sometimes even harder to tackle. This reality forces me to claim how teachable pronunciation could be and if the potential of teaching could be diminished to achieve native-like pronunciation, a task rarely targeted.

With the acquisition of vocabulary or the writing system, the gap between NS and NNS is substantially large. If the chance to shorten it is rather complex, the task of language teaching has to focus on more tangible achievements. Being aware of the possibilities and impossibilities of the classroom is something that teachers and course planners will be more concerned about. Every learner is a resourceful, creative and effective L2 user in his own right and there is no need to compare his ability to somebody external to his needs, somebody isolated in a paradigmatic and controversial definition as an NS. The so-called NNS possesses far much more attributes than a monolingual. Cook (2002: 5-24) mentions some of the distinctive 'characteristics of L2 users'. His attributes include, among others, the ability of 'code-switch from one language to another; the L2 user's knowledge of their first language is in some respects not the same as that of a monolingual; L2 users have different minds from monolinguals'. Although research has also drawn conclusions about L2 users who 'had slight cognitive deficits on certain tasks compared with monolinguals', for example (Magiste, 1986; Ransdell and Fischler, 1987 cited in Cook, 2002: 8), the NNS deserves attention for his own capacities which are far beyond the nature of the monolingual.

In summary, although the NS has always been quoted in the theoretical background of influential SLL research as something worthy of attention, the argument of this paper states that sounding like a native is not a priority. I also claim for an efficient user who should be able to cope with a new reality where English is used for different reasons within a worldwide community. The frontiers and inheritance that a few nations presumed to own, now seem to be overcome.

An effective L2 user: an achievable goal for SLL in Colombia

The two previous sections in this paper have highlighted the big gap that exists between an NS and an NNS. It has also set out the paradox of sounding like a native in SLL. This study also attempts to approach the current debate of L2 usage that has collapsed the barriers of geographical limits to serve to the purposes of a world-wide community of users. The use of English by a permanently increasing number of new speakers has led to approaching a new reality which is recognised under the label of World Englishes (WEs) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins also states that in the case of WEs its definition includes 'covering all varieties of English worldwide' or 'to refer to the so-called new Englishes in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean' (p: 159). On the other hand ELF seems to expand also on terms such as English as an international language. To one extent or another, what seems to be clear now is that English is now used anywhere by speakers who have no concern whether their counterparts are native or non-native. How to understand it in the light of a new social and political re-configuration of the

world could be an enrichable path to follow.

The Colombian situation is not far away from such a reality. Some institutions are proud of having NSs as members of their staff and some others advertised American or British models for language achievements. The Colombian Ministry of Education has prioritised two basic SLL directions: the adoption of the CEFRL and the national programme of bilingualism (www.mineducacion.gov.co). The first is adopted as an official yardstick to measure learners' proficiency, and the second as a 10 year long term process for 'a bet on the country we all desire' - the bilingual education programme, public policies for foreign language education – (*Ibid*). Although the NS is not used explicitly, his image underlies as the benchmark to judge target language achievements. The effects of the policy have significantly influenced the curriculum, the teacher training programmes and the teaching and learning goals.

Some assumptions related to the image of an NS as a political imposition has also to be part of the debate. There is no doubt that the U.S.A and England have extensively dominated the SLL scenario. Having a look at SLL materials, for example, the model of the NS is always British or American. There are no references to Australians, New Zealanders, Scottish, Irish, South Africans or Jamaicans. There are also implicit models of 'idealised' pronunciation and language use. That not entirely truthful NS model leads me to re-evaluate its convenience as a teaching goal for Colombian L2 learners. Because of political and economic dependence on America, the Colombian learner is always tied to a stereotyped model

of society. Countries with equal cultural and linguistic rights – Jamaica, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago or the Caiman Islands - are never introduced as part of the multicultural competence of an L2 learner. Those learning environments could be even easier to reach because they are geographically closer to Colombia.

The Colombian L2 learners are located in an area where face-to-face contact with an NS is scarcely possible. If they have no chance to meet NSs very often, our teaching concern should be directed towards an effective L2 user able to cope with the demands of worldwide communication. Hundred of thousands of users of English meet on the internet for different reasons – business, entertainment, study or tourism – every day. The percentage of NSs is significantly lower than NNSs who engage in active and successful language use. Nobody cares whether each single interaction is properly accomplished or not, according with the parameters of the CEFRL, for example. The Colombian L2 learners are never tested by international users from Tokyo, Manila, Milan, Kiev, Berlin or Stambul. They are not asked to re-sit exams and are not categorised with labels such as C1, C2, B2, B1, A3 either (look at the standards of the CEFRL). There are also underlying principles of negotiation for meaning and cooperation. In such a context, I can see neither the reason nor the need for a Colombian learner to sound like a native.

Another interesting reference has to deal with the expectations or interactions that Colombian learners are going to face and what they need the L2 for. Cook (2002: 329)

states a list of 'multi goals of language teaching' which includes, among others:

- a vehicle to self-development,
- a method of training new cognitive processes,
- a way-in to the mother tongue,
- the way of promoting intercultural understanding and peace.

If the Colombian authorities, scholars, researchers, in-service and pre-service teachers engage through a course of discussion and re-evaluation of the current and future policies, a more promising SLL environment could emerge.

An efficient L2 user might then cope with the demands of a new era where SLL forms part of a new reality that should highlight a peaceful understanding and cooperation as a paramount target. An efficient L2 user is conceived in this paper as somebody who:

- shows motivation and high engagement for language improvement,
- assumes the task of language learning beyond schooling,
- commits himself to achieving competent command of the L2,
- is able to succeed in communication in any setting,
- gains multi-cultural understanding of the Englishes in the world.

If they are totally or partially achieved, then we can assure that the goals of language teaching might respond to create conditions for effective target learning environments. The paradigm of an NS might then be avoided in the search for a more fruitful exploration. Anyway the dilemma is not yet sorted out and

plenty more studies have to draw conclusions from new and updated foundations.

CONCLUSION

An NS is argued to be a model impossible to replicate in SLL (Cook, 2007; Quirk, 1990). NSs appear as subjective figures with levels of linguistic command, knowledge or competence which are hard to define or accomplish in the language classroom. This paper also intends to demonstrate that there is a new reality that has emerged as a result of a new configuration of the world where English is used for reasons and needs beyond the simplistic distinction between native and non-native speakers. A L2 learner who is able to use English efficiently is proposed as an alternative for second language teaching (Cook, 1999; Lee, 2005; Paikeday, 1985; Rampton, 1990).

The Colombian context displays a scene where its teaching goals have been defined under the parameters of the CEFRL. L2 competence is measured with reference to a set of pre-defined standards which are very close to the definition of a 'competent' NS. Nevertheless, with the increasing use of computer-mediated communication, for example, L2 learners are facing a new demand that includes real and authentic possibilities to interact with users of English worldwide. Sounding native-like is not a priority any more. An efficient user of English should be recognised in its own right with linguistic constraints and strengths, but never undervalued in comparison with the NS. A classroom that expands its own horizons towards more achievable goals, could overcome the paradigm of sounding like an NS.

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