Who Is An Ideal Native Speaker?!

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Abstract. It has commonly been a desired end in the field of SLA to approximate to native speakers and to achieve a target-like competence. Learners' achievements have been ideally compared with those of monolinguals -native speakers- although they constitute a different group of people, with different needs and abilities. But who is a native speaker? And what are the criteria for defining a native speaker as an ideal one? This paper aims at defining an ideal native speaker and explaining the alternative terms, discussing the criticisms regarding the issue, and elaborating on the notions of 'globalization' and 'multi-competent language users' in order to redefine the standards of an ideal native speaker.

Keywords: ideal native speaker, globalization, multi-competent language users

1. Introduction

The term 'native speaker' is not well-defined in the field of second language acquisition, and the objective of SLA as achieving native-like mastery seems utopian. However, the native speaker was centralized in applied linguistics as a result of the Chomskyan paradigm, suggesting 'idealized native speaker' or an 'ideal speaker-listener'. Early SLA researchers used the 'native speaker' norm as being the goal of all language learners, and the native speaker's language use as the most appropriate model for them to achieve that goal. However, native speakers do not always speak according to the rules of their standard national languages. They display regional, occupational, generational, and social class-related ways of talking that make the notion of an ideal native speaker controversial. Non-native teachers, on the other hand, may be better qualified than native speakers if they have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners, and have adequate experience of using a second or foreign language. Moreover, on a practical level, it seems more desirable for learners not to be taught the full range of registers and styles of the target language but only those elements that will help them to achieve their learning goals.

Setting learning objectives other than getting as close to monolingual native speakers as possible can lead SLA researchers to redefine the objectives of SLA and standards of an ideal native speaker. The goal of this article is to overview the existing definitions of an ideal native speaker, to find out his/her real place in the globalized world, and to suggest a renewed definition of him/her.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. An Ideal Native Speaker

The distinction between native and non-native speakers originates from the perception of the colonists who considered colonized people as incompetent speakers and illegitimate offspring of English (Mufwene, 1994). It was also believed that a native speaker of one language is someone who born in that language country; learned it during childhood; and speaks it as a first language. However, we should have in mind that no baby is born with an innate knowledge of a particular language. 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.

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The native speakers were also highly valued by Chomsky (1965) who defined them as those who are capable of giving valid judgments on their language and of identifying ill-formed grammatical expressions in their languages although they may not be able to explain exactly why they are ill-formed. Chomsky (1965) also states that "linguistic theory is concerned with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance." (p. 3). Chomsky claims that a native speaker has the authority on the language and is the only one who can characterize sentences in grammatical terms because s/he is the ideal informant regarding grammatical judgments. According to Chomsky, the grammars of different speakers may differ, but there is an optimal grammar for any given language. This optimal grammar represents the linguistic competence of an ideal speaker.

In the same way, Stern (1983) argues that an ideal native speaker is a person with subconscious knowledge of rules, creativity of language use, a range of language skills, the ability to take hold of meaning intuitively and to communicate within various social settings, and is able to tell whether a structure produced is acceptable or not.

2.2. Criticisms

According to Medgyes (1992), the native/non-native issue is controversial from both a sociolinguistic and a purely linguistic point of view. 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. In other words, it is this diversity that makes the task of defining a native speaker difficult. Regarding the value of social context, Sealey and Carter (2004, p. 29) state, "sociolinguistic is basically concerned with exploring how people use language differently in different social contexts". Chambers (2003) also believes that sociolinguistic studies have made enormous progress in understanding of the nature of variation in language. In fact, many sociolinguists argue that an *asocial* linguistics is not worthwhile and that meaningful insights into language can be gained only if such matters as 'use' and 'variation' are included in a comprehensive theory of language.

Contrary to Chomsky, Hymes (1972), claims that when a child acquires his/her native language, the child acquires ''knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner'' (277). He calls this ability to use the grammatical rules that are appropriate to a given social context *sociolinguistic competence,* which introduces the notion of a heterogeneous speech community and the notion of a heterogeneous speaker. Hymes' sociolinguistic competence stands in sharp contrast to Chomsky's notions of a completely homogeneous speech community and an ideal, homogeneous speaker and listener.

Beaugrande (1998), on the other hand, discusses that the irrational part of Chomsky's theory is that he replaces real language with ideal language; consequently, 'a real native speaker' is replaced with 'an ideal native speaker'. In Chomsky's view, the ideal language would not be the idealized version of any one 'particular' real language but rather the idealized version of all possible or at least all known languages and of no one real language. But there is no evidence that how the ideal speaker-hearer relates to real speaker-hearers; or how there is a relationship between 'a homogeneous community' and 'a real society'.

Regarding the difference between ideal and real language, Widdowson (1998) also posits that the language which is real for native speakers is not likely to be real for nonnative speakers. For language to be authentic in its routine pragmatic functioning, it needs to be localized within a particular discourse community. In other words, the more the language is localized for the learners, the more they can engage with it as discourse. In addition, referring to the Chomsky's definition of an ideal speaker- listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, Widdowson (2003, p. 57) argues that "such an idealization leaves out of account what real speaker-listeners actually do with their language. In effect, it eliminates the variable of human agency altogether in order to identify the invariant properties which are intrinsic to language itself. "

In her theory of 'social identity', Norton (1997) proposes another challenge to the view that native speakers own the language and asserts that the language learners need to see themselves as legitimate speakers of it. Norton's theory is concerned with the relationship between power, identity, and language learning and claims that learners' social identities affect their success in SLA. This way, Norton (1997) contradicts the idea of 'ownership' of language being learnt and the traditional notion of native/non-native speaker.

