

Volume 7. Issue 2
Article 9

Article title:

The Native Speaker: An Achievable Model?

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Abstract:

In this more mobile and globalized world, the concept of what it means to be a native speaker of a language is becoming ever more difficult to define, especially in regards to English. In recent developments in second language acquisition and language teaching, this concept has been the focus of attention for numerous scholars (e.g. Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1992; Phillipson, 1992) to get a better understanding of this concept, and, perhaps, to reevaluate and revise the “native speaker model” in the field of language teaching. In this article, the definition of the native speaker is explored based on the works of various scholars who have investigated this concept. Based on the findings of what it takes to be a native speaker, the issue of whether the native speaker model is the appropriate model in language teaching is discussed.

Introduction

The concept of the native speaker is one that is understood and self-explanatory until the notion is explored or thought about (Ellis, 1993). There are those who would argue that it is a unitary concept, hence the question of what it means to be a native speaker is pointless as “everyone is a Native Speaker of the particular language states that the person has “grown” in his/her mind/brain. In the real world, that is all there is to say” (Chomsky, 1965, quoted in Paikeday, 1985, p. 58). However, the quest for a better understanding of the concept of the native speaker, and, perhaps, reevaluation, is not pointless and has been critically discussed by numerous scholars in recent times (e.g., Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1992; Phillipson, 1992) in the field of language teaching. As the English language and the mobility of the human race become more and more accessible, the concept and perception of the native speaker is being challenged. In this paper, I attempt to explore and systemize a more cohesive definition of the native speaker based on the collective works of various scholars in the field of language teaching, particularly English. The question of what the native speaker actually knows is, then, examined. Based on the internalized knowledge that a native speaker has of his or her language, the abilities of the native speaker is presented. Upon presenting the concept of the native speaker, the issue of whether it is possible for a nonnative speaker to acquire membership into the “native speakerdom” (Nayar, 1994) is addressed, briefly. At last, the question of whether the native speaker is the appropriate model and goal of language learning and teaching is discussed.

What is a Native Speaker?

Is there a systematic way of defining or characterizing what a native speaker is? Or is this a question that is so circular that it needs no attention? In recent developments in the field of language teaching, this question seems to be of particular importance and necessity to resolve the issue of what a native speaker is, and whether he or she is the goal that learners should strive to achieve. However, this puzzle seems to be elusive since it is unclear as to what a native speaker is and knows based solely on being a native speaker of a language (Davies, 1991; Myhill, 2003; Paikeday, 1985). In this section of this paper, I will attempt to make some sense of this elusive enigma based on recent

investigations and studies by different scholars in the fields of Second Language Acquisition and language teaching.

The first account of the use of the native speaker, according to Davies (1991), seems to have been referenced by Bloomfield (1933) who states, “The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language” (p. 43). However, this definition seems to be too restricting. In fact, the first learned language can be replaced by a language that is acquired later (although may not be completely forgotten) through the more frequent and fluent use of the later-acquired language where the first language is “no longer useful, no longer generative or creative and therefore no longer ‘first’” (Davies, 1991, p. 16), as in the case of children who are transplanted, either through migration or adoption, at an early age. In the field of theoretical linguistics, the native speaker is the authority of the grammar of his or her native language (Chomsky, 1965) who “knows what the language is [...] and what the language isn’t [...]” (Davies, 1991, p. 1). According to this logic, a native speaker is an individual who is infallible and has perfect command of his or her language. This may not absolutely be the case, as Nayar (1994) argues that native speakers are not “*ipso facto* knowledgeable, correct and infallible in their competence” (p. 4). He further contends that the notion that the native speaker “has the power to err without a blemish in his competence” based purely on the fact that the individual is perceived as a native speaker needs to be challenged and reevaluated. So far, the two explanations presented by Bloomfield and Chomsky do not adequately resolve this complex puzzle.

