

# The Native Speaker Ideal in Foreign Language Teaching

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#### **Abstract**

It is customary in the field of second language acquisition to approach learners as potential approximations to native speakers and measure their achievements against those of monolinguals although the learners constitute a different group of people, with different needs, different mental abilities and different mastery of the two languages. It is also argued that defining native speakers is a complex and debatable task and therefore the objectives of foreign language pedagogy should be re-defined and adjusted to the specialized roles and situations the learners usually take part in. Setting goals other than getting as close to monolingual native speakers as possible will shed light on the actual nature of a learner and the characteristics he or she has. The goal of this article is to examine the place of the native speaker ideal in foreign language instruction and to discuss the implications for teaching that the arguments have raised above.

#### 1 Introduction

There is wide agreement that a totally monolingual country does not exist. Multilingualism is the normal condition found around the world and "monolingual speech communities are rare and monolingual countries are even rarer" (Spolsky, 1998, p. 51). In a survey of London metropolitan area (Baker & Eversley, 2000), 32% of the children are found to speak languages other than English and 300 languages are in routine use. In France, 9 million people are bilingual (Harding & Riley, 1986), whereas in Japan, one of the most monolingual countries in the world (99.3% of the population speaks Japanese) there are substantial groups of Korean and Chinese speakers (Grosjean, 1982). It is clear that learning a second language is a normal, almost everyday activity, a model according to which people have one language to speak at home and a different one outside (Johnson, 2001).

The systematic study of the way people learn a foreign language other than their first one is a recent phenomenon dating back to the second half of the 20th century (Ellis, 1997). In the relevant literature, two terms are used to refer to any language that is learnt subsequent to a person's mother tongue, namely "foreign" and "second language." A foreign language is a non-native language within school curriculum, which is not used as a means of everyday communication. On the other hand, a second language is a non-native language that serves as a medium of education, administration or business (Crystal, 2005). For methodological reasons and keeping in mind that this distinction refers mainly to the setting and purposes a non-native language is taught, we will use throughout our paper both terms interchangeably.

In a global world, where political and cultural barriers recede, learning a foreign language is an ordinary and unexceptional process. Coleman (1996) carried out a survey in order to identify the reasons that motivate second language learning. In particular, he found that the most popular reasons were, in descending order, career prospects improvement, personal interest in the target language, travel, understanding foreign life style and desire to move to the country where the target language is spoken.

The above mentioned reasons that are expected to motivate second language learning are indicative of the ways the target language will be used to fulfill learners' specific purposes. Therefore, on a practical level, it is desirable for learners not to be taught the full range of registers and styles of the target language but only those elements that will aid them achieving their learning goals. Nevertheless, research in mainstream foreign language education shows that learners are exposed mainly to formal domains of the second language (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1994). Moreover, it is usually assumed that learning a foreign language means being able to use it in the same way as its monolingual native speakers (Stern, 1983). As we will see in the sections to follow, this fundamental assumption raises certain problems.

At this point and before we move on to our analysis, it is essential to stress out that the native speaker ideal will not be examined within the context of English as a foreign language. We desire to give our paper a wider scope in order to reach out to professionals in various languages. Therefore, the target language, mentioned throughout our paper, may refer to, for example, Greek taught in Bulgaria, or French taught at an American college or high school.

### 2 The native speaker ideal

### 2.1 Theoretical background

In the field of second language acquisition, it is a common practice to measure the achievements of learners against those of the native speakers of the same language. In other words, in an educational context, instructors seek to turn their students into native speakers or make them reach a near-nativeness level (Piller, 2002). For González-Nueno (1997), the ultimate goal for a learner is to "sound like a native speaker" (p. 261). According to Davies (2003), the constant appeal of Applied Linguistics to the concept of a native speaker is due to the need for models, norms and goals whether the focus is on teaching or testing a first, second or foreign language. Given that multilingualism is on the increase, there is a constant need for setting standards in order to measure success or failure of second language learners. Hence, the native speaker's language use stands as the only appropriate model for a second or foreign language user.

The notion of a native speaker dates from the medieval era when expressions such as *natale idioma* and *lingua nativa* were used. In earlier times, these terms were deemed to be clear and precise because it was believed that language was biologically inherited. Nowadays, of course, it has been proved that this is not the case, since no baby is born with an innate knowledge of a particular language (Christophersen, 1988). In other words, people are genetically endowed with the capacity for language, but which particular language will be acquired is a matter of social setting. In recent times, Chomsky (1965) claims that a native speaker is the ideal informant regarding grammatical judgments. Therefore, a native speaker is the authority on the language, the only one, who can characterize sentences in grammatical terms.

