

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

Working with native speakers to improve communication across linguistic difference

Why focus on native speakers¹?

Language educators' primary responsibility is to help people learn new languages. Our work is usually focused on how learners can become better at communicating with speakers of the target language. For example, language teachers may help their students make their pronunciation more comprehensible to speakers of the target language. We don't usually think about working with native speakers of the target language. Because they've been using the language since childhood, we don't expect them to need our help. However, despite all of their experience, native speakers may still find understanding nonnative speech challenging. Usually, these challenges are seen as indications that nonnative speakers' language has "problems" that should be remedied through further language study. While, as a language educator, I believe in the value of language study for nonnative speakers, I argue that working directly with native speakers to improve their understanding of nonnative speech is a practical and ethical way of improving communication across linguistic difference.

Many problems people encounter in communication across linguistic difference can be practically addressed by working with native speakers. For example, one difficulty is trying to recognize words spoken with a nonnative accent. When we first encounter someone who speaks with an unfamiliar accent, we may feel that we will never understand. However, research has shown that listeners have a remarkable capacity to adapt to an unfamiliar person's speech patterns. After a short adjustment period (research suggests this often takes less than a minute, Clarke & Garrett, 2004; Xie et al., 2018), listeners have been shown to adjust themselves to a nonnative accent and efficiently process the person's speech. Furthermore, adapting to many different nonnative speakers may give us a greater ability to understand nonnative speech more generally. For example, language teachers have been shown to be particularly good at understanding nonnative speech because they regularly communicate with language learners (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). While teachers' abilities are honed over months and years, numerous studies have found that improvements in understanding nonnative speech are observable even after surprisingly short interventions. For example, Lindemann, Campbell, Litzenberg, and Subtirelu (2016) found native listeners showed modest improvement after an online training that took most less than half an hour. While more in-depth interventions would probably yield better results, research suggests that specially-designed interventions can have clear effects on how native speakers communicate with nonnative speakers.

There is also an ethical justification for this work. Nonnative speakers of a language may have spent hundreds or thousands of hours studying and practicing to be able to use their new language. When speaking, they work very hard to make themselves understood. However, they should not be expected to do all of the work, as they so often are (Lindemann, 2002; Lippi-Green, 1994; Subtirelu, 2017). Native speakers must be expected to do their share.

What might this work look like?

If we believe that working with native speakers is a practical and ethical endeavor, then the next question is “How?” The relevant research is still in its very early stages, but there is enough to lay out some priorities and principles. In a recent overview article, Subtirelu and Lindemann (2016) proposed three areas that are important to interventions aimed at native speakers: (1) improving their attitudes toward nonnative speech, (2) increasing their familiarity with accents that are different from their own, and (3) encouraging them to develop and utilize interactional strategies that productively and respectfully deal with communication difficulties. As I’ve already suggested, just talking with nonnative speakers may be effective, but this might not be the most efficient or enjoyable approach for many people. As a result, guided preparation is an effective method for preparing native speakers to be better prepared to communicate across linguistic difference.

Addressing negative attitudes toward nonnative speech

Research has shown that native speakers of many languages tend to have negative attitudes toward nonnative speech. These attitudes may result in negative perceptions of the speaker’s personal characteristics (e.g., associating nonnative accents with lower intelligence). Negative attitudes may also affect the effort that listeners are willing to put into understanding as well as how people perceive the success of communication with nonnative speakers (Lindemann, 2002). For example, people with negative attitudes toward nonnative speech may be predisposed to see communication with nonnative speakers as problematic. Their expectations may lead them to put in less effort when interacting with nonnative speakers. Those expectations may also make people more likely to evaluate interactions with nonnative speakers as unsuccessful, blaming the nonnative speaker for communication problems. To counter these tendencies, it is important to confront negative attitudes toward nonnative speech directly.

Researchers have tried two methods to confront people’s negative attitudes toward nonnative speech. The first is called structured contact. The basic idea is that people develop more positive attitudes toward other groups by being exposed to members of those groups, and this effect is particularly strong if certain conditions for positive group encounters are met. Kang, Rubin, and Lindemann (2014) developed a structured contact intervention that improved US college students’ attitudes toward international teaching assistants (ITAs) who were nonnative users of English. First, they brought students and ITAs together in an informal setting, which included snacks and time to get to know each other. After mingling, groups composed of both

students and ITAs worked on puzzles² together. The puzzles required all group members to collaborate. After the event, the students showed more positive attitudes toward ITAs. There are many other possible ways to implement structured contact. However, it is important that participants meet on equal terms, that they cooperate toward a common goal, that they learn about each other, and that they see each other as typical representatives of another group.