Phillipson (1992) also notes that languages have several dialects, registers, and styles that make the task of defining a native speaker difficult. 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 or even in different countries adds ideological dimensions to the point at issue and creates the fallacy of a homogenous native speaker who exhibits accurate and proper language use.

And finally, Cook (1995) points out that the 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.

2.3. Suggested Terms

Due to the above-mentioned deficiencies, many researchers have tried to use alternative terms for 'native'. Christoppherson (1988, cited in Andreou & Galantomos, 2009) notes that the two terms 'primary' and 'dominant' have been proposed in the relevant literature. 'Primary' refers to priority in terms of importance, and 'dominant' lacks any association with time.

The term 'language expertise' is also coined by Rampton (1990) and suggests that concerning the communicative aspects of a language, we'd better think of an expert rather than a native speaker. Language expertise is not equal to identification; it is learned, but not fixed or innate. It is relative and partial; that is, people can be experts in various language areas, but not in every field. Finally, expertise acquisition involves certification and judgments by other people. 'Language loyalty' is another term coined by Rampton (1990) which 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).

Jager (2001), on the other hand, uses the term 'the intercultural speaker' as a replacement for 'the native speaker' as the ideal the language learner has to strive to attain in language teaching. The intercultural speaker is not required to erase his/her own social and cultural identity when assuming the role of near-native speaker of the target language. Instead, the intercultural speaker is believed to be able to:

- mediate, or help to establish cooperations and the basis for mutual understanding between those who are culturally different;
- learns or increases his/her knowledge and understanding via communication with native speakers, and this understanding takes place at all levels;
- self-reflect, and the reflection includes the perception of the self and the view of one's own cultural stance.

And finally, the writer of this paper suggests the alternative term 'ideal language user' to define any language learner who has more creativity of language use, uses language functions more skillfully, shows more proficiency in language use, and is more capable of expressing his/her thought via language, no matter to which community s/he belongs.

3. Multi-competent Language Users

The common belief that people who know two languages are different from monolingual speakers has given rise to the notion of 'multi-competent language users' proposed by Cook (1995). Multi-competence theory refers to knowledge of two or more languages in the same mind, and its main claims suggested by Cook (1995, 1999) are as follows:

First, learners' knowledge of the second language is not the same as that of a native speaker. To put it in another way, l2 learners' foreign language system is not identical to the native speakers' one. Second, L2 learners have other uses of language than monolinguals. They employ more language functions than monolinguals because they do not share the same needs. Besides, their everyday language use is influenced by the knowledge of other languages they have in their mind. Third, L2 learners' knowledge of their first language is not identical to that of a monolingual native speaker. This suggests that a second or third language may influence all language domains. And finally, learning another language enhances language awareness and cognitive flexibility. That's why children who have learned a second language have a sharper view of language and are more capable of separating meaning from form (Bialystock, 2001).

To sum up, Cook (1995) posits that second language users should be regarded as a different kind of language learner in their own right and not as an unsuccessful native speaker. Accordingly, he prefers to use the term 'second language user' rather than 'second language learner' as an alternative suggested to those who are in the constant trial to achieve a target-like competence.

4. Native Speakers in a Globalized World

Globalization and the spread of languages across borders have blurred the definition of a native speaker, suggesting that a totally monolingual country does not exist. In the globalized world -the world as a community- learning a foreign language is an ordinary and unexceptional activity. As Fairclough (2003) states, "our self-interest and our mutual interests are today inextricably woven together. This is the politics of globalization."(p. 114).

English as a global lingua franca is actually influenced by the various ways it is used by its users, as well as the way it relates to different cultures. This suggests one purpose of language use that all bilinguals share, as MacKay (2003, p. 18) argues: "to use English as a language of wider communication, resulting in cross-cultural encounters being a central feature of the use of EIL." In fact, in the whole world as a community, there are so many EFL/ESL users who may not need to acquire the full range of registers needed by monolingual speakers of English. To put it another way, if English as a globalized language belongs to all its users, there is no reason to recognize some speakers of English as more privileged for providing standards for other users of English.

It can be deduced from the above-mentioned that language acquisition cannot be tied to the distinction between native and non-native speakers. Therefore, the standards seem to need redefining. Perhaps, as Anchimbe (2006) suggests, competence or proficiency must be judged instead of origin because SLA is a matter of training and efficiency rather than origin. Being a native speaker is no guarantee for competence in communication due to the fact that even among native speakers, poor and inefficient speakers are found. In fact, not all native speakers are proficient in their native languages. In addition, there is no efficient way of measuring how native a native speaker must be because there is great variation in native standards, and as Anchimbe (2006) notes, native speakers themselves are speakers of non-standard dialects of their languages.

5. Conclusion

Looking back at ourselves, we can realize that none of us are ideal native speakers although we are competent enough. We may be inefficient speakers, far from fluent in oral speech, or in written one. In other words, being born into a particular group is not a sufficient factor for the perfect language use. While native speakers are not absolutely perfect and flawless, the objective of SLA as achieving to native-like mastery of language seems unreasonable. In fact, SLA objectives should be redefined and adjusted to the situations in which second language users take part, and a productive theory of ELT must recognize the various ways through which ESL/EFL learners use English within multi-competence communities.

Moreover, in a globalized world where more non-native teachers are involved in ELT than native, where the non-native speakers of English outnumber the native ones, where English is detaching from the so-called native speakers' countries, there is no room for defining an ideal native speaker. Perhaps we should be viewed, as Cook (1995) argues, 'multi-competent language users' rather than 'ideal native speakers'.

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