## 2.2 Defining the native speaker

At first sight, the idea of being a native speaker seems straightforward and clear enough. Therefore, an English native speaker is someone who

- 1. Is born in an English-speaking country
- 2. Has learned English during childhood in an English-speaking environment
- 3. Speaks English as a first language

- 4. Has a native-like command of English
- Is capable of producing fluent, spontaneous speech in English that is characterized by creativity, and
- 6. Has the intuition to distinguish correct or wrong forms in English (Medgyes, 1999)

In the same vein, Stern (1983) argues that a native speaker is a person with subconscious knowledge of rules, an intuitive grasp of meaning, ability to communicate within various social settings, a range of language skills and creativity of language use. For instance, many native speakers can tell whether a structure they produced is acceptable or not (Medgyes, 1999). They may lack the necessary metalanguage to do so, but this does not mean that they are less capable of making judgments than other speakers who are more familiar with the formal aspects of the language they use.

However, the label "native speaker" is quite questionable. There is a consensus among researchers that the above features of a native speaker are confusing, misleading and a cause of fuzziness. Medgyes (1992) claims that the native/non-native issue is controversial from both a sociolinguistic and a purely linguistic point of view. In addition, the term native speaker suggests the existence of a single, idealized register of the target language, although within the same speech community there are many registers and styles each one valued more or less for various sociopolitical reasons (Phillipson, 1992). Languages have several dialects, registers and styles and it is this diversity that makes the task of defining a native speaker difficult. Thus, who can be considered to be the ideal native speaker of, let's say, Italian, a college professor, an accountant or a bus driver? Moreover, an Italian who lives in Milan or in Naples? No doubt, all of them have developed the necessary language competence which is useful in their field. If particular language patterns are preferred over others, this is due to social norms and the process of standardization and not purely linguistic criteria. Therefore, the existence of various registers within a single speech community adds ideological dimensions to the point at issue and creates the fallacy of a homogenous native speaker who exhibits accurate and proper language use.

Williams (1990) notes that as long as the native speaker behavior is not documented and since the ideal speaker competence is based on assumptions and intuitions, it will be very difficult to judge second language learners' performance adequately.

Likewise, Rampton (1990) believes that being born into a group is not a sufficient factor for an automatic good language use. In the same way, some native speakers are far from fluent in oral speech and others in the written one; that is, some users are more proficient in certain language areas than others. Moreover, as a concept, native speaker puts an emphasis on its biological aspects at the expense of its social ones and mixes up language as a device of communication with language as a symbol of social attitude and identity.

## 2.3 Alternative approaches

In the light of the above, many researchers have looked for alternative terms so as to replace the term "native" when talking about proficiency. To name a few, "primary," "dominant" and "proficient" have been proposed in the relevant literature. While "primary" refers to priority in terms of importance and "dominant" lacks any association with time, "proficient" does not address personal preference and commitment (Christophersen, 1988).

Rampton (1990) took a step forward and introduced a bilateral distinction in order to address the social dimensions of the language learning process. The first term he coined is "language expertise," which suggests that when it comes to the communicative aspects of a language, it is better to think of an expert rather than a native speaker. Language expertise comes with certain advantages. It is not equal to identification; it is learned, but not fixed or innate. It is relative and partial, in that people can be experts in various language areas, but not in every field. Finally, expertise acquisition involves certification and judgments by other people. Nevertheless, language expertise does not address language as a means of social group identification.

This void is filled by the second term, "language loyalty" (or language allegiance). Language

loyalty consists of "inheritance" and "affiliation." Inheritance has to do with individuals and groups that are closely linked while affiliation refers to a link between individuals and groups that are taken to be separate or different. As Rampton (1990) notes, "inheritance occurs within social boundaries, while affiliation takes place across them" (p. 99). The connection between affiliation and inheritance is flexible, subtle and responsive to the broader setting.

In the absence of consensus, other scholars (e.g. Medgyes, 1999) are more lenient towards the concept of a native speaker and retain it for the sake of convenience.

From a similar point of view, Grosjean (1989) criticizes the monolingual view of knowing two languages, which holds that a bilingual speaker has two separate and isolable language competencies. These competencies correspond to those of two monolinguals. Therefore, a bilingual is two monolinguals in one person. This view implies that a bilingual can be studied like any other monolingual with no modification of the research methods.

