

What we can learn from near-native English speakers

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1. Introduction

Today, more and more people immigrate to the United States from other countries. According to statistics, as many as 7,605,068 people immigrated to the U.S. during the eight years from 1991 to 1998 alone. Although immigrants face a number of difficult problems, language still remains the most difficult problem to them. It is generally considered that only about five percent of L2 learners can reach a level in which their grammar is considered to be the same as native English speakers'. Of course, the mastery of English has much to do with variable conditions such as the age at which they came to the U.S., the length of their stay, the type of education they received and so on. However, it cannot be denied that many L2 learners stop developing their English while they are still short of target-language competence (Ellis, 1997).

According to Lennon (1990):

Little is known about the precise nature of the linguistic improvement which

can be expected when the advanced classroom learner is exposed to the L2 community ... what stages of development s/he must still undergo in order to approximate to native speaker norms. (p309)

This is say, while L2 learners who complete an advanced-level ESL course are still immature in terms of their command of English, they do not know what they should do after that. In order for L2 learners to become fully participating members of the society, it is considered essential to find out exactly what they should do in order to reach their communicative goal demanded by the society.

On characteristics of good language learners, Oxford (1993, p.178) offers the following list quoting Rubin:

1. They are willing and accurate guessers.
2. They have a strong drive to communicate:
3. They are often uninhibited and willing to make mistakes.
4. They focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing.

5. They take advantage of all practice opportunities.
6. They monitor their own speech and that of others.
7. They pay attention to meaning.

In order to clarify the path L2 speakers have to follow to reach their linguistic goal, it may be helpful to create a similar type of list based on what those who actually achieved a native-like oral proficiency level have to say. It may provide us with some insight into exactly what should be done so that L2 speakers may reach near-native proficiency levels for sure.

2. Methodology

In order to create such a list from near-native speakers' actual experiences, interviews were conducted. According to Mason (1996), a legitimate way to generate data on ontological properties is to actually interact with people, to talk to them, to listen to them, and to gain access to their accounts and articulations. Thus, interviews were considered one of the most promising approaches for the purpose of this study.

In order to make the findings of this study truly meaningful, the criteria for selecting near-native subjects were critical. First of all, their command of English had to be truly native-like. Initially, six candidates were prepared. The researcher tape-recorded his conversations with them, and asked an ESL instructor to listen to the tapes and judge the levels of their oral English proficiency, based on the interview protocol provided by the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (1983). A five minute segment of each tape was played to her, and she rated each speech on a scale of 0—5 with plus levels in between. The three of the highest levels on the

scale were described as below:

Level 4

Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Can (understand and) participate in any conversation within the range of own personal and professional experience with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary: would rarely be taken for native speaker, but can respond appropriately even in unfamiliar circumstances, interpreting the language (Date Code 40).

Level 4+

Speaking proficiency sometimes equivalent to that of a well-educated native speaker but cannot sustain performance. Weaknesses may lie in breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, pronunciation, cultural references or in not responding in a totally native manner (Date Code 46).

Level 5

Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of a well-educated native speaker. Has complete fluency in the language such that speech on all levels is fully accepted by educated native speakers in all of its features, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms and pertinent cultural references (Date Code 50).

As a result, one candidate turned out to be in Level 5, four in Level 4+, and one in Level 4. The one who belonged to Level 5 was instantly chosen as a participant, and the candidate who belonged to Level 4 was taken out. However, there seemed to still exist considerable differences in command of English among the four in Level 4+.

According to McLaughlin (1987), because

humans are limited-capacity processors, such a task as speaking a second language requires the integration of a number of different skills, and each of them must be practiced and made routine. Once automatic processes are set up at one stage, controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher levels of processing. Then restructuring occurs because learners go beyond the success of phase one and attempt to control and link previously isolated procedures into a unified representational framework. That is, once the procedures at any phase become automatized, learners move to a 'metaprocedural' level of orchestrating all the automatized procedures. This implies that the more advanced an L2 speaker is, the more automatized parts s/he has in speech. A similar point is made by Henderson, Goldman-Eisler, and Skarbek (quoted by Harley, 1995). They proposed that there are two phases in speech production: planning and execution and that phases of highly hesitant speech alternate with phases of more fluent speech. Most of the planning takes place in the preceding hesitant phase. To combine McLaughlin's proposal and that of Henderson et al, it follows that the more advanced an L2 learner is, the longer the automatic execution phases become in speech production. In other words, more advanced L2 speakers have longer automatized parts in their speech.