Another technique is called perspective-taking. The idea behind it is to encourage participants to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Weyant (2007) used this technique to improve participants' attitudes toward nonnative English speakers. The participants listened to a native Spanish speaker talk about her life. After listening, they wrote a paragraph taking her perspective (using first person, e.g., writing "I" instead of "she") and describing the things she might do or how she might feel. Weyant found that the act of taking the woman's perspective caused people to perceive the woman as more capable and accomplished. As with structured contact, there are many possible variations of perspective-taking that might work to improve native speakers' attitudes toward nonnative speakers. Books, movies, or other media might serve as useful tools to help native speakers explore what it is like to be a nonnative speaker. The most important thing is that participants imagine or explore the thoughts and feelings of a nonnative speaker and attempt to put themselves in that person's shoes.

Introducing people to unfamiliar accents

Research has shown that native listeners can become better at understanding nonnative speakers. Two approaches have been tried: explicit and implicit, and both appear to be effective although in different ways. The explicit approach involves telling people about the features of other accents. For example, Derwing, Rossiter, and Munro (2002) taught social work students about Vietnamese-accented English, hoping to improve their understanding of Vietnamese speakers' English. For example, after listening to an interview with a Vietnamese man describing his struggles with employment and learning English, the instructors pointed out some pronunciation features that English speakers may find hard to understand, such as a tendency to drop consonants from the ends of words (e.g., *stops* might be pronounced as "stahs"). The instructors discussed relevant differences between Vietnamese and English, including the fact that English allows many more combinations of consonants at the ends of words than Vietnamese does. The instructors played the recording again and asked students to pay attention to certain words highlighted on their transcripts to hear the man's pronunciation. Derwing and her colleagues did not find that this instruction led to significantly improved understanding of Vietnamese-accented English, but the participants did report increased confidence in their ability to interact with nonnative speakers. Results like these may be indicative of a flaw in explicit approaches, namely that learning information about someone's speech is not the same thing as learning to process it in real time. However, it is important to note that explicit approaches may still be valuable. Subtirelu and Lindemann (2016) argue that the information presented in explicit

approaches could facilitate perspective-taking. By learning about why nonnative speakers speak the way they do, native listeners may be encouraged to see nonnative speech as a product of a systematic process that is normal and not always within the speaker's control.

The second approach to improving native listeners' understanding of nonnative speech is the implicit approach. Well-designed training programs that take an implicit approach to developing listeners' familiarity with a new accent have been shown to successfully increase listeners' comprehension of the particular accent (e.g., Bradlow & Bent, 2008; Tzeng, Alexander, Sidaras, & Nygaard, 2016) as well as nonnative speech more generally (Baese-Berk, Bradlow, & Wright, 2013). This second finding is particularly intriguing since it suggests that listeners may not need training in all possible accents. Rather, instruction in a few different accents may be enough to help them understand any previously unencountered accent. The methods that have been used in these studies, though effective, are monotonous. Listeners are presented with many sentences, often around 80 or 90 per session, read by different speakers. They transcribe each sentence and immediately receive feedback. It is important that listeners hear different speakers because they should be learning to generalize across different people rather than adapting to a single speaker. In addition, feedback is crucial to help listeners notice where they are making mistakes in word recognition. As long as these basic principles are followed, educators might consider experimenting with more creative and engaging trainings.

Encouraging good strategies for addressing communication difficulty

Finally, many native speakers might benefit from better strategies for interacting with nonnative speakers, especially strategies for productively and respectfully dealing with communication difficulties. For example, it's common for native listeners to struggle to recognize words produced by a nonnative speaker. In many situations, however, there are opportunities for repairing the difficulty. A question like "You put WHAT in the mixture?" would potentially help ensure that communication was successful despite a momentary setback. Such strategies are not unique to interactions between native and nonnative speakers, but the greater linguistic difference may require people to reflect on how they will deal with communication difficulties in a respectful and productive manner, so everyone feels good, and necessary information is effectively communicated. However, people are often unsure how to deal with communication difficulties when talking to a nonnative speaker; unfortunately, they often choose to avoid the problem or the person all together (Subtirelu, 2017).