As an alternative, Grosjean (1989) proposes the bilingual view of bilingualism. This view holds that a bilingual speaker is an integrated whole, which cannot be decomposed into two distinct parts. A bilingual has developed a competence that is sufficient in everyday language communication. Whether he or she will rely on one or both languages is closely related to the given situation. As Grosjean (1989, p. 6) points out, "the bilingual is NOT the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather he or she has a unique and specific configuration."

Cook (1995) notes that language learners should be compared with people who use a foreign language in their everyday communication in order to meet their own needs. Therefore, the norm should be the achievements of other learners and not those of native speakers.

The idea that people who know two languages are different from monolingual speakers has given rise to the notion of multi-competence (Cook, 1991). Multi-competence refers to knowledge of two or more languages in the same mind. According to Cook (ibid.), multi-competence represents a compound state of mind with two grammar mechanisms. A body of research suggests that multicompetence is a distinct state of mind. Furthermore, people who know two languages exhibit different qualities from those people who know only one. The concept of multi-competence comes with four basic tenets. First, learners' knowledge of the second language is not identical to that of a native speaker. Second, learners have other uses of language than monolinguals. Third, learners' knowledge of their first language is not the same as that of a monolingual speaker. Fourth, multi-competent learners demonstrate different cognitive processes from monolinguals (Cook, 2005).

To start with the first claim, it is widely agreed that very few students can pass for native speakers. In other words, a learner's foreign language system is never exactly as the native speaker's one (Saville-Troike, 2006). Medgyes (1992) attributes this reality to the nature of non-native speakers, who are norm-dependent. This means that their use of the target language is an imitation of some form of native use. However, there are some non-native speakers, who have a native-like mastery of the second language. For this category of speakers, Medgyes (1999) introduces the term "pseudo-native speakers." Pseudo-native speakers are easily recognized by their strange pronunciation and they have a lower degree of idiomaticity than average and gaps in their conceptual knowledge. Added to this, they rely on repetitions and routine language and are less aware of the contextual and cultural norms. Finally, pseudo-native speakers are less coherent and consistent in the way they judge their own production and other people's language use.

Secondly, learners use in a different way the target language compared to monolingual speakers of the same language. Learners employ a broader range of language functions than a monolingual simply because they do not share the same needs. Their everyday language use is influenced by their knowledge of other languages. Moreover, a learner rarely has the chance to function in the same situations as a native speaker because the presence of a learner modifies native speakers' speech. That is to say, native speakers alter the kind of talk they use when addressing non-native speakers. This specific variety is usually referred to as foreigner talk (Ellis, 1997).

Thirdly, a learner's first language is influenced by the other languages he or she knows. To put it in another way, learners have a different mastery of their first language from a monolingual na-

tive speaker (Cook, 2003). Experimental data suggests that a second or a third language exerts an influence on all language domains. In terms of syntax, Japanese students of English show a tendency to pluralize subjects in Japanese sentences than Japanese monolinguals, who do not know English (Cook, Iarossi, Stellakis & Tokumaru, 2003). With regards to vocabulary, Russian speakers of Hebrew use a simpler repertoire in Russian (Laufer, 2003). In stylistic terms, Hungarian children, who speak English, are more prone to use stylistically more complex Hungarian (Kecskes & Papp, 2000). In pragmatics, Russian learners of English express emotions as states rather than processes (Pavlenko, 2003). Flege (1987) notes that French users of English pronounce the /t/sound in their mother tongue with a longer voice onset compared to monolingual French speakers. In reading, Greeks, who know English, read Greek in a different way than Greek monolinguals do (Chitiri & Willows, 1997).

The fourth property of a multi-competent speaker is in terms of metalinguistic awareness. Learning a second language enhances and fosters language awareness and cognitive flexibility. According to Peal and Lambert (1962), people who know two languages appear to have a richer set of mental abilities. Bialystok (2001) finds that children who have learnt a second language exhibit a sharper view of language. In a similar vein, Diaz (1985) notes that a second language positively affects one's conceptual development, creativity and analogical reasoning. In addition, Yelland, Pollard and Mercuri (1993) draw the conclusion that knowing a foreign language leads to quicker reading in the first language. Additional evidence in support of the fourth trait of a multi-competent learner comes from Galambos and Goldin-Meadow (1990), who report that bilingual children grasp the grammatical patterns of their first language sooner than monolingual ones. Also, bilingual children are more capable of separating meaning from form (Bialystok, 1986).

