Non-Native Speaker Perception of Native Speaker Dialect Authenticity and Implications for Pedagogy

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Abstract

Extensive research has been conducted on second language acquisition and its perceived limits. Many will argue that these limitations, such as age of acquisition, can be counterbalanced by certain factors of motivation. If an individual has an internal desire for native-like use of the language, then hypothetically they should be better equipped to reach such a level. But how do these motivational factors develop, and what factors from the learning environment could be responsible for fostering them? This study was designed to explore the influence of non-native speaker perception of native speaker dialect authenticity and its implications for pedagogy. If an individual perceives a dialect to be more authentic than another, could this influence their desire to obtain a manner of pronunciation similar to the favored dialect, as directed by their perceived future L2 self? It was hypothesized that the dialects that differ more from neutral Spanish—in other words, those that exhibit more distinct phonemes—would be deemed more authentic and would be used as a personal basis for measuring and directing acquisition. Statistical analysis showed significant correlations between dialectal preference and those who have Spanish-speaking family and friends, as well as those who intend to study abroad. These results suggest that students who are not exposed to specific dialects prior to formal education may not be fully aware of dialectal variance and as such they may not be able to make an educated decision in their own pronunciation acquisition.

Introduction

For many years, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) has been used to describe the potential for authentic pronunciation in second language acquisition. The theory states that there is a particular age prior to pubescence at which the ability to attain phonetic authenticity is optimized (Johnson & Newport, 1989). After the onset of puberty, it is further hypothesized that the ability to obtain this authenticity drops off dramatically as the individual progresses into adulthood. As further studies have been conducted and have disproved the CPH (Flege & Yeni-Komshian, 1999), it has been determined that many other factors are involved in acquisition, the majority of which extend far beyond the proposed limitations of age and the associated decrease in mental plasticity. An example of a factor that has been studied as a counterbalance to acquisition limitations is motivation. According to the future L2-self model proposed by Dörnyei and Chan (2013), each L2 learner has a self-created image in their mind of how they perceive themselves using the language in the future. This "future self" image helps to guide their acquisition, acting as a visual motivation for the attainment of their linguistic goals (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

The study was designed to look at the exposure that second-language students have to Spanish dialectal variance and how this experience may work in conjunction with their future L2 self as a means of directing their pronunciation acquisition. In other words, do students have a certain dialect that they prefer, and if so, do variables such as age of acquisition, length of study, exposure to native-speakers of particular dialects, or factors of motivation affect this preference?

It was hypothesized that the dialects which differed the most from neutral Spanish (or those that exhibited more distinct phonemes) would be ranked higher than more conservative dialects, and that these dialects would ultimately be used as a guide for indi-

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vidual pronunciation acquisition as directed by the future L2-self model.

Methodology

Participant Demographics

For this study, a diverse group of participants was established from the Spanish Language and Literature Department at the State University of New York at Geneseo, a public liberal arts college. Of the 197 participants, a wide demographic range was represented.

Table 1. Participants Demographics, Course Numbers, and Age of Spanish Acquisition.

Gender	
Female	59%
Male	41%
Age	
18	18%
19	27%
20	22%
21	23%
22	6%
23+	4%
Course Number	
Low-Level (100, 200)	59%
Upper Level (300+)	41%
Spanish Age of Aquisition	
≤12	17%
>12	83%

Procedures

Students in 10 Spanish courses of seven levels were offered the opportunity to participate in the study. These courses ranged from introductory Spanish to literature and linguistics lectures (Table 2). For the purposes of this study, they were divided into lower-level and upper-level categories. Participation involved the completion of a questionnaire that asked for basic demographic information and inquired about individual exposure to the Spanish languages and native speakers as well as motivation for learning the language. Additionally, participants were asked to listen to 10 recordings[1] of 10 different speakers reading a short story in Spanish. For each, they ranked the authenticity of the speaker's pronunciation on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing a recording that they deemed to be least like a native speaker, and 5 representing a recording that they perceived to be most like a native speaker. Eight of the speakers were native Spanish speakers, each exhibiting a different dialect, and two were non-native controls.

Table 2. Participating Spanish Course Numbers

Course #	Title	Level
101	Elementary Spanish I	Lower
102	Elementary Spanish II	Lower
201	Intermediate Spanish I	Lower
300	Oral Communication	Upper
302	Hispanic Literature	Upper
306	Latin American Literature	Upper
323	Linguistics	Upper

Recordings

The eight native speaker recordings included the following dialects: Mexico (Mexico City), Costa Rica (San José), Colombia (Bogotá), Peru (Trujillo), Chile (Punta Arenas), Spain (Barcelona), Venezuela (Caracas), and Uruguay (Minas). Because it is difficult and often controversial to define a standard version of a language, it seemed more practical to distinguish the native speaker recording from one another based on neutrality. A neutral dialect is one that tends to be phonologically conservative, meaning that it adheres more to orthography by minimizing the number of phonological processes.

