

Native speaker perceptions of learners' acquisition of connected speech in Spanish

INTRODUCTION

The current study treats L2 learner data from the perspective of native speakers and their judgments regarding the degree of naturalness or native-likeness of learner utterances. A panel of native speaker judges evaluated pre- and post-treatment speech samples from three treatment groups (study abroad (CR, for Costa Rica), pronunciation class (317), other advanced classes (OA)) and a native/heritage control (NH), with stimuli controlled for rate of speech and achievement in linking.

The main research question was whether improved mastery of connected speech phenomena would be significant for native speaker judges in their consideration of fluency and naturalness.

We hypothesized that native speaker judges would rate

- 1.T2 for 317 as more native-like than their T1 and compared to other groups due to the explicit instruction received for linking
- 2.T2 for CR as more fluent than their T1 and compared to other groups due to greater lexical recall due to daily communicative context and need
- 3.NH highest of all for both native-likeness and fluency

STIMULI DESIGN

Utterances played for judges were drawn from a database of recordings made of English learners of Spanish in the three treatment groups (317=5, CR=4, OA=5) and the native/heritage control group (NH=7):

The sentences were drawn from a list of 100 phrases constructed to contain a variety of cases of C-V and V-V linking. We attempted to control for duration and achievement in C-V and V-V linking, and formed subgroups for each condition.

Figures cited for duration and achievement of linking come from sentences 1-50.

Stimuli sentences:

- 1.Los panfletos fueron hechos por ocupantes clandestinos.
 - 17 syllables; 2 cases of C-V *enlace*; 1 of VV
- 2.Los padres sintieron el olor a quemado desde el jardín.
 - 17-18 syllables; 3 cases of C-V *enlace*; 1 case of V-V synalepha; 1 of VV
- 3.Los cuentos están en mi universo infantil.
 - 12-14 syllables; 2 cases of C-V *enlace*; 2 cases of V-V synalepha; 1 of VV
- 4.Los científicos cambiaron titanio por uranio.
 - 15 syllables; 2 cases of C-V *enlace*; 2 cases of VV synalepha; 4 of VV
- 5.Los alumnos que se portan bien se llevan el oso de peluche a casa un día cada uno.
 - 27-29 syllables; 3 cases of C-V *enlace*; 3 cases of VV synalepha; 1 of VV

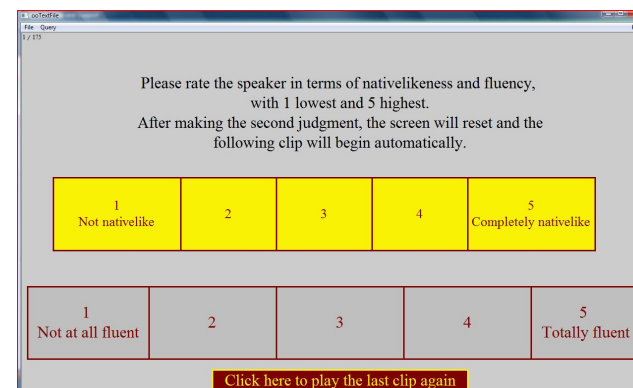
There were a total of 175 stimuli:

- For each nonnative subject (n=14), there were 10 audio samples (sentences 1-5 at Time 1 and 2);
- For each NH subject (n=7), there were 5 audio samples (sentences 1-5 at Time 1 only)

PARTICIPANTS

Four native-speaker judges: two "linguistically naïve" and two "linguistically trained". All judges were speakers of a Latin American variety (Costa Rica, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru). Three of the judges were female. All have post-baccalaureate degrees.

Linguistics background	Judge 1 (CR)		Judge 2 (Peru)		Judge 3 (Colombia)		Judge 4 (Ecuador)	
	no		yes		no		yes	
	Native-likeness	Fluency	Native-likeness	Fluency	Native-likeness	Fluency	Native-likeness	Fluency
317 overall	3.18	3.04	3.44	3.86	3.6	3.52	2.54	2.78
317 - T1	3.08	2.96	3.48	3.88	3.52	3.4	2.44	2.84
317-T2	3.28	3.12	3.4	3.84	3.68	3.64	2.64	2.72
CR overall	3.25	2.9	3.325	3.675	3.875	3.775	1.975	2.675
CR-T1	3.2	2.96	3.3	3.45	3.8	3.75	1.9	2.6
CR-T2	3.3	2.85	3.35	3.9	3.95	3.8	2.05	2.75
OA overall	3.22	2.78	3.22	3.66	3.72	3.76	2.26	2.96
OA-T1	2.96	2.52	3.24	3.6	3.52	3.6	2.2	2.88
OA-T2	3.48	3.04	3.2	3.72	3.92	3.92	2.32	3.04
NH	4.4	4.14	4.26	4.51	4.6	4.51	4.37	4.31



TEST DESIGN

The stimuli were presented in random-non-repeating order via noise-cancelling headphones and using Praat's ExperimentMFC object. Judges were asked to provide a rating for native-likeness and then fluency for each stimulus. They could replay the clip up to three times, if desired. After every 40 stimuli, the experiment paused, and resumed when the judge clicked to continue.

RESULTS

We conducted two-factor repeated measure ANOVAs. Given that this was a pilot study, we used an α value of 0.1 to increase the probability of finding significance to provide direction for future studies. However, none of the results reached significance.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If these results are sustained, it suggests that native speaker judges attend to other factors besides rate of speech and linking in evaluating native-likeness and fluency. Anecdotal evidence collected post hoc from the judges confirms that they noticed and commented negatively on segmental and sentence-type-intonational factors. This suggests that these factors are more important to judges than connected speech phenomena, and further study is warranted.

Limitations of the study include a small number of judges, a small sample size of subjects and subject utterances, and uncertainty regarding how judges interpreted 'fluency' and 'native-likeness'.

The study provides some insight into the subtle contextual and linguistic factors that influence the degree of mastery of elements of nonnative phonology, and that lead to favorable recognition by native speakers, likewise contributing to the field of sociolinguistics in exploring one group of speaker's evaluation of the identity of another based on linguistic factors.

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