

Re-evaluating the “Native Speaker” Goal in English Teaching as a Second Language in China

NIE Jia^{[a],*}

^[a] Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, China.
*Corresponding author.

Received 26 April 2024; accepted 15 June 2024
Published online 26 June 2024

Abstract

The essay critiques the traditional goal of achieving native speaker (NS) proficiency in second language (L2) learning, highlighting its problematic and often unattainable nature. It examines difficulties in defining a native speaker, the unfairness of using NS as a universal goal, and the low likelihood of most learners achieving native-like proficiency. The essay also considers diverse learner motivations, using examples from English teaching in China. The essay proposes alternative goals like “language expertise,” “L2 user,” and “competent language user” as more realistic and fairer. It concludes by advocating for language learning goals tailored to individual needs and aspirations, moving beyond the rigid native speaker model to a more personalized and practical approach in L2 education.

Key words: Native Speaker (NS) Proficiency; Second Language (L2) Learning; Language Expertise; L2 User; Competent Language User; Language Teaching Goals; Intercultural Communication; English Teaching in China

Nie, J. (2024). Re-evaluating the “Native Speaker” Goal in English Teaching as a Second Language in China. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 26(2), 62-67. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/13471>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13471>

1. INTRODUCTION

Native speakers are always considered to be flawless by second language learners. Consequently, non-

native speakers are “viewed as the [native speakers’] subordinates” (Firth and Wagner, 1997:291), even though in some occasion nonnatives can do better than natives (Cook, 2000). It is logically reasonable that the native speaker (NS) has been taken for granted as being the goal of second language (English in particular) teaching for a long time, but there is little reason for this having been stated. This goal is set in the same way as first language acquisition, however most L2 learners cannot achieve it. In past two to three decades, the goal of NS has been questioned, teaching English as an international language has been discussed (Matsuda, 2017), and the re-evaluation of appropriate goals for second language teaching continues.

This essay will firstly present a rationale for the challenge of the goal as NS in the aspects of the problems in defining NS, slim possibility to be native-like, unfairness for the NS goal, as well as arguments for and against it, which will express my stance to reject the goal of NS in general. Then secondly the goals setting in the perspective of L2 learners will be discussed, specifying some situations in China, in the following section: individual purposes, motivation, identity of L2 learners, and learners’ characteristics.

2. RATIONALE

2.1 The Problems in Defining the Native Speaker

As the goal is set to be NS, the first question that needs to be answered is who the native speaker is. The concept of NS seems to be easy to understand, but difficult to define (Widdowson et al., 1995).

The traditional definitions by scholars such as Bloomfield (1933) and McArthur (1992), which are usually related to the first language, birthplace, and childhood, have been argued to be problematic (Cook, 2009, Slavkov, N. et al., 2021), because we can easily

challenge them by asking questions. For instance, for some people who stayed in several different countries when they were children, and can speak several languages, do all the languages they speak count as their native language? And in China, some Tibetan people are taught to speak Mandarin and Tibetan language at the same time. Then are they native speakers of Mandarin or Tibetan? Besides, as it is proved that to some extent the L2 influences one's L1 (Cook, 2008), the real monolingual NS is very difficult to find (De Bot et al., 2005). That is why Firth and Wagner (1997:292) said, "a NS is assumed unproblematically to be a person with a mother tongue, acquired from birth. How bilingualism, multilingualism, 'semilingualism', and (first) language loss relate to the concept of NS are in large measure ignored".

Another problem is related to the local dialect and the standard language (Davies, 2003). Should those people who only speak local dialect until the standard language being taught be considered as native speakers? If so, why L2 learners do not take local dialect as their learning goal? If not, are there native speakers at all? For example, in China most people have their own dialects. If they are not native speakers of Mandarin, who should be?

Additionally, when specifying English, it varies according to different regions and different countries. Recent scholarship advocates for the recognition of World Englishes (Baker, 2015) and the legitimacy of different English varieties, moving away from the monolithic NS model. If we are going to set an NS model, should we choose native speakers in England and American as the model, or those "new varieties of English such as Indian, Singaporean and Nigerian English" (Baker, 2015:6)?