In short, it shows that multi-competence is a different state of mind. Multi-competent learners have both different language and mental abilities that function in a different way from monolingual native speakers. Before moving on, it should be stressed that we deliberately dealt with Cook's claims in greater detail because they describe adequately the entity of a second language learner, in that they capture the diversity and the complex nature of learning an additional language plus the interaction and the relationship of both the mother tongue and the foreign language.

#### 3 Implications for teaching

With the diversity of opinions and alternatives, it is better to seek for a compromise. In our view an instructor has two possible options. The first option is to adopt a more flexible and functional approach to the native speaker ideal by bearing in mind that trying to make learners to get as close to a native speaker as possible is not the only and ultimate goal of foreign language learning. There are many learners who have limited specific-purpose objectives so as to fulfill comparatively simple everyday exchanges, such as getting directions or commuting to work. Thus, it is important to treat learners as what they are and not as potential native speakers. A useful tool for defining goals, individual needs and tailored teaching materials is the needs analysis. This technique, developed within the framework of Communicative Approach, provides an instructor with information about the learner and the required skills needed to carry out real-world communicative tasks (Nunan, 1988).

The second option instructors have at their disposal is to look for an alternative competence which will stand as a model for learners to adhere to. It is desirable that this educational model recognizes and respects learners' autonomy in order to give them the opportunity to perform up to potential. We should keep in mind that students have different minds, different needs and they will function in a different way and context from a monolingual speaker. Communication in a foreign language involves both native speaker-nonnative speaker and nonnative speaker-nonnative speaker interactions (Alptekin, 2002). These interactions will reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, different learning objectives and different attitudes towards the particular second language which serves as a medium of mutual comprehension. Therefore, it is essential to adopt instructional methods and design teaching materials that will acknowledge these differences and will give nonnative

speakers a more active role in the development of the desired language standards they want to reach.

It is essential to establish an educational model suitable for teaching in cross-cultural contexts and to redefine the qualities an instructor should have. In addition, the content of the teaching materials, the adopted instructional methods and the place of learners' first language in foreign language teaching should be reexamined.

In our view, the successful target learner is someone who has the necessary language skills to overcome language barriers and the intercultural awareness to code switch when copying with other users of the target language from various cultural backgrounds. In other words, the successful target learner should be equipped with linguistic competence and knowledge of how the foreign language is used in cross-cultural settings. This bilingual learner with the above described characteristics can stand as an alternative model replacing the monolingual/homogenous native speaker.

In the same vein, Alptekin (2002) provides a pedagogic model that acknowledges the uses of English in both local and international settings. This model is based on the notion of "intercultural competence." Intercultural competence puts an emphasis on learners' aspirations and expectations in a clearer manner than any other suggested educational model and describes adequately what the goals of foreign language learning should be and the standards against which learners' achievements should be measured. It achieves these two goals because it takes into consideration the various uses a foreign language (in particular English) serves and the diversity of learners who are trained to use it.

It is our belief that intercultural competence can stand as a point of reference and an alternative educational model for every language, which is learned as a second one. For example, although Modern Greek is one of the less widely spoken languages, in recent years there is a growing call for learning it as a foreign language (Antonopoulou, Tsangalidis, & Moumtzi, 2002). This interest has generated the establishment of various programmes around the world, from Canada (e.g. Simon Fraser University) and Argentina (e.g. Universidad de Buenos Aires) to Japan (e.g. Keio University) and Australia (e.g. Flinders University). Undeniably, learning Modern Greek in Australia is not the same as learning it in Japan. The reasons are obvious, for example, the diverse cultural backgrounds and different needs. In Australia, Modern Greek is taught mainly to Australian citizens of Greek ancestry so as to retain cultural bonds with their motherland. In Japan, the same language is taught to fulfill educational objectives. Therefore, the goal of learning Modern Greek should not be to make learners in both countries to speak like a native Greek speaker but to teach Modern Greek in a realistic and feasible way that addresses their objectives and aspirations.

Added to this, researchers should examine individual learners' uses of the target language within their particular speech community as a point of reference for determining learning goals. It is essential to draw our attention to the unique character of each classroom and employ methods that will take into consideration the fact that any target language in a global/multilingual world serves different needs in the contexts where it is taught and is used by speakers of diverse backgrounds. From this perspective, the successful target learner becomes a bilingual who is expected to exhibit both global language awareness and local appropriation, in that it will enable him or her to communicate effectively in both international and national settings (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996).