Table 3. Non-Neutral Recordings. The native speaker recordings that were said to be non-neutral due to a higher number of phonological processes and unique phonemes.

Dialect	Process	Phone
Mexican	Aspiration of /s/	[h]
	zheismo	[ʒ]
Costa Rican	dzheismo	[dʒ]
Chilean	aspiration of /s/	[h]
	palatization of /x/	[ç]
Uruguayan	aspiration of /s/	[h]
	sheismo	[ʃ]
Peninsular	velarization of /x/	[χ]
	distinction	/θ/
	apical s	[s̺]
Venezuelan	aspiration of /s/	[h]
	velarization of final /n/	[ŋ]
	elleismo	/ʎ/

1 Recordings were borrowed with the permission of Dr. Carlos-Eduardo Piñeros and the University of Iowa from the "Dialectoteca de Español" database.

This can be compared to a radical dialect that exhibits many phonological processes, making the spoken language more different from the written language. Based on this distinction, the dialects of Colombia and Peru were said to be the most neutral while the other six were said to possess enough unique phonemes and phonological processes to make them diverge from neutrality (Table 3).

Method of Analysis

The information obtained through the questionnaires and recording rankings was coded and analyzed using SPSS. The non-numerical questionnaire data was analyzed primarily by correlations (chi-squared McNemar for nominal-nominal correlations and chi-squared eta for nominal-interval correlations). The recording rankings were averaged and compared using a one-way ANOVA/Tukey HSD analysis.

Results

Recording Analysis

The mean ranking of each recording was calculated and plotted to show the relationship between the native dialects and the non-native controls (Table 4).

Table 4: Recording Means and Overall Rankings

Rank	Reecording #	Mean	Dialect
1	10	4.5436	Venezuela
2	7	4.4745	Uruguay
3	4	4.2857	Colombia
4	5	4.2704	Peru
5	1	4.1385	Mexico
6	6	4.0969	Chile
7	8	3.7755	Spain
8	2	3.4592	Costa Rica
9	9	1.7857	Non-Native (F)
10	3	1.1429	Non-Native (M)

A one-way ANOVA/Tukey HSD analysis was then used to test whether a significant difference existed between each recording. It was found that the non-native controls and the Costa Rican and European Spanish dialects had significantly lower ($p < 0.01$) average rankings when compared to those with higher averages (Figure 1).

To determine if course number was significant, the upper-level Spanish students were analyzed separately for their mean ratings of the 10 recordings. When compared to the rankings of all of the participants, there was a slight shift in the order of the means (Table 5). Venezuelan, Uruguayan, and Colombian remained the three dialects with the highest perceived authenticity. However, the Chilean recording was

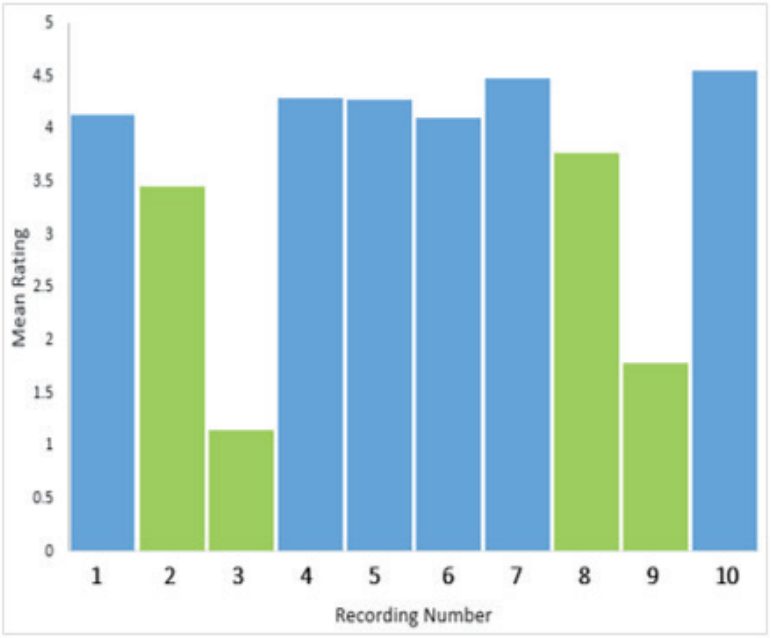

Figure 1. Recording Mean Rankings. Recordings that were found to have significantly lower averages than those above them (2, 3, 8, and 9) are marked in green ($p < 0.01$).

ranked higher in the upper-level courses, resulting in a drop in rank for the Peruvian and Mexican dialects. The bottom two dialects remained the same (Peninsular Spanish and Costa Rican), with the non-native controls falling below them.

