

Who is a Native Speaker?

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During the 2020 CATESOL State Conference last year in October, we presented on “Club Membership and Second Language Acquisition.” In the talk we discussed how accent rarely interferes with comprehension in a second language and how being part of a “club” and feeling welcome to join/be accepted as a member of the club of users of a language can have a significant role in how we acquire and use aspects of language, including pronunciation (Krashen, 1997).

This topic is important. Research has shown that non-native speakers of English, despite a high level of competence in English, still face bias and discrimination based on their accent both in terms of personal and professional life experiences (Ashtari, 2014; Clark & Paran, 2007; Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, & Hartford, 2004).

An example of this bias was illustrated in a poll that we used at CATESOL 2020. The question that was posed was, “Which speaker is a native speaker of English?” There were two audio clips with two individual speakers reading lines with the exact same wording. No further information was provided. Speaker A was a native English speaker with Indian ethnicity who acquired and spoke English as his first language with an Indian English accent. Speaker B was a non-native English speaker who was born and raised in Iran and moved to the United States after what could be referred to as the “Critical Period” for second language acquisition.

Speaker B had what could be considered an “American English accent,” and Speaker A had what is referred to “Indian English accent.” What is interesting is that 64% of participants (N=85) chose Speaker B as the native English speaker and only 36% chose Speaker A as the native English speaker. Even though Speaker B was a non-native speaker

of English, his American accent helped him to be perceived as part of the “native speakers” club in English.

With this information in mind, we are reminded of the power of perception in language use and interactions. It may be the case that when departments insist that a teacher of ESL must be a “native speaker” this could really mean that the candidate must fit their preconceptions of what accent the speaker has and even what he or she looks like.

References:

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