Any change in the adopted instructional methods requires instructors with language proficiency, language awareness and pedagogic skills. The first component of an instructor's expertise refers to mastery of the target language. It is not necessary for language instructors to be native speakers of the target language. As long as they have developed a teaching philosophy which will guide their daily decisions, the teaching goals will be achieved in the same way as with native speakers. In other words, teaching foreign languages in a global/multilingual context requires language instructors with the desire and intention to enhance their professional expertise through self-generated activity. Therefore, the dilemma between a native language instructor and a non-native language instructor is illusive. The focus of attention should be provided on instructors with self-awareness, coherent teaching philosophy and a clear, well-structured set of principles.

Instructors with these attributes and abilities will be able to question entrenched ideas, such as the native speaker ideal, and strengthen their credibility as a language professional. Language awareness is related to overt knowledge about language as a system. Pedagogic skills are essential because they will determine the effectiveness of the way teaching material will be presented to learners (Medgyes, 1999). In addition, language instructors should be familiar with the current trends in second language acquisition and have access to a wide range of both research and empirical data in order to support effectively their choices during language instruction.

The next step is to design instructional materials that will familiarize students with situations and roles in which they and not the native speakers will take part. Cushner and Brislin (1996) offer a series of intercultural activities in the form of a problem solving case. Students are encouraged to discuss and find the best solution that matches the given situation. For instance, an indicative case-study is structured around the following scenario. A US college student joins an overseas study program in Germany. Soon enough she finds herself isolated by the rest of her colleagues. Learners, after discussion, conclude that her limited interest in politics is the cause of her rejection. Selecting such tasks is difficult and requires a well-equipped instructor. Nevertheless, it introduces to the classroom both the figure of a second language learner and actual situations he or she might get involved in.

Moreover, the produced teaching materials should include suitable and appropriate discourse samples among native and nonnative speaker interactions (Widdowson, 1998). This way, learners will have the opportunity to get exposed to different uses of the target language by other learners with various profiles and learning objectives.

Lastly, it is important to address the role students' first language plays in foreign language pedagogy. Macaro (1997) finds that teachers usually rely on the students' first language when giving instructions for activities, checking comprehension, commenting on individual learners' performance, giving feedback and maintaining discipline. Nevertheless, the majority of the teaching methods insist on minimizing its role in language teaching (Stern, 1992). For Cook (2005), the idea of using the first language in classroom needs to be redefined in view of the notion of multi-competence. If the arguments throughout this paper are accepted, then a learner has two languages available in the same mind. Code mixing and code switching provide evidence for this composite language repertoire. It follows that teaching should make deliberate use of the first language so as to enhance learning. Therefore, it is suggested that the first language should be used for conveying second language meaning and as a device for explaining activities and tests. Moreover, teachers can rely on their students' first language in order to introduce grammar and to practice them (i.e. learners) in code-switching. These uses should not be to an extreme but seen as a starting-point for designing teaching materials, which will incorporate accordingly first language into syllabus.

The range of goals, the various aspects of language proficiency and the diversity of teaching methods call for a re-examination and revision of goals and practices applied to foreign language instruction. In the words of Bialystok and Hakuta (1994), "with no single correct path, language learners and teachers become free to negotiate their own goals and chart their own route" (p. 210).

#### 4 Conclusions

To sum up, in this paper we argued that the idea of a native speaker is one of the most complex and elusive ones in the field of foreign language teaching for two major reasons. Firstly, it is not well-defined and secondly the implicit target of making learners approximate to monolingual native speakers is utopian. In literature, many alternative approaches (e.g. language expertise, language loyalty, pseudo-native speakers, multi-competence) have been recorded so as to address the inadequacy to define appropriately a native speaker and to set goals that will meet learners' actual needs and aspirations. While all the theoretical contributions stem from the same starting-point, that is, to adjust language teaching methodology to learners' profiles, the issue of describing what exactly instructors should expect from their students is still open to debate. It is our belief that an

instructor can take a more flexible and functional view of the native speaker ideal. On the other hand, taking into consideration the multilingual/intercultural settings a particular target language is used in, a language professional could develop an alternative pedagogic model that will be based on both mastery of the appropriate language skills and cross-cultural awareness. Hence, research and educational policy-making bodies should take into account the situations and the roles learners might deal with, in order to design suitable teaching materials and redefine teaching objectives. This way, they will lead teaching process to newer, flexible, feasible and more appropriate paths.

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