

Non-native Speech and Feedback: The Relationship between Non-native Speakers' Production and Native Speakers' Reaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the connection between production and willingness to speak and write without the fear of constant correction of non-native speakers of English in the light of the feedback they receive from native speakers of English. Most of the previous literature on this subject studied this behavior in different classroom settings and considered teacher-student and student-student feedback, but not much emphasis has been put on the social aspects of NNS speech and NS feedback. This study explores whether in a social context negative or positive feedback from native speakers of English, intentionally or unintentionally, affects English learners' learning process, improving or worsening it. Questionnaires are used as the method of data collection to learn about the ESL learners' experiences. The findings suggest that approximately 80% of the participants acknowledge that their use of L2 is in fact negatively affected by the native speakers' reaction.

Keywords: native, non-native, English, speech, feedback, ESL, correction.

Introduction

English, as an international language is learned and used all over the world for various purposes such as education, business, communication etc. Hence, unlike other languages English is not possessed by certain people in particular territories and it “belongs to all people who speak it, whether native and nonnative, whether ESL or EFL, whether standard or non-standard” (Norton, 1997). Native speakers of English as Kachru argues, “seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization; in fact, if current statistics are any indication, they have become a minority” (Kachru, 1985, p. 30).

Kachru (1985) divided English speakers into three different categories; 1) The inner circle consisting of native speakers of English, 2) The outer circle including countries in which English is the second language such as India and Nigeria, and 3) The expanding circle referring to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and non-native learners of English in various countries around the globe is the fastest growing circle. As the statistics show, 80 percent of verbal exchanges in English are between non-native speakers (Gnutzman, 2000). Pakir (1999) suggested that the number of non-native English speakers triples the number of native English speakers in the world and this number will increase from 253 million to approximately 462 million during the next 50 years (Graddol, 1999).

One plausible argument for some of the immigrants in the United States’ expressing their lack of interest in using English might be because they do not receive motivating reactions from native speakers in different situations. Some of these reactions would not only be not enthusiastic but also disappointing or offensive which could potentially have a negative effect on the non-native speakers’ production and communication in the second language regardless of their proficiency in English. Therefore, it is of extreme importance to pay more attention to native and non-native speech and the factors influencing each.

Literature Review

Although the importance of the listener’s role is acknowledged by many researchers (Schegloff 1982; Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs 1986; Clark & Schaefer 1987,1989), it is much neglected in native speakers’ attitude towards non-native speakers and attributing their understanding difficulties to that speaker’s language skills (Lippi-Green,1997). Communication takes place when both of the interlocutors help one another; therefore, it is not only the responsibility of the speaker or as Schegloff (1982) suggests, “conversation is always collaboratively achieved”. This is called the principle of mutual responsibility: “The participants in a conversation try to establish, roughly by the initiation of each new contribution, the mutual belief that the listeners have understood what the speaker meant in the last utterance to a criterion sufficient for current purposes” (Clark & Schaefer 1987, 1989).

In native and non-native conversations this issue may cause many problems such as the NS not considering his or her responsibility as a listener and relating lack of appropriate communication to NNS’s unintelligibility (Perkins & Milroy 1997). As in a study by Rubin (1992), it was shown that failure in comprehension might be the result of expectations from the speaker’s accent. He studied two groups listening to the same recorded lecture by a native speaker but showing different pictures of the lecturer to each group; an Asian and a Caucasian. Even though both of the groups listened to the same lecturer, surprisingly the group which was shown the Asian picture scored lower in the test and claimed foreign accent.

In another study by Taylor & Gardner (1970), communication between English and French native speakers in Canada was investigated in which even though the French and English Canadians had the same level of proficiency, the listeners rated the French Canadian speaker as less proficient. Moreover the same experiment was

conducted to see the results between Tagalog and Chinese native speakers in the Philippines. None of the groups used their native language but on the contrary the listeners expected the Chinese speaker to be less successful.

