

“You may be a native speaker but I still disagree with you”: Why the trappings of being an expert do not guarantee immunity in NS-NNS interactions

Sylvia Scheuer and Céline Horgues, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3

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In the past few decades, much emphasis has been placed on the elusiveness of the ‘native speaker’ concept, which has come to be regarded by some – especially in the context of L2 English – as an ideological construct, exploited as an instrument of oppression. Consequently, placing the native speaker in a position of unquestionable competence and authority has been getting a bad press recently. Idealised though they may be, native speaker models still remain a popular option in L2 learning, and were staunchly defended at the 2003 PLM. One such learning context, explored in the present paper, is language tandem. Tandem learning is a collaborative arrangement where two partners, native speakers of two different languages, meet regularly with the express purpose of learning the other’s language. The database we draw on is the SITAF tandem corpus collected at (authors’ affiliation). The corpus contains around 15 hours of video recordings of face-to-face conversations held by 21 pairs of undergraduate students, with each such ‘tandem’ consisting of a native speaker of English and a native speaker of French. By virtue of containing largely unscripted L1-L2 productions, the corpus offers ample opportunities for various types of analyses of NS-NNS interactions, in both languages.

Naturally, native speaker *status* is not called into question within either language condition: whether the conversation proceeds in English or in French, it is clear that one participant is the NS and the other the NNS. Native language expertise, on the other hand, does not go unchallenged. The aim of the paper is to take stock of language-related episodes (LREs) of this ‘challenging’ type, found in the SITAF database. These include the following situations:

- The NNS asserting their autonomous position as a speaker of the L2, e.g. by assessing the quality of the feedback received from the NS and rejecting the proposals offered by the latter;
- The NS questioning their own expertise, e.g. by admitting to being unable to provide the correct linguistic form in a given context;
- The NS correcting the NNS on a form which – according to the prevalent view – is correct in the given language, thereby imposing their linguistic idiosyncrasies on the learner.

While none of the above have previously been unattested in SLA literature, we believe a major contribution of our paper is that it provides empirical data gathered in a systematic way from a fairly large group of NS-NNS dyads, engaging in semi-spontaneous conversations in two different languages over a three-month period. The tandem learning context adds a unique facet to the analysis, in that each speaker gets to be both the native and the non-native part of the dialogue. This role reversibility may significantly affect the dynamics between the two participants, and, consequently, shape the way and the frequency with which the above LREs arise, as well as the way they get resolved. Studying this particular context of NS-NNS – yet peer-to-peer – interactions will hopefully enrich our understanding of human communication, and collaborative L2 acquisition in particular.

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