From an etymological perspective, the word “native” suggests that an individual is a “[native speaker] of a language by virtue of place or country of birth” (Davies, 1991, p. ix). This implies that the individual acquired the language from birth (Davies, 1991; Paikeday, 1985; Phillipson, 1992). However, as stated above, this is inadequate in determining whether an individual is a native speaker of a language, or not, due to the fact that individuals can be resettled to other places in childhood, as in the case of children who immigrate or are adopted in early childhood. Additionally, being born in a place does not guarantee that the person will be a native speaker of the native area because the language that the individual speaks at home may not coincide with the

language in the native area; and children who are adopted in early childhood may not develop in the same linguistic environment of his or her birthplace.

Some may state that the only bona fide native speaker is a monolingual speaker of a language; being a monoglot is the only attribute that absolutely guarantees membership owing to the fact that the individual does not have any other language to be a native of. However, this assumption is not completely factual, as many native speakers of a language do, in fact, speak other languages besides their own; and monoglots may be the exception rather than the norm (Maum, 2002). So, where does that leave us? Being a monoglot (which is rare) and being born in a particular place does not adequately facilitate the quest in defining the native speaker. To get a clearer picture of what a native speaker is, I have isolated six defining features of a native speaker that numerous scholars in the field of Second Language Acquisition and language teaching support and agree with.

1. The individual acquired the language in early childhood (Davies, 1991; McArthur, 1992; Phillipson, 1992) and maintains the use of the language (Kubota, 2004; McArthur, 1992),
2. the individual has intuitive knowledge of the language (Davies, 1991; Stern, 1983),
3. the individual is able to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse (Davies, 1991; Maum, 2002; Medgyes, 1992),
4. the individual is communicatively competent (Davies, 1991; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 1992), able to communicate within different social settings (Stern, 1983),
5. the individual identifies with or is identified by a language community (Davies, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Nayar, 1998)
6. the individual does not have a foreign accent (Coulmas, 1981; Medgyes, 1992; Scovel, 1969, 1988).

Other features of the native speaker include race (Liu, 1999; Kubota, 2004); the capacity to write creatively (Davies, 1991); knowledge to differentiate between their own speech and the standard form of the language (Davies, 1991; Kubota, 2004); and the “capacity to

interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker” (Davies, 1991, p. 149). These four other features that have been presented are debatable and dubious in many ways. The race (or ethnicity) of an individual, I believe, is not a determining factor since, as noted above, in the case of a child who is adopted by individuals who differ from the child’s ethnic background can surely transplant him or her to a place where he or she is not a native inhabitant of. Therefore, an ethnically Chinese child, at an early age, can be adopted by a family who is not Chinese (and does not speak the child’s first language) who relocates the child to another country where the local language is not the child’s first language. The child will mature and develop, perhaps, being no longer a native speaker Chinese, but rather his first language—Chinese—will most likely be substituted with the language of his new environment. As a result, the later-acquired language will, in all probability, become his native or first language. Furthermore, in countries like the United States, individuals who are not ethnically of English decent do, in fact, speak English as their first and native language, as in the many cases of descendents of non-British immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for several generations. Additionally, in China, although 91.8% of the people are of Han Chinese background (CIA, 2003), not all 91.8% speak the same language. The people of China who are ethnically Han Chinese speak languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, and others, although some may consider these dialects or variants of Mandarin.

Davies (1991) stated that a native speaker has the capacity to write creatively in his or her language. This feature is not completely accurate. We can only suppose this feature to be factual if we assume that all native speakers are highly proficient and creative in writing in their languages through a great number of years of formal schooling, and, most of all, from a talent for expressing themselves creatively in written language. We, also, have to account for proficiency level differences among literate members of a language community, not to mention those individuals who are not literate in their language. Moreover, there are languages that are preliterate (Florez & Terrill, 2003) where there are no written forms of the languages. Therefore, the notion that native speakers are creative writers would only be accurate, if all languages have writing systems, and all native speakers of those languages were highly proficient and creative individuals such as writers and poets.