Taking this perspective into account, the researcher conducted another selective procedure among the four in Level 4+. As a result, one was singled out as being outstanding in terms of automatized execution of his speech. Thus, out of a total of six candidates, the researcher decided to interview only the two whose performances were substantially better than the other four. The following are the profiles of the two participants.

Participant 1 (Level 5)

He is originally from Thailand. He first came to the U.S. at the age of 15. However, it was a one-month stay and then he went back home. He returned to the U.S. at the age of 17. Even though he had finished the first two years of his high school program in his home country, he had to start his high school program in the U.S. all over again from the freshman level. After he graduated from high school, he proceeded to college, majoring in architecture. During that period, he went back to his country for two years. He was in the U.S. for six years in total so far. He was 25 years old at the time of this study. He had just finished college and was applying to a graduate school.

Participant 2 (Level 4+)

He is originally from Korea. He was 29 years old at the time of this study. He first came to the U.S. at the age of 19 after finishing high school. At the time, he stayed in the U.S. for only one year, and went back to Korea. About two years later, he returned again, and, since then, has been in the U.S. for over three years. Though he was not able to speak English at all during his first year, he was asked to teach Korean martial arts, *Tea Kwon Do*. It was very helpful experience for him in terms of learning English. He also used Korean very often, which he later regretted. According to him, at the end of his second stay in the U.S., 80% of his oral ability was established. He transferred from a city college to a state university, and recently graduated from the university. He was planning to go on to a graduate school.

The researcher obtained approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS).

Interviews were conducted based upon the following three research questions:

1. How do near-native speakers perceive the importance of grammar as a contributing factor to their success?
2. What do near-native speakers do in order to perfect their listening comprehension and speech production?
3. How do near-native speakers characterize their information processing system?

The interviews with the above two participants, P1 and P2 respectively, were tape-recorded, and later carefully listened to multiple times to identify common themes. The process of meaning condensation as identified by Kvale (1996) was utilized for this purpose. According to Kvale:

Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what it said is rephrased in a few words. Meaning condensation thus involves a reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations. (p.192)

Thus, by carefully following this procedure, the researcher tried to find key themes among the recorded data.

3. Findings

The findings are as follows. The researcher included expressions actually used by the participants as much as possible.

3.1 *How do near-native speakers perceive the importance of grammar as a contributing factor to their success?*

P1)

P1 says that without grammar his speech becomes broken, and he cannot express ideas perfectly. He mentions that his uncle cannot use long sentences even after staying in the

U.S. longer than him. Thus, he emphasizes the necessity of formal grammar instruction. However, although he believes in the importance of English grammar, when he speaks English, he is unaware of it.

P2)

P2 says that he is against the way English is taught in Korea, because grammar construction and translation are emphasized too much. Like P1, he mentions the case of his uncle. He says that his uncle, in spite of having graduated from the best law school in Korea and being very good at translating books, had a hard time communicating with people in English when he visited P2 in the U.S. According to P2, his uncle was always translating instead of immersing himself in the situation. He says that if you understand the situation, you understand the language, so you have to try to understand the situation directly without translation and grammar. For example, when you hear the word 'apple', you should mentally draw a picture of an apple. Also, since he is used to hearing "If I was..." often in daily conversation, he feels uncomfortable saying, "If I were..." which is grammatically correct.

3.2 *What do near-native speakers do in order to perfect their listening comprehension and speech production?*

P1)

P1 points out that in terms of listening comprehension, trying to pick up a key word out of the entire sequence is important at first. He says that it is impossible for L2 learners to suddenly be able to understand the same amount of information which native English speakers can. Thus, focusing on one key word which represents the direction of speech is helpful.

On the accuracy in speech and the mastery

of vocabulary and articles, P1 points out that one has to listen very carefully to what kind of words native English speakers use and imitate them. He especially emphasized the importance of exactly imitating the oral structure of native English speakers as children do, especially for the mastery of pronunciation, articles, tense, prepositions and so on. He also points out that he has experience of imitating what he heard on TV or the radio. He says that perfect imitation of native speeches is the only way by which L2 learners can learn English. He also says that he was careful about details in his speech, so that he would not be recognized as a foreigner.