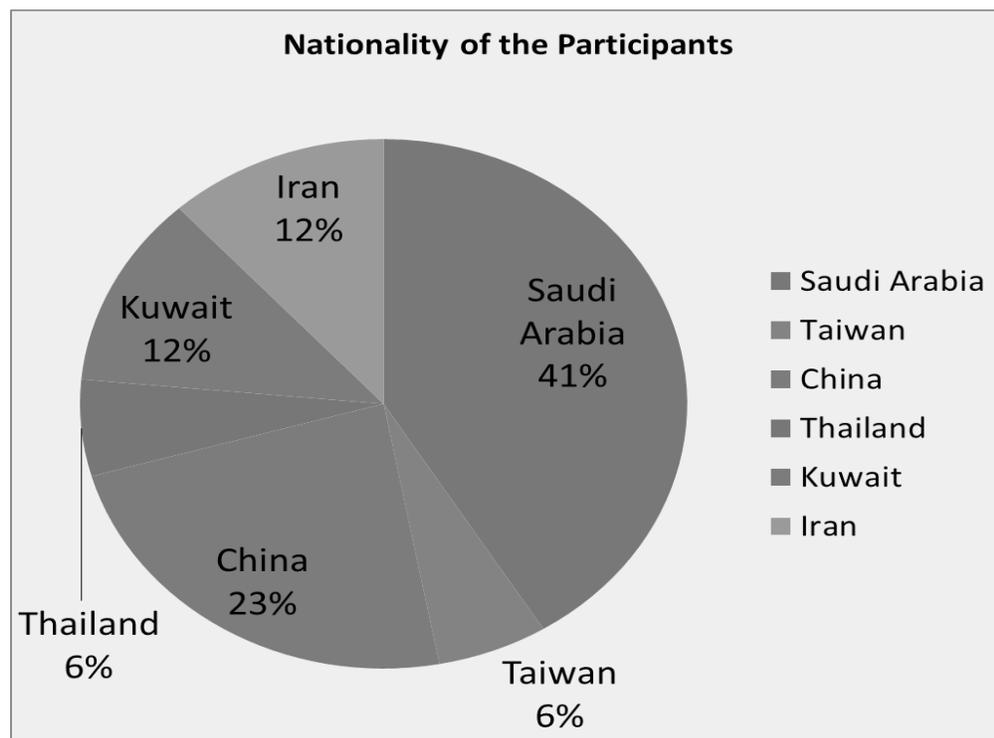
Lindemann (2002), studied twelve native English speakers' attitudes toward Koreans by completing a map task and found out that NSs had negative attitudes towards NNS and used avoidance strategies. Lindemann (2002) further concluded that native speakers' choice of strategies mediates the comprehension between NSs and NNSs.

Methods

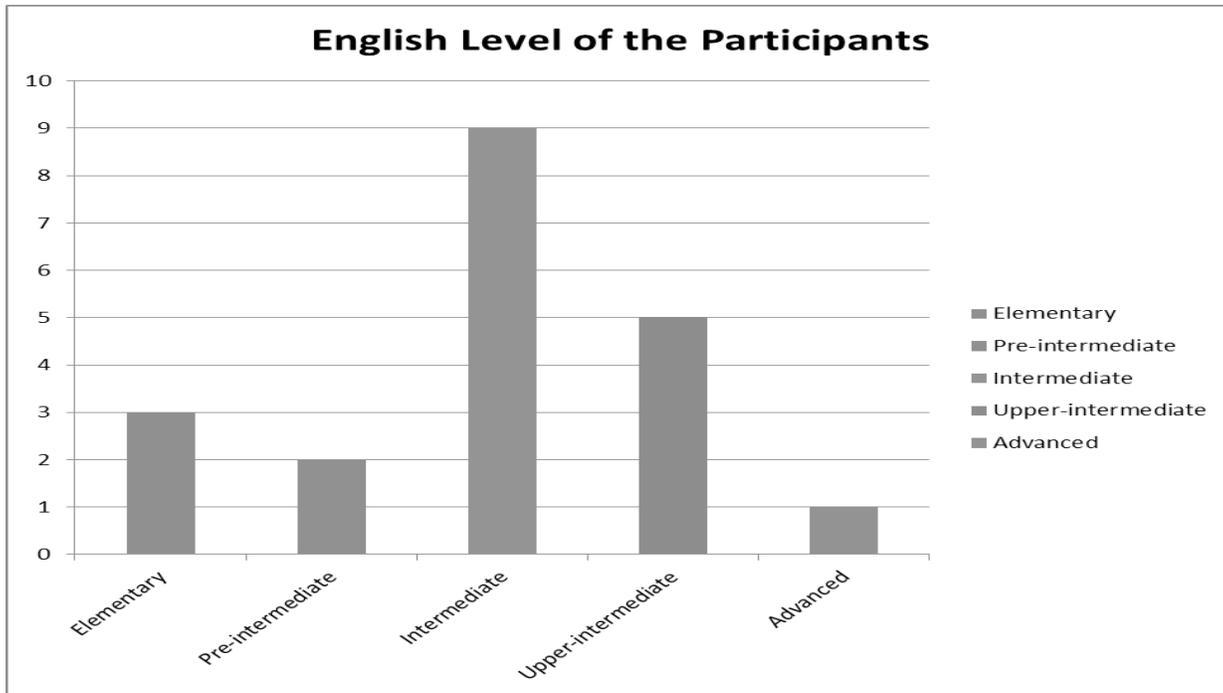
This is a pilot study to evaluate how non-native speakers of English perceive native speakers' attitudes towards themselves and the effects they have on their speech and usage of English. For this purpose, 20 non-native speakers of English were chosen from the California State University of Northridge's IEP (Intensive English Program) Center and were asked to respond to a questionnaire (See Appendix).

Data Analysis

The students were from a mixed TOEFL Listening and Speaking class consisting of mostly intermediate students (45%), upper-intermediate (25%), advanced (5%), intermediate (10%) and elementary (15 %) students.