Because of the difficulties in defining the native speaker, and also because of the impossibility for L2 learners to be native speakers according to those definitions, some other terms of goals came into being, such as "language expertise" (Rampton, 1990), "the L2 user" (Cook, 2002), and "competent language user" (Lee, 2005). The concept of expertise avoids some of the problems in defining NS, but it is still not clear whether the L2 learner is compared with the native speaker in achieving expertise "through processes of certification, in which one is judged by other people" (Rampton, 1990:99). "The L2 user" is neutral and fair in that it does not judge L2 learners by comparing them with natives, and this will be discussed later. "Competent language user" aims "to focus the attention on what we are actually attempting to accomplish in language teaching—communicative competence. (Lee, 2005)"

2.2 Slim Possibility to be Native-like

There were some other similar researches on "ultimate attainment" (Moyer, 2004:16) which means the same level of proficiency as NS. Although some of the studies are controversial, especially those on phonology, "[the] balance of the research to date suggests that a small

proportion of L2 learners can acquire the same knowledge of a language as native speakers, just as a small group seem able to acquire a native-like accent" (Cook, 2000:497). It frustrates the students when the goal is set on an almost unreachable level (Cook, 2008). As a result, it is unrealistic to set the goal as NS for all L2 learners, because a goal should be generally achievable.

Besides, when Cook (1995) was arguing about the foreign accent, he claimed that it is unreasonable and meaningless to ask L2 learners to sound like native speakers. Both researches on "critical period" and "ultimate attainment" are comparing L2 learners with native speakers, but the two groups are different and should be assessed differently. This leads to our next point.

2.3 Unfairness for the NS Goal

As Cook (2008) argued, L2 learning is different from L1 acquisition, and L2 learners are a different group from monolinguals. They have their own characteristics, and more importantly, they "have independent language systems of their own" (Cook, 2008:13). Firstly, four characteristics of L2 users have been concluded (Cook, 2002): L2 users have some ability that monolinguals do not, such as codeswitching (Cook, 2008) and translation; L2 users usually have explicit knowledge of the second language which native speakers do not have; L2 users' L1 is influenced by their L2; and L2 users' minds will change because of L2 learning. Secondly, in order to express L2 learners' own language system, the term "interlanguage" was introduced by Selinker (1972, cited by Cook, 2008:14), which implicates that "[linguistic] competence is whatever it is at the particular moment that it is being studied, not a partial imitation of what it might become one day." (Cook, 2002:8) This term was further developed into "Multicompetence" (Cook, 2008:15) by combining the learner's L1 and interlanguage.

All these arguments and concepts are offered to declare that L2 learners should be treated individually, and should not be compared with monolingual native speakers, implying that they are deficient. That is why Cook (1995) blamed "critical period" and "ultimate attainment" (Cook, 2000), because these two notions judge L2 learners by seeing whether they can achieve the level of a different group.

Therefore, "the L2 learner" and "the L2 user" were distinguished by Cook (2002). The L2 user, as he stated, is someone who use the second language in real life; while the L2 learner are just studying the language for a certain reason (Cook, 1999). The purpose for this distinction is to offer an alternative goal for second language teaching to be an L2 user instead of a native speaker which was just chosen conveniently (Cook, 2000). The term "L2 user" gives a language learner a fair identity, because it "can refer to a person who knows and uses a second language

at any level” (Cook, 2002:4), and does not judge them to be proficiently lower than natives. Nevertheless, one thing needs to consider is how to define efficient or successful L2 users, since Cook (2008:173) mentioned that “[if] we want students to become efficient L2 users, not imitation native speakers, the situations modelled in course-books should include examples of successful L2 users on which the students can model themselves”. If L2 users are relatively efficient only because they can perform closer to native speakers either in their pronunciation or grammatical competence, it will be meaningless to set the goal as good L2 users.

The unfairness of the NS goal also lies in the uniqueness of English that it is the only “hypercentral language” (De Swaan, 2010:72). It seems we have never heard someone who is ashamed that he/ she cannot speak Chinese or Hindi as a second language like a native speaker, even if there are more speakers of these two languages in the world than English. Some writers blamed the “fundamental role of English in the (re) production of global inequalities” (Pennycook, 1995:43). However, “English would continue to be the hub of the world language system for quite some time” (De Swaan, 2010:72-73), therefore the only thing learners can do might be just aware of this situation.

2.4 Arguments for and against the NS goal

Generally, with the process of globalisation, English is widely used as lingua franca, and the number of speakers of “English as Lingua Franca” exceeded the “English first language speakers” (Davies, 2003:165). Setting the goal as NS “ignores the main use of international language like English for non-native speakers to speak to other non-native speakers rather than to natives” (Cook, 2002:10). If L2 users have no problem in communicating with each other without using “perfectly correct” English like natives, there is little reason for them to be native-like, and there is no need to set the NS goal (Cook, 2008). Accordingly, there came some new ideas, such as choosing the goal as “the intercultural speaker” (Kramsch, 1998:27) which avoids the controversy between native and non-native speakers.