In addition, he points out that in order to reach the near-native level, you must continuously imitate native speech even after you have reached a level at which you do not have any difficulty communicating in English. Most L2 speakers stop trying to improve their English when they reach this level.

P2)

P2 says that he does not remember trying to imitate what native speakers say. However, he says that it is possible that he was doing it without being aware of it. He believes that the only way to learn a new language is by trying to think like children, because children take everything as it is. He contends that this is applicable to adult L2 learners as well. You actually cannot go back to your childhood, but you try to go back, he says. If you try to translate, your brain is not going to function as well as those of children. Thus, he emphasizes how important it is to force oneself to think like children. He says he trained himself very hard to think like children.

In regard to how you actually come to understand speech inputs, he says that by listening to similar input in similar situations repetitively, you eventually get used to

sentences and some part of the vocabulary which you heard before. Also he highly emphasizes the importance of listening before speaking. It may not even be necessary to classify input into words, since taking input as it is so important, he adds.

3.3 How do near-native speakers characterize their information processing system(8)?

P1)

In regard to the number of communication system, P1 says that he has only one system to manage his two languages. According to him, it is something like one dresser with two different drawers. In switching between the two languages, he describes it as being like using a nail or a screw. The difference is only superficial and they are essentially the same.

He also adds that the reason why oral communication is possible, even when linguistic information cannot be caught clearly, is partly because a listener can compensate for the incompleteness of linguistic information with some other types of information, such as visual and situational information. He contends that L2 learners have to be more sensitive to these other types of information, just as they normally pay attention to such information in their native language. The more alternative information they have, the easier it is for them to understand the language itself.

According to P1, his motivation to learn English was to mingle with native English speakers without being detected as a foreigner. He also comments that native English speakers start to treat you differently once they know you are a foreigner. For example, once they know you are a foreigner, they begin to be very careful about grammatical mistakes when you speak, he says.

In addition, P1 says that for the first two

years and a half, in spite of his living with his uncle, he did not use Thai often, because they missed each other due to his uncle's busy schedule. He remembers that he talked to himself in his room all the time in order to practice his English, especially when he did not have any friends at school. He points out that once your English competence has been established, the use of your native language does not damage your English competence. However, if you speak in your native language before that, it delays the establishment of competence and fluency in English. He volunteered to participate in this study by responding to the sign the researcher posted on campus of his university. What he said when we met was that he wanted to prove that even those who started to learn English after 17 can still achieve native-like oral proficiency level.

P2)

P2 also believes that he has only one communication system, based on his actual experiences in which he would often use English words even when he was talking to his Korean friends. He also points out the importance of not trying to make a conscious effort, especially in listening comprehension. He says that children around five, six and seven learn everything without doing anything special. They are like small computers. Put information in, and they accept it. According to him, this ability is lost in adults, and they use information they already have instead of absorbing new information. He admits that he had a very difficult time learning English. He was able to overcome this situation by training himself to absorb information like children. He says that now he understands without making any conscious effort. He says that to get involved in situations is the key to making this happen and that you must remain in a

situation even when you do not understand it.

4. Discussion

4.1 *The importance of trying to think like children*

P2 time and again emphasized how important it is to try to think like children, especially in developing listening comprehension. Instead of depending on translation or grammar, it must be understood directly. In order to do this, there must be involvement in a situation.

Paying attention to information other than linguistic information, such as visual and situational information, helps you to be naturally immersed in the situation. According to P1, the more sensitive you are to such information, the easier it is to understand the language itself. Similarly, P2 points out that if you understand the situation, you automatically understand the language. Both subjects seem to suggest that visual information and situational information are primary while linguistic information is only secondary.

Although language is not understood in the beginning, by repetitively being exposed to similar situations with similar sounds, the sounds and situations are gradually integrated. Thus, it is important to try to accept what you are experiencing, whether you understand it or not. What is important is accepting it without making a conscious effort. One must connect sound with the situation. This is exactly what children do when they acquire L1. Because adults tend not to think like children anymore, they must intentionally train themselves to do so. This modification of L2 learner's attitude towards L1 acquisition seems the key to success in developing listening comprehension.

