

LIN 630 – Second Language Acquisition: Dr. Leo van Lier
Literature Review of the native speaker construct in SLA: November 19, 2004

The purpose of this assignment was to review the literature on a specific aspect of second language acquisition. I chose the role of the native speaker as a target or standard for acquisition because my experience of living in a country where an English Creole is spoken, Jamaica, led me to believe that *native speaker* excludes individuals who switch between two varieties of a language on a daily basis. The assignment required me to search the library's periodical and book stacks thoroughly to find a significant collection of contributions from scholars in the field of SLA. Because my topic was less commonly studied in the field, I had to borrow books from other libraries in order to cover all of the literature on this subject. I also learned that the researcher needs to know his/her subject very well to determine what does and does not fit the genre of study. At times my collection of articles focused on ultimate attainment and near-native ability, but I had to be clear in my own mind that what I wanted to research was the viability of modeling language ability after the "native speaker", not the ability itself. This focus led me to some fascinating articles and created a very interesting field of work to review.

I used several process writing techniques for this assignment. I prepared a first draft of my literature review and shared it with two other peers who gave me feedback. The feedback was helpful for me because it allowed me to understand which points of mine were clear and which ones needed improvement. In addition, the professor provided the class with some brief instruction on how to conduct a literature review. In order to produce a final draft, I used organizing techniques such as a matrix of authors' positions on common topics in the literature and what Elbow (1981) calls "cut and

paste” editing where I literally cut out sections of my paper and rearranged them to improve coherence.

As a result of this paper, I learned that there are sociolinguistic, pedagogic, and cognitive implications for maintaining the mythical “native speaker” as the goal for language learners to attain in their study. The social function of language cannot be divorced from its linguistic function. Any attempt to do so and maintain the native speaker as a construct for linguistic proficiency, is inadequate. The native speaker construct is a remnant from colonial days where resources were controlled from the center. Today, the colonial powers no longer control the norms of language. In the classroom, students will benefit from an honest and realistic target for language acquisition that is not based on emulating the native speaker. In assessment, norming of test for non-native speakers should not depend on the variable competencies of native speakers.

My conclusions from this assignment have strongly informed my pedagogy and language attitudes. A significant portion of my position paper hinges on the globalized and changing nature of language, which implies that all humans are in the process of learning a language and therefore no one can be considered a “native speaker” in a terminal state of authority on language use. Because of this position, I have developed instructional materials, that can be seen in my C section, to increase others’ awareness of an English-based Creole.

Reference

Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. New York: Oxford University Press.