In addition, “there are L2 learners who have no intention of becoming L2 users” (Cook, 2002:3), let alone becoming native-like. For instance, students in China, especially young children, have little chance to use English in real life, and a large number of them do not expect to use it in the future (ibid.). Given that English education in China is “extremely exam-oriented” (Taguchi et al., 2009:69), English is just a compulsory subject for most of them, so it is useless to set the goal as NS. And for some others who have a chance to communicate with either native or non-native speakers, NS goal is still not necessary, because the lack of NS competence does not impede successful communication. A related topic is the

motivation for language learners which will be discussed in the next part.

However, there can be some reasons to become native-like, such as gaining authority and for job purposes (Widdowson et al., 1995). Aiming to be an English teacher can be a suitable example. It is common to find that teachers with excellent native-like pronunciation and intonation of English get confidence and respect from their students. It is also not unusual that schools prefer hiring teachers with higher proficiency, best to be native-like. In this case, the NS goal may be appropriate in English teachers’ education or training. Another example can be seen in the acting industry, where actors might need to master native-like accents to authentically portray characters from specific regions. Additionally, professionals in international business may benefit from native-like proficiency to build credibility and establish rapport with clients and colleagues. Therefore, while the NS goal may not be necessary or realistic for all L2 learners, it can be advantageous in certain professional contexts where native-like skills are highly valued.

Thus, the NS goal can be applicable for some people in some cases, and there is no right or wrong for the goal of being native-like. The rejection of the NS goal is a general stance, not applicable to all situations. The specification of whether choosing the goal as NS or not in the perspective of L2 learners will be stated in the next part.

3. PERSPECTIVE OF L2 LEARNERS

3.1 Individual Purposes

It is not an exaggeration to say that every L2 learner has his/her own purpose in short term or long term. Cook (2008:212) has concluded some of the aims which are a guide for setting teaching goals, such as pursuit of a certain job or “[higher] education”, “[access] to research and information”, travelling abroad, “understanding of foreign cultures” or the “language itself”, and training the brain.

It seems for none of these purposes, the ultimate NS goal is necessary. Still, there are some people who view becoming native-like as their life-long goal for personal reasons, either for reputation or the sense of accomplishment. For those, teachers may make effort to help and encourage them, but should not generalise the NS goal for the whole class or group.

In contemporary China, most students commence their English education in primary school, with formal study beginning in junior high school. From this point onward, passing exams becomes their primary objective, largely due to the education system and the limited use of English outside the classroom or even within it. Additionally, some English training centres offer classes or modules for individuals interested in learning English, particularly

those who wish to practice speaking. For both of these groups of learners—whether in schools or training centres—the NS goal is inappropriate. It is unrealistic, exceeds the learners' expectations (Tarone and Yule, 1989), and can diminish their interest and undermine their confidence. Conversely, some English majors in higher education feel a sense of responsibility to achieve native-like proficiency and experience shame when they fail to meet this goal. This sentiment likely stems from the long-standing and widespread acceptance of the NS goal (Cook, 1999). Therefore, educators should address these students separately, enhancing their awareness that achieving native speaker status need not be the ultimate goal for L2 learners.

To sum up, “decisions about how to present the ‘best’ learning experience for a group of students inevitably depend on the individual teacher’s ability to work out what those students appear to need, while also remaining aware of what they expect to happen in the learning situation” (Tarone and Yule, 1989:9). Teachers should take learners’ purposes into account “in terms of processes of learning rather than solely in terms of end goals and purposes” (ibid.).

3.2 Motivation

One factor related to learners’ purposes is their motivation. Better-motivated students usually perform better in the L2 learning (Cook, 2008). Gardner and Lambert (1972, cited by De Bot et al., 2005 :72) proposed two kinds of motivation: “integrative” and “instrumental”. On the one hand, learners with integrative motivation are interested in the language and the L2 culture, and may hope to be a member of that community (De Bot et al., 2005). For some of them, setting the goal as NS can be reasonable and this may trigger their desire to do better. On the other hand, “[instrumental] motivation means learning the language for an ulterior motive unrelated to its use by native speakers—to pass an examination, to get a certain kind of job, and so on” (Cook, 2008:138). Most Chinese students usually just have instrumental motivation (specifically for passing or getting good marks in the exam) or do not have motivation at all (Taguchi et al., 2009). In this case, if teachers choose the NS goal for teaching, further stress and frustration will strike the students. Another distinction was made between “intrinsic motivation” and “extrinsic motivation” (Dörnyei, 2001:47). And Noels (2001, cited by Dörnyei, 2001) claimed that we can choose goals for languages teaching according to the learner’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. For instance, if one learner has the intrinsic motivation that he/she truly enjoys learning the L2 with the NS goal, then there is no reason to blame that goal.