The last two features that Davies suggests of a native speaker are debatable as well. Cook (1999) indicates that “many native speakers are unaware how their speech differs from the status form, as shown, for example, in the growing use of nonstandard *between you and I* for *between you and me* even in professional speakers such as news readers” (p. 186). Hence, the claim that native speakers can differentiate their speech and that of the standard variety is not as obvious as Davies asserts. Moreover, Cook challenges Davies’ claim that native speakers have the capacity to interpret and translate from another language to their own. This capacity, according to Cook, is only reserved for those individuals who have a language other than the language that they are natives of, and not necessarily by all of them.

Among the six essential features of the native speaker that have been laid out above, the most incontrovertible factor in defining the native speaker is that the individual acquired the language in childhood and sustains the use of the language. According to Cook (1999), an individual is not a native speaker of a language unless the individual acquired it in childhood. Furthermore, an individual who did not acquire the language in childhood will most likely maintain a recognizable foreign accent in his or her speech (Scovel, 1969, 1988). Therefore, all other features besides the one that I have mentioned are secondary; a matter of competence and performance of the individual (that is, how well the individual uses his or her language). The most poignant summation of what it means to be a native speaker of a language is offered by Kourtizin (2000):

English is the language of my heart, the one in which I can easily express love for my children; in which I know instinctively how to coo to a baby; in which I can sing lullabies, tell stories, recite nursery rhymes, talk baby talk. In Japanese, there is an artificiality about my love; I cannot express it naturally or easily. The emotions I feel do not translate well into the Japanese language, and those which I have seen expressed by Japanese mothers do not seem sufficiently intimate when I mouth them (p. 324).

Keeping the above ideas about what it is to be a native speaker in mind, I will present the knowledge and abilities that a native speaker of a language possesses.

What Does a Native Speaker Know?

In exploring the definition of a native speaker, the notion that a native speaker has intuitive knowledge of the language he or she is a native speaker of, and has linguistic as well as communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) have been offered. What does that actually mean? What is it that a native speaker knows that a nonnative speaker does not that distinguishes the two? In this section of this paper, I will present what the native speaker actually knows and can perform that differentiates him or her from a nonnative speaker. Based on findings and studies by scholars in the fields of Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, and English Language Teaching, the knowledge of a native speaker has been cataloged. Native speakers have internalized knowledge of:

1. appropriate use of idiomatic expressions (Coulmas, 1981; Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Phillipson, 1996),
2. correctness of language form (Coulmas, 1981; Davies, 1991; Phillipson, 1996),
3. natural pronunciation (Coulmas, 1981; Medgyes, 1992, 1994),
4. cultural context (Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Phillipson, 1996) including “response cries” (Goffman, 1978, cited in Coulmas, 1981), swear words, and interjections,
5. above average sized vocabulary, collocations and other phraseological items (Coulmas, 1981; Medgyes, 1992, 1994),
6. metaphors (Coulmas, 1981),
7. frozen syntax, such as binomials or bi-verbials (Coulmas, 1981),
8. nonverbal cultural features (Coulmas, 1981; Davies, 1991).

Additionally, native speakers of a language have pragmatic and strategic competence of their language. They are able to attend to pragmatic conventions of the language, to not only accomplish communication goals but pay heed to interpersonal relationships with other interlocutors simultaneously, depending on different sociocultural contexts (Kasper, 1997). They have the internalized strategic competence to use different verbal and

nonverbal communication skills to repair breakdowns in conversational exchanges (Canale & Swain, 1980). Native speakers avoid avoidance (Davies, 1991); that is, they shun from giving up on comprehension or production. However, avoidance is a strategy commonly found in communication acts of nonnative speakers. With the automatized knowledge that native speakers have, what is it that they are able to perform? Native speakers possess the ability to manifest and perform:

1. spontaneous, fluent discourse (Davies, 1991; Maum, 2002; Medgyes, 1992),
2. circumlocutions (Davies, 1991; Halliday, 1978),
3. hesitations (Brown, 2001; Davies, 1991; Halliday, 1978),
4. predictions of what the interlocutor will say (Davies, 1991; Halliday, 1978),
5. clarifications of message through repetition in other forms (Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1992, 1994).