Today, many scholars influential in the field of SLA agree on the idea that the key to success in ESL is developing a learning approach suitable to each individual's needs. For example:

The success of any particular strategy depends on the characteristics of the situation and on individual learning styles.... Some adult learners have a greater need than others to work from knowledge of the rules. Others prefer to work from the input.... Optimizing outcomes involves fitting the instruction treatment to the individual's learning style—which is the ultimate practical goal of research on second language development. (McLaughlin, 1983)

A distinctive possibility, however, is that the same instructional option is not equally effective for all L2 learners. Individual differences that have to do with such factors as learning style and language aptitude are likely to influence which options work best.... It is obviously important to take individual differences into account when investigating the effects of instruction. For example, even if it is eventually shown that input-based instruction works better overall than production-based instruction, it does not follow that this will be true for all learners. (Ellis, 1997, pp.86-87)

Tremendous variation among learners is recognized; human beings do not behave like the other consistently and uniformly. Therefore, no single method suffices to answer all needs of all learners at all time. (Brown, 1994, p.291)

These scholars emphasize that there is no

single approach effective with everyone and that each L2 learner should be taught with what best suits their needs. However, data obtained from P2 seem to indicate rather the opposite of what is suggested by these scholars. P2 succeeded in the mastery of ESL not especially catering to his unique needs. Instead, he focused on training himself to think like children, which rather suppressed his individual needs. This is to say, the key to achieving the near-native oral proficiency is not focusing on L2 learner's individual differences, but intentionally modifying them towards L1A.

This finding obtained from P2 is basically in the same direction as Krashen's stance that L2 should be acquired as children acquire L1. Although this data is based on only one subject, the fact that this subject clearly achieved his near-native proficiency by following what he suggests seems too substantial to be dismissed as being an exception. He even went so far as to use the word "brainwash" to describe his intentional effort to think like children as opposed to what he naturally would do as an adult. Which is more effective in order to ensure L2 learner's achievement of near-native oral proficiency level: the individually customized approach or the approach modified towards L1A? This is a very critical issue because these two approaches lead L2 learners in totally opposite directions.

4.2 *Perfect imitation of native speech and its continuation*

While P2 provided us with some insight into how to improve listening comprehension, P1 gave us some insight into how to improve speech production to near-native levels. When he was asked about listening comprehension, he answered that he did not have difficulty

in listening comprehension, and stated that listening was the easiest part in the mastery of English. It is highly possible that P1 was able to do what P2 suggested without being aware of it. At any rate, this relative ease in listening comprehension could allow him to pay more attention to speech production. Accordingly, the very key in developing near-native speech production is to listen very carefully to what native English speakers say and how they say it, and then make one's own speech as close to that of native speakers as possible. According to Schmidt and Frota (quoted by Richards, 2002):

Notice: learners need to recognize differences between forms they are using and target-like forms. A learner will not be motivated to try out a new linguistic structure if he or she is not aware of the differences between his or her current interlanguage system and the target language system (Schmidt, 1990). Schmidt and Frota (1986) found that the new forms a learner incorporated into speech were generally those that had been noticed in the speech people addressed to the learner. Forms that were present but not noticed were not used. (p.42)

P1 was instinctively doing exactly what Schmidt and Frota claim here without knowing it. Also the degree of P1's sensitivity to details of what he listens to was fairly high because his purpose was to mingle with native English speaking people without being detected as a foreigner. That is, he wanted to become one of them. Thus, P1 is a good case of convergence in Gile's accommodation theory, in which L2 learners try to make their speech similar to that of their addressee. Although normally L2A involves long-term convergence, his case is more intensive because he achieved his

proficiency in much shorter period.

He was careful about subtle aspects of the language such as prepositions, articles, tense, pronunciation, and so on. Especially in terms of pronunciation, when he came across a sound very different from sounds in his L1, he always repeated it orally until he was able to say it exactly the way it sounded. In this way, he detected his weaknesses and reformed them. He continued this imitation of native speech even after he was able to communicate in English without difficulty. He points out that the reason most ESL speakers cannot reach his level is that they compromise and stop improving their English halfway. Becoming a near-native speaker or not depends on whether you maintain this attitude of keeping improving your English all the way, he says.