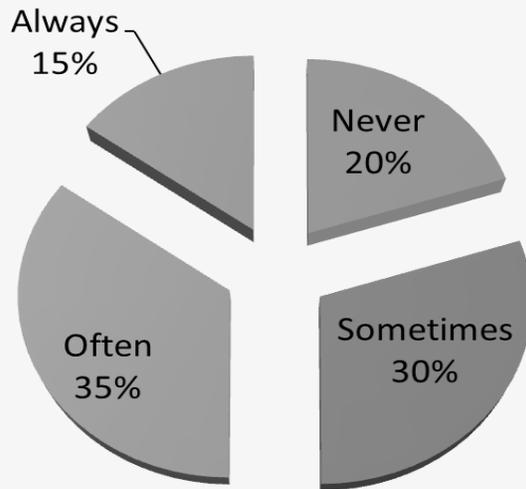
Ten female and ten male students within 19 to 29 range of age from seven different countries (Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Kuwait, Korea, China, Thailand and Iran) were the participants of this study. The students' length of stay in the U.S ranged from one month to two years.



The results show that 80 percent of the participants stated that when talking to native English speakers in the U.S what they say is grammatically correct but NSs do not comprehend what they said and ask them to repeat what they have said again.

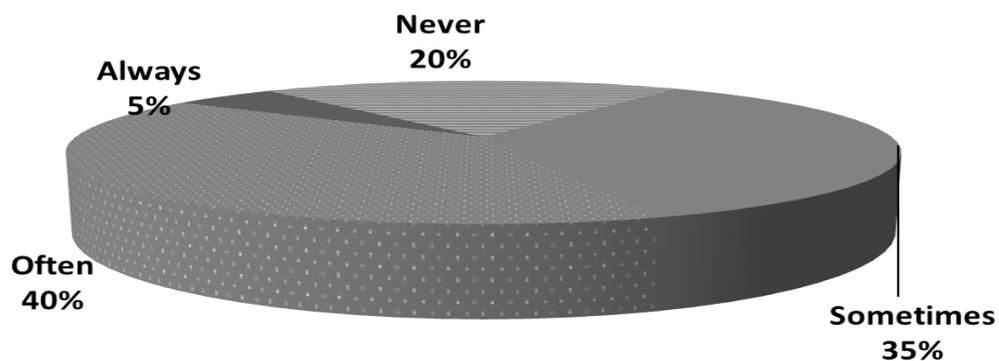
Moreover, about 80 percent of the participants gave positive responses to the following question, “Do you feel disappointed when you can’t get your message across when talking to native speakers?” with 35% choosing “Often”, 30% choosing “Sometimes” and 15% choosing “Always”. Also, the same percentage, 80% of the participants, stated that they would not initiate a conversation with native English speakers due to their fear of not being able to make themselves understood.

Do you feel disappointed when you can't get your message across when talking to native speakers?



Has it ever happened to you that you would not initiate a talk with a native speaker because of the fear of not being able to make yourself understood by that person?

■ Never ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Always



Conclusion

The data shows that non-native speech and production is in fact affected by native speakers' reaction and the feedback they give to non-native speakers of English. As stated above, a high percentage (about 80%) of non-native speakers get disappointed by the feedback they receive from native speakers and are not willing to start a conversation due to this fear/ disappointment. This lack of enthusiasm and fear of speaking in L2 may result in non-native speakers' preference of having non-native friends (more than 70% showed preference towards having non-native friends) and spending most of their time with people sharing the same L1, and as a consequence receiving less L2 input and in turn not improving in the second language.

Options for non-native speakers in this situation include taking advantage of sources of comprehensible input that do not require interaction (e.g. reading and comprehensible TV shows) and finding those special people who will try to understand them "even though you are miles away from what a native speaker would usually be able to understand" (Lonsdale, 2006; p. 178). In other words, a "language friend" (Lonsdale, 2006; Krashen, 2012).

Appendix

Questionnaire

Age: Nationality: Level: Gender:

1. How long have you been living in the United States?

2. How do you evaluate your English regardless of the level you are currently in?

Elementary Pre-intermediate Intermediate Upper-intermediate Advanced

3. Do you have any native English-speaking friends?

Not at all a few some many

4. If yes, how much time do you spend with them?

Not much sometimes most of the time all the time

5. Do you prefer to spend time with your native or non-native friends?

Native friends non-native friends both equally

6. Do you have any problems communicating with native speakers?

Always most of the time sometimes Never

7. When talking to native speakers has it happened that you think what you said was grammatically correct but the native speaker you were talking to did not understand what you said?

Always most of the time sometimes never

8. How do you rate native speakers' reactions when you are communicating with them?

Very bad bad not very good good

9. Do native speakers correct you when you are talking?

Always most of the time sometimes never

10. Do you feel disappointed when you can't get your message across when talking to native speakers?

Never sometimes most of the time always

11. Has it ever happened to you that you would not initiate a talk with a native speaker because of the fear of not being able to make yourself understood by that person?

Never sometimes often always

12. Do you relate an unsuccessful conversation to your lack of proficiency in English or the native speakers' lack of interest in understanding you?

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13. Have you been asked to repeat what you said more than once when you were talking to native speakers?
Always most of the time sometimes never
14. If yes, do you get irritated by having to repeat the same sentence again? Do you have a memory regarding this issue?

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“Language acquisition proceeds best when the input is not just comprehensible, but really interesting, even compelling; so interesting that you forget you are listening to or reading another language.”

Dr. Stephen Krashen

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