Additionally, native speakers have other verbal as well as nonverbal communication skills that enable them to communicate effortlessly, in most instances, with other participants in communication exchanges, within appropriate sociocultural contexts.

Conclusion

The question as to whether a nonnative speaker can become a native speaker has been a concern in the field of language teaching. Based on what has been presented, we can conclude that it is impossible for any learner of a language, after the critical period (Scovel, 1988), to become a native speaker unless he or she is born again. It is impossible due to the fact that in order to be considered a native speaker of a language, an individual must satisfy the one most salient criterion—acquire the language in early childhood and maintain the use of that language. If a nonnative speaker cannot become a native speaker based on this one definitive element, then can a nonnative speaker, after the critical period, attain all of the other elements discussed above? According to Phillipson (1996), a nonnative speaker, through effective training, can acquire most of the other elements that define the concept of a native speaker. However, Medgyes (1992) points out that many aspects of linguistic competence do pose tremendous challenges for nonnative speakers. Among the aspects of linguistic competence, accent seems to be a

hurdle that is most difficult, if not impossible, to overcome (Scovel, 1969, 1988). Coulmas (1981) asserts that the ability to produce natural pronunciation and perfect grammar are other areas of linguistic competence which are extremely difficult for nonnative speakers. Furthermore, target cultural competence (Liang, 2003) seems to pose another challenge as the exposure to this element is not substantial for nonnative speakers. However, as mentioned above, most of the elements that a native speaker knows and can perform can, through effective learning and teaching principles and approaches, be learned and acquired by nonnative speakers except, perhaps, accent. Therefore, instead of focusing on the elements that is out of the control of language learners and language teachers, such as the definitive element of what a native speaker is and accent, teachers as well as learners should focus on the elements that are achievable.

If the native speaker model is not achievable in language learning, perhaps, it should be reevaluated and revised to set forth models that are achievable by learners. Perhaps, it is time to shift our focus from 'who you are' to 'what you know' (Rampton, 1990). Alternative terms can be employed, instead, in the field of language teaching (Cook, 1999). Such alternative terms have been explored by Paikeday (1985) who suggest "proficient user of the language;" Rampton (1990) proposes "language expert;" Cook (1991) puts forward "multicompetent speaker;" and I offer "competent language user (CLU)." The purpose of using alternative terms in place of the native speaker is to shift not only the attention away from 'who you are,' but to focus the attention on what we are actually attempting to accomplish in language teaching—communicative competence. We should attempt to set the goals for our learners to more attainable goals; not goals which are nearly impossible, if the most irrefutable definition of a native speaker is that he or she acquired the language in childhood and continues to use it. Now, should the label 'native speaker' be removed from our mental as well as written lexicon for good? No, the label will not and should not go away (Cook, 1999). However, as stated above, it is time to revisit this label and, perhaps, use alternative terms in the field of language teaching to eliminate the native speaker-nonnative speaker dichotomy which perpetuates exclusion, rather than inclusion of all individuals who are users of a language; to permit all users access into the membership of "competent language userdom." Additionally, by introducing and maintaining alternative labels in the field of language teaching, we, as

educators, are setting a goal for the learners—to become a competent language user of the target language—that is achievable. After all, as Davies (1996) aptly inquires, what is it that we are trying to achieve in language teaching, the native speaker or proficiency?

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express his sincerest appreciation to Dr. Thomas Scovel at San Francisco State University for his invaluable insights, guidance, and comments.

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