We still need further research about how to encourage people to actively and respectfully work through communication difficulties when they arise. One approach that Kris Acheson-Clair, Maxi-Ann Campbell, Stephanie Lindemann, and I have recently tried is to have computer science students plan how best to communicate across linguistic difference. We first showed participants an example list of tips for ensuring successful communication across linguistic

difference. The list was from the Københavns Sprogcenter (see Derwing, 2010, p. 31) and included things like “Say it in a different way if you are not understood” and “Imagine what it’s like to be in your colleague’s shoes.” We then asked the groups, composed of both native and nonnative speakers, to develop guidelines that they would use if they were working together on a class project. We have not yet formally evaluated the effectiveness of this technique, but we are hopeful that it spurs productive conversations that help people feel more prepared to engage in communication across linguistic difference.

Final thoughts

It’s likely that the most effective approach for preparing listeners to better understand speech that is unfamiliar to them is not any one of these but a combination of all three. Indeed, it is very likely that each contributes to the others in important ways. For example, more positive attitudes likely make listeners more willing to invest effort in understanding new accents and working through communication difficulty. Furthermore, although research has suggested some general guidelines, educators should feel free to customize their approaches for the local context and be creative in making their interventions as engaging and relevant for their audiences as possible. If such interventions were widespread, we would be one step closer toward addressing the need to make sure native speakers enter linguistically diverse spaces prepared to be productive and respectful communication partners.

End Notes

1. The categories “native speaker” and “nonnative speaker” have been widely and rightly criticized because they fail to account for the diversity of people’s linguistic experiences and reinforce harmful language hierarchies (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001). I use the terms here to reference a categorization process that, while imprecise and even sometimes harmful, has real world consequences. One of those consequences is that people categorized as “nonnative speakers” are expected to do the majority of the work to ensure that communication with native speakers is successful (Lippi-Green, 1994), a situation the research I summarize here intends to challenge.
2. An example puzzle is available at this site:
<http://www.edteck.com/rigor/lessons/detective/clues2.pdf>

References

Brutt-Griffler, J., & Samimy, K. K. (2001). Transcending the nativeness paradigm. *World Englishes*, 20(1), 99-106.

- Baese-Berk, M. M., Bradlow, A. R., & Wright, B. A. (2013). Accent-independent adaptation to foreign accented speech. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 133(3), EL174-EL180.
- Bradlow, A. R., & Bent, T. (2008). Perceptual adaptation to non-native speech. *Cognition*, 106(2), 707-729.
- Clarke, C. M., & Garrett, M. F. (2004). Rapid adaptation to foreign-accented English. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 116(6), 3647-3658.
- Derwing, T. M. (2010). Utopian goals for pronunciation teaching. In J. Levis & K. LeVelle (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 1st Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, Iowa State University, Sept. 2009. (pp. 24-37), Ames, IA: Iowa State University.
- Derwing, T. M., Rossiter, M. J., & Munro, M. J. (2002). Teaching native speakers to listen to foreign-accented speech. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 23(4), 245-259.
- Kennedy, S., & Trofimovich, P. (2008). Intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness of L2 speech: The role of listener experience and semantic context. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 64(3), 459-489.
- Lindemann, S. (2002). Listening with an attitude: A model of native-speaker comprehension of non-native speakers in the United States. *Language in Society*, 31(3), 419-441.
- Lindemann, S., Campbell, M.-A., Litzenberg, J., & Subtirelu, N. C. (2016). Explicit and implicit training methods for improving native English speakers' comprehension of nonnative speech. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, 2(1), 93-108.
- Lippi-Green, R. (1994). Accent, standard language ideology, and discriminatory pretext in the courts. *Language in Society*, 23(2), 163-198.
- Subtirelu, N. C. (2017). Students' orientations to communication across linguistic difference with international teaching assistants at an internationalizing university in the United States. *Multilingua*, 36(3), 247-280.
- Subtirelu, N. C., & Lindemann, S. (2016). Teaching first language speakers to communicate across linguistic difference: Addressing attitudes, comprehension, and strategies. *Applied Linguistics*, 37(6), 765-783.

- Tzeng, C. Y., Alexander, J. E. D., Sidaras, S. K., & Nygaard, L. C. (2016). The role of training structure in perceptual learning of accented speech. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 42(11), 1793-1805.
- Weyant, J. M. (2007). Perspective taking as a means of reducing negative stereotyping of individuals who speak English as a second language. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37(4), 703-716.
- Xie, X., Weatherholtz, K., Bainton, L., Rowe, E., Burchill, Z., Liu, L., & Jaeger, T. F. (2018). Rapid adaptation to foreign-accented speech and its transfer to an unfamiliar talker. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 143(4), 2013-2031.