Table 5: Rankings of Upper-Level Recording Means

Rank	Reecording #	Mean	Dialect
1	10	4.7848	Venezuela
2	7	4.5625	Uruguay
3	4	4.4875	Colombia
4	6	4.375	Chile
5	5	4.3375	Peru
6	1	4.2125	Mexico
7	8	3.8	Spain
8	2	3.6625	Costa Rica
9	9	1.5125	Non-Native (F)
10	3	1.025	Non-Native (M)

A one-way ANOVA/Tukey HSD test was used to find any significant differences between the values, and it was determined that only the two non-native speaker controls were significantly lower ($p < 0.01$) than the other recordings (Figure 2). As such, no significant difference was observed between the eight Spanish dialects.

It is also interesting to note that the non-native speaker controls were significantly different from one another ($p < 0.01$) when looking at all participants together *and* when analyzing the upper-level students separately.

Dialectal Preferences

As a part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to check a box next to the dialect that they would want to sound like. Options were also given to write in another dialect that had not been suggested or to indicate no preference. Of those who had a preference, a noteworthy percentage selected Mexican and European Spanish (Figure 3).

Because approximately 40% of the participants showed a specific dialectal preference, the factors that could potentially affect a second language learner's dialectal choice were analyzed. Using a series of chi-squared correlations, the non-numerical questionnaire data was compared to the presence of absence of a preference. It was found that an individual is more likely to not have a preference if they are taking Spanish as a program requirement ($p = 0.023$), if Spanish is not their major ($p = 0.000$), if they do not intend to study abroad ($p = 0.032$) or live abroad ($p = 0.036$), and if they do not have Spanish-speaking friends ($p = 0.002$) or family ($p = 0.000$). It is also interesting to note that no correlations were observed between having a dialectal preference and age of acquisition, length of study, past study abroad or live abroad experience, and the desire to obtain native-like pronunciation, despite that these factors were hypothesized to be significant.

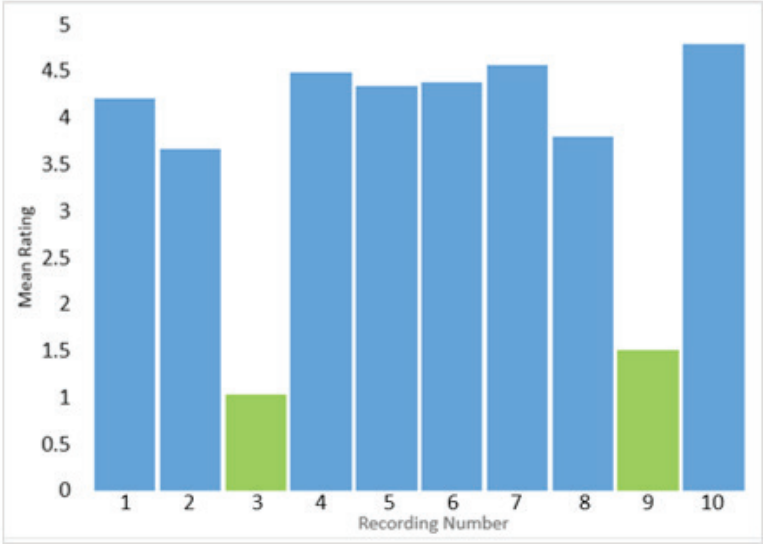

Figure 2. Upper Level Recording Means. Recordings that were found to have significantly lower averages than those above them (3 and 9) are marked in green ($p < 0.01$).

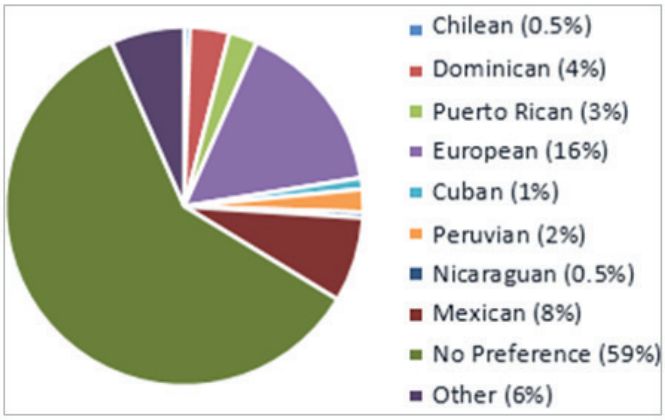

Figure 3. Dialectal Preferences. While more than half of the participants had no preference, those that did showed an inclination toward Mexican and European Spanish.