Moreover, motivation and success are interactive, which means that to some extent motivation in learning the language can bring out success in some aspects,

while successful experience can add more motivation (Cook, 2008). It also means that “student motivation does not remain constant but undergoes continuous changes” (Dörnyei, 2001:45). Thus, setting the goal as NS regardless of other factors, which has already been stated, will provide learners a sense of failure, and at the same time they may lose their motivation, if there is any. On the contrary, if we consider “the temporal aspect of motivation” (ibid.:46), and settle goals according to the process of learning and teaching, more success may be achieved by students, with more confidence and motivation afterwards.

3.3 Identity

Cook (2008:211) has pointed out that the goal of L2 teaching should be “to equip people to use two languages without losing their own identity”.

One factor threatening identity is that some of L2 learners are losing their L1, not all of their mother language, but some features (Davies, 2003). For instance, it is very common to find an English-majored Chinese student scratching his/her head to retrospect how to write a certain Chinese character. Although the L2 learning is not the only reason that someone loses the L1, the effect of L2 on the L1 should not be neglected (Cook, 2008). Some people feel annoyed in this situation because the identity as native speaker of their L1 is attacked. If setting the native-like goal for them in L2 learning, they may feel antipathy.

Another situation is that in China some learners are ashamed of or frustrated by their foreign accent. One reason for this has been explained in this essay as the unfairness of the NS goal or the belief of NS supremacy. However, actually, “it is possible to perform too well in a foreign language and ... a foreign accent may be a good badge to display” (Davies, 1995:148). The foreign accent shows the nonnative speaker’s identity, and explains their possible misunderstanding or misbehaviour in the L2 context. Above all, in this perspective, the implication can be that teachers may rectify students’ unnecessary thoughts and stress about the NS goal, and guide their awareness to their own identity as native speakers of their L1. Now that we often hear about British English, American English, Singaporean English, and Indian English, learners can also have their Chinese English.

3.4 Other Characteristics of L2 Learners

There are some other features we should take into consideration in choosing the goal for second language teaching: learners’ proficiency level, their attitudes to L2 culture, and aptitude.

Davies (1995) noted that to achieve a certain proficiency level is one of the goals usually set for language teaching. Also, learners’ proficiency level at present can be a factor to influence the choice of the

goal. According to the study by Young and Walsh (2010), none of the participants (non-native English teachers) showed the awareness of which variety of English they had been taught at the beginning of their study in their own countries, but most of them reported that they could notice the disparity between the varieties until they were advanced learners. If this can be generalised to all L2 learners, it is ridiculous to set the NS goal especially for those in the lower level, because they cannot even tell what exactly their goal stands for. It is just like asking someone to aim to a destination which he/she does not know where it actually is. Regardless the argument against the NS goal, it is decent to say that the NS goal is only possible for advanced learners. Furthermore, since those beginners are usually also young learners in China, before setting the goal, we should consider whether they are mature enough to understand what the goal means to them. For children who have no clear idea about their future, the NS goal can be meaningless and may waste teachers’ and learners’ time.

As to learners’ attitudes to the L2 and its culture, “[positive] attitudes may enhance or encourage positive experiences, and vice versa” (Moyer, 2004:108). Generally, many Chinese students have neutral attitude toward major English-speaking countries and their cultures, and some admire certain parts of that culture, such as the music from America or the royal history in Britain. It is possible for the latter group of people to have the desire to be native-like in some aspects, however to generalise the possibility to the NS goal is quite inappropriate. And we should notice that learners’ attitudes are changing from time to time: a visit to the English-speaking country may totally change their attitude. Although the attitudes just affect language learning unconsciously (McGroarty, 1996), it should be taken into account.