This finding from P1 can also be interpreted as indicating that the key to developing near-native speech production is to modify the L2 mode to L1A. When you are a child acquiring L1, the only information available is oral input provided by the people around you. First you listen to them carefully in order to understand them. Then, you gradually try to express yourself in the same way. In this way, children try to express themselves by using the same tools as adults use. This natural act is interfered in the case of adult L2 learners because they use a different mode than children, in which they go through information they already have when absorbing new information. In other words, adults compare new information with what they have in their already established system. L2 learners also have a strong tendency to depend on grammar rules, rules that are based on the written language, which is not available in the case of L1A. Regarding the effects of grammar, it remains to be further researched.

However, even if grammar works positively in L2A, it seems safe to say that oral input is what L2 learners have to pay primary attention to and that grammar has only a secondary position in promoting absorption of oral input. Possibly, the reason P1 believes that grammar is necessary could be because it functioned as a scaffold when he tried to imitate native speech. The finding from P1 suggests that in order to achieve native-like oral proficiency, L2 learners must learn to think like children, in which they absorb what is available orally without depending on their L1 knowledge and grammar rules, which are rather based on written language.

There was one more finding which deserves our attention. It is that both P1 and P2 agree on having only one communication system to manage their two languages. P2 mentioned his experience that he spoke English words when he was talking to his Korean friend without knowing it. By this, he seems to have meant that if he accessed two separate communication systems in his mind, he would have spoken Korean words. However, the fact that he used English indicates that in his mind English and Korean exist together. By using an analogy “like one dresser with two different drawers,” he tries to convey that basically there is only one main communication system in his mind and that the two languages are just representative tools which express one common understanding. He chooses how to express his ideas at will, whether in English or Korean.

Harley (1995) introduced three different approaches to explain the number of lexicons existing in a bilingual mind. A mixture of common and separate storehouses is the one in which culturally similar words, concrete words, and cognates are stored in a common storehouse, and other words are in separate

storehouses. In a separate storehouse model proposed by Potter, So, von Eckardt, Feldman, Schwanenflugel, and Rey, the two languages are connected via an underlying amodal conceptual system that is hypothesized to be the same interface as that which interfaces between language and pictures. In the Grosjean and Soares model, a language system is flexible in a bilingual speaker, and behavior depends upon the circumstances. In unilingual mode, when input and output are limited to only one of the available languages, and perhaps when other speakers involved are unilingual in that language, interaction between the language systems is kept to a minimum, for the bilingual tries to switch off the second language. In the bilingual mode, however, both language systems are active and interact. We can relate these approaches to what we obtained from our two participants.

The situations the two respondents describe seem different. However, both clearly stated that they utilize only one communication system because it became much easier to switch between their two languages. They both emphasized how easy it is now to switch back and forth between their two languages, although it was difficult before, especially when they tried to switch from L1 to English. It is considered that they wanted to explain their currently established bilingualism by saying that they utilize only one system. They wanted to say that their English is established at almost the same level as their L1, and that because of this achievement they now feel no uncomfortable feelings, whichever tools they use.

5. Conclusion

There were many interesting findings obtained from this study. The followings

are what the researcher consider especially significant:

1. In listening comprehension, near-native speakers achieved their proficiency by training themselves to think like children. They try to connect sound with the situation, without depending on L1 knowledge, and grammar rules, which are mainly based on written language.
2. In speech production, native-speakers achieve their proficiency, following the way children acquire L1. They attempt to imitate what native English speakers say and how they say it. They continue to do so even after they reach the levels in which they can communicate in English without difficulty.
3. Both participants agreed that there was only one communication system to manage their two different languages. This came from their feeling that it was fairly easy to switch back and forth between the two languages.
4. One participant emphasized that his primary motivation to learn English was to mingle with native-English speaking people without being detected as a foreigner. He simply wanted to be one of them.
5. Both participants agreed that the more attentive L2 learners are to the information other than linguistic information, the more positive effects it has on understanding the language itself.

Out of these five major findings, 1 and 2 seem to be especially critical. They suggest that in order for L2 learners to achieve near-native proficiency levels it may be necessary to modify their mental attitude towards LIA as opposed to the prevailing idea that the best ESL approach is the one which meets each individual's different needs.

Brown (1994) says:

We have come to a point in our young history where we understand that those traditional disciplines (linguistics, psychology, and education) are an important part of our research tradition but that our research must be directly focused on second language learning and teaching itself. (p. 291)

Although a number of significant developments have been made in disciplines related to L2A, our top priority as SLA researchers has to be to find out how to lead L2 learners without fail to proficiency levels in which each L2 learner can function as a full member of society.

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