After looking at factors affecting the presence or absence of a preference, the decision was made to look further into what factors may influence the selection of specific dialects. Using chi-squared analyses, the following correlations were observed:

- If a student wants to have native-like pronunciation, they are less likely to prefer Chilean ($p = 0.025$).
- If a student isn't learning Spanish because of Spanish-speaking family, they are less likely to prefer Dominican ($p = 0.000$) or Puerto-Rican ($p = 0.000$).
- If Spanish is not the student's major, they are less likely to prefer Peruvian ($p = 0.012$) or Mexican ($p = 0.021$).
- If a student isn't learning Spanish to study abroad, they are less likely to prefer European Spanish ($p = 0.008$).

From these correlations, two apparent relationships were observed, the first between the desire to study abroad and the preferential selection of the European dialect, and the second between Spanish-speaking family as a motivational factor and the Dominican and Puerto-Rican preferences. To analyze these results further, the data was divided into two groups on the basis of age of acquisition: <12 and ≥ 12.

Separate correlations revealed two new relationships:

- If a student has a desire to study abroad, they are more likely to have an age of acquisition greater than or equal to 12 ($p = 0.018$).
- If a student has a higher age of acquisition, they are less likely to have Spanish-speaking family ($p = 0.004$).

As such, there seems to be a relationship between a lower age of acquisition, the presence of Spanish-speaking family members, and a preference for Dominican and Puerto-Rican Spanish. Similarly, a relationship is possible between a higher age of acquisition, a desire to study abroad, and a preference for European Spanish.

Conclusions

Recording Rankings

When we look at the results for the overall recording rankings, we can see a significant difference between European and Costa Rican Spanish when compared to the other dialects. However, when the upper-level students were analyzed separately, we saw a rise in the ranking of these two dialects until they were no longer significantly lower. From this, we can conclude that students with more exposure to the language are able to distinguish between native and non-native speakers but don't have a tendency to differentiate between native speakers.

Dialectal Preferences

While we observed several correlations between various motivational factors and dialectal preferences, one of the most interesting was the probable relationship between age of acquisition, specific dialectal preference, and expected use of the language in the future. First, we saw that a lower age of acquisition seemed to be tied to the presence of Spanish-speaking family as a motivational factor and the preferences of Dominican and Puerto-Rican Spanish. It is understandable that those who have Spanish-speaking family members would have a lower age of acquisition, since it is highly probable that the language was spoken in the home. It can be further suggested that the specific dialectal preferences are the result of the country of origin of those family members. For the higher age of acquisition group, we saw the desire to study abroad as a motivational factor and the preference of European Spanish. Many of the students within this group began learning Spanish at the age of 12 or

shortly after. In a large portion of grade schools within the United States, it is common to begin learning a second language at this age. It is also highly probable that these individuals only began learning the language later in life because they did not have exposure to it at a young age, that is, because they do not have Spanish-speaking family. Therefore, we can see that many of these students are hoping to gain more in-depth exposure to the language through study abroad. That being said, it is interesting to see a preference for the European Spanish dialect. We can hypothesize that this is the result of a desire to study abroad in Spain, although this would need to be confirmed through further analysis.

Another correlation we observed was between students with a Spanish major and the Peruvian and Mexican dialectal preferences. It is interesting to note that the college from which these students were selected offers study abroad programs to Peru and Mexico that are available for upper-level students. From this, we can hypothesize that students who have a desire to study abroad in a specific country may wish to have a dialect similar to the one spoken in the target country.

Additionally, the correlations discussed above can be connected to Dörnyei's Future L2-Self Model. We are seeing that students who hope to use Spanish in the future, either as a means of communication with their family members or as a resource when studying abroad, are showing specific dialectal preferences that relate to the target country and associated dialect. Therefore, it seems that expected use of the language may provide a guide for acquisition.

Implications for Pedagogy

From what we have observed, it seems that students may benefit from increased exposure to dialectal variance at an earlier age. If students are aware of the variation in pronunciation that exists within their target language, they may be able to make a more informed decision when directing their linguistic acquisition. What we often see is a dichotomy between Latin America and Europe in which second language students see all Spanish-speaking countries within Central and South America as very similar, when in fact they offer a diverse wealth of cultural and phonological variance. Similarly, we see that students are unaware of how ubiquitous the Spanish language is, often forgetting that Africa has a Spanish-speaking country and that the United States itself has a wide variety of dialects represented. It appears that if we educate students from a younger age on the variability of language, and if we provide a more accurate depiction of the cultures themselves, then students will be better prepared for their future use of the language.

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