Aptitude, a feature which cannot be trained to acquire (De Bot et al., 2005), is sometimes used to explain why some learners can master the L2 so quickly and easily while some end in poor proficiency no matter how much effort they have made. Besides, learners’ aptitude varies in different language factors: some are good at pronunciation and some are adept in grammar (Cook, 2008). One implication for this situation is to “[provide] different teaching for different types of aptitude with different teaching methods and final examinations” (ibid.:146). This also indicates that goals should be tailored to different aptitudes, but the practicality of this approach is doubtful. It is evident that the NS goal is not suitable for individuals with varying levels of aptitude. However, it is undeniable that some learners possess the aptitude to achieve native-like proficiency. The question that remains is how we can enable these learners to make the most of their potential.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has synthesized various arguments against setting the goal of L2 learning as becoming native speakers, primarily from a theoretical standpoint. It has highlighted the problems in defining a native speaker, the slim possibility for most learners to achieve native-like proficiency, the inherent unfairness of the NS goal, and the practical irrelevance of this goal for many L2 learners. Furthermore, it has shown that while the NS goal may be unrealistic and counterproductive for the majority, there are specific circumstances where it might be appropriate. For instance, learners with exceptional aptitude or those aiming for professional roles requiring native-like proficiency may benefit from such a goal. However, these are special cases and should not be generalised. Therefore, it is concluded that while the “native speaker” should not be the universal goal for all English L2 learners, educators should consider individual learners’ contexts and motivations, tailoring goals to meet diverse needs and aspirations.

REFERENCES

- Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and identity through English as a lingua franca: Rethinking concepts and goals in intercultural communication* (Vol. 8). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. New York, NY: Holt Rinehart Winston.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(2), 185-209.
- Cook, V. (2000). Linguistics and SLA: One person with two languages. In M. Aronoff & J. Rees-Miller (Eds.), *The handbook of linguistics* (pp. 488-511). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cook, V. (2009). Questioning traditional assumptions of language teaching. *Nouveaux Cahiers de Linguistique Française*, 29, 7-22.
- Cook, V. J. (2008). *Second language learning and language teaching* (4th ed.). London: Hodder Education.
- Cook, V. J. (Ed.). (2002). *Portraits of the L2 user*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Davies, A. (1995). Proficiency or the native speaker: What are we trying to achieve in ELT? In H. G. Widdowson, G. Cook, & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle & practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H. G. Widdowson* (pp. 145-157). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, A., & Ebooks Corporation. (2003). *The native speaker: Myth and reality*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- De Bot, K., Lowie, W., Verspoor, M., & Ebooks Corporation. (2005). *Second language acquisition: An advanced resource book*. London, UK: Routledge.
- De Swaan, A. (2010). Language systems. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *The handbook of language and globalization* (pp. 56-76). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). New themes and approaches in second language motivation research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 43-59.
- Firth, A., & Wagner, J. (1997). On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(3), 285-300.
- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Quoted in K. De Bot, W. Lowie, M. Verspoor, & Ebooks Corporation (2005), *Second language acquisition: An advanced resource book* (p. x). London, UK: Routledge.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). The privilege of the intercultural speaker. In M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography* (pp. 16-31). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, J. J. (2005). The native speaker: An achievable model. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(2), 152-163.
- Matsuda, A. (Ed.). (2017). *Preparing teachers to teach English as an international language* (Vol. 53). Multilingual Matters.
- McArthur, T. (Ed.). (1992). Quoted in V. Cook (2009), Questioning traditional assumptions of language teaching. *Nouveaux Cahiers de Linguistique Française*, 29, 7-22.
- McGroarty, M. (1996). Language attitudes, motivation, and standards. In S. McKay & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language teaching* (pp.3-46). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Moyer, A. (2004). *Age, accent, and experience in second language acquisition: An integrated approach to critical period inquiry*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Noels, K. A. (2001). Quoted in Z. Dörnyei (2001), New themes and approaches in second language motivation research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 43-59.
- Pennycook, A. (1995). English in the world/ The world in English. In J. W. Tollefson (Ed.), *Power and inequality in language education* (pp.34-58). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rampton, M. B. H. (1990). Displacing the 'native speaker': Expertise, affiliation, and inheritance. *ELT Journal*, 44(2), 97-101.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Quoted in V. J. Cook (2008), *Second language learning and language teaching* (4th ed.). London, UK: Hodder Education.
- Slavkov, N., Melo-Pfeifer, S., & Kerschhofer-Puhalo, N. (Eds.). (2021). *The changing face of the "native speaker": Perspectives from multilingualism and globalization* (Vol. 31). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Tarone, E., & Yule, G. (1989). *Focus on the language learner: Approaches to identifying and meeting the needs of second language learners*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Young, T. J., & Walsh, S. (2010). Which English? Whose English? An investigation of 'non-native' teachers' beliefs about target varieties. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 23(2), 123-137.