EFL LEARNERS' SELF-CONCEPT: REPERCUSSIONS OF NATIVE SPEAKERISM

"NATIVE SPEAKERISM": REPERCUSIONES EN EL AUTO-CONCEPTO DE ESTUDIANTES DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

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ABSTRACT

In Costa Rican universities, English as a foreign language (EFL) programs are often filled with practices and discourses that idealize native speakers of English and construct them as the models to follow. In these programs, instructors' overreliance on native speaker proficiency models create unrealistic standards that can misinform EFL learners' views of their proficiency as English speakers. As these students 'fail' to align their present L2 proficiency to the ideal praised in the classroom, they develop negative self-concepts, which lead them to characterize their proficiency as deficient and incomplete. In this paper, I examine tacitly validated practices and circulating narratives in two academic EFL programs in a public Costa Rican university regarding learners' expected EFL proficiency and problematize the repercussions these unspoken expectations may have for these students' overall self-concept as L2 speakers. In light of the results that I discuss herein, I advocate for the abandonment of the native speakerism trend that still prevails in the EFL programs in question and for the construction of EFL teaching practices that provide EFL learners with the validation they deserve for their expanding linguistic repertoire.

Keywords: native speakerism; EFL Learners' self concept; self-theory; EFL proficiency.

RESUMEN

En las universidades costarricenses, los programas de inglés como lengua extranjera están plagados de prácticas y discursos que idealizan al nativo hablante del inglés y lo posicionan como *el* modelo a seguir. En estos programas, el uso constante y exclusivo de modelos nativo hablantes por parte de los profesores crean estándares poco reales que pueden distorsionar la percepción que los estudiantes tienen sobre sus capacidades en el idioma inglés. Esto debido a que cuando los estudiantes no logran alinear sus destrezas en la segunda lengua a la proficiencia que implícitamente se idealiza en la clase, estos desarrollan un auto-concepto negativo que los lleva a describir sus propias destrezas lingüísticas como deficientes e incompletas. Es por eso que en este estudio, me doy a la tarea de analizar narrativas circulantes en dos programas académicos de inglés como lengua extrajera de una universidad pública en Costa Rica, en cuanto al nivel de competencia en inglés que los estudiantes perciben se espera de ellos al terminar el programa, y problematizo las repercusiones que estas expectativas implícitas tienen en el auto-concepto de los discentes. A la luz de los resultados que aquí presento, abogo por la erradicación de la tendencia de idealizar al nativo hablante del idioma inglés que aún prevalece in los programas en cuestión y por la construcción de prácticas pedagógicas que validen las destrezas que los estudiantes desarrollan en programas de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: peferencia del nativo hablante; el auto-concepto de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera; teoría del auto-concepto; competencias en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera.

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1. Introduction

> Uh... yeah, I can speak English, but what I think is that maybe I'm not perfect... but yeah, I cannot say I'm advanced, an advanced speaker because that is not true. To be advanced, it means that you are like an American, that you can speak like them.... **SZ (Interview #11).**

In Costa Rican universities, EFL programs are often plagued with practices and discourses that idealize native speakers of English and position them as the models to follow. In such programs, teachers' constant reference to and use of native speaker models create unrealistic benchmarks that can distort EFL learners' views of their abilities as English speakers. As these students 'fail' to align their L2 proficiency to the ideal praised in the classroom, they develop problematic L2 self-concepts that lead them to characterize their own proficiency as deficient and incomplete. Sadly, it is not uncommon to hear EFL learners voice their lack of confidence in their competence as L2 speakers. It is against this backdrop that I sustain we must take a more critical position towards the native speakerism implicit in the practices and narratives aforementioned, so that EFL students' sense of deficit and incompleteness can be eradicated.

In this paper, I examine the endorsed practices and circulating narratives in two academic EFL programs in a public university in Costa Rica, regarding learners' ideal EFL proficiency. Subsequently, I problematize the repercussions these unspoken expectations may have for these students' overall self-concept as L2 speakers. With this end in mind, I conducted open-ended interviews with 22 senior students, which I analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. In light of the results that I discuss herein, I advocate for the abandonment of the native speakerism trend that still prevails in the EFL programs in question and for the construction of EFL teaching practices that provide EFL learners with the validation and encouragement they deserve for their expanding linguistic repertoire.

2. Theoretical framework

My position in this paper is that the uncritical reference to and overreliance on native speaker proficiency models in EFL classrooms exposes students to unrealistic and impossible standards (ideal and 'ought to' selves) that severely distort EFL learners' perceptions of their actual L2 proficiency (actual selves). This overexposure to native speaker models, I sustain, causes EFL learners to develop problematic L2 self-concepts, which lead them to characterize their own proficiency as incomplete and deficient. Hence, in this section, I address the importance of nurturing positive self-concepts in EFL classrooms and the corollaries of the uncritical reference to and exclusive use of native speakers as the proficiency models in EFL settings.

2.1. EFL learners' self-concept: Ideal, 'ought to' and actual selves

I coincide with Arnaiz and Guillen that "... no other area of study presents as much of a threat to self-concept as does foreign language learning" (2012: 81), reason why attention should be paid to whether or not EFL programs are directly or indirectly contributing to EFL learners' positive concepts regarding their language proficiency and overall success as EFL users. Notwithstanding, as these authors claim, despite the existing evidence that enhancing students' self-concept leads to positive educational gains such as better academic achievement and higher levels of perseverance, few studies exist that examine the construct in the realm of EFL (81), especially in light of Self-theory (Higgins 1987; Dornyei 2001) and Self-discrepancy Theory (Higgins 1987)

Initially considered to be consistent across domains, current literature acknowledges that, "Self-concept consists of a person's self-perceptions built through experience with —and interpretations of— one's environment" (Arnaiz & Guillen 2012: 81). According to these authors, given the 'ego-involving' nature of EFL learning, students' self-concept is particularly vulnerable to severe damage that can turn the EFL learning experience into an ordeal (82). Further, they point, commenting on

Stevick (1980), that success in EFL depends more on what happens inside and between people in the classroom than on materials and techniques, so much so that even the most appealing materials/innovative techniques render themselves unsuccessful should negative emotional factors exist in the EFL setting (82).

Similarly, Genç, Kalusakli and Aydin have shed light on the importance of self-concept. As these scholars claim, self-concept "... is the personal determination of one's own ability to deal with a certain task. Notably, this determination is not based entirely on actual past experience or existing ability and skills but also on students' perceptions of their own knowledge and ability relative to the task or situation..." (2016: 54). Put differently, as much as past experiences and existing ability influence EFL learners' self-concept, their own perceptions as L2 speakers are so powerful that a negative self-concept can lead to demotivation, especially in the face of impossible and realistic standards.

Following Self-Theory (Dornyei 2001), self-concept is sustained by three possible selves (Higgins 1987): (1) the ideal self –one's representation of the attributes that oneself or someone else would like oneself to posses–, (2) the 'ought to' self –one's representation of the attributes oneself or someone else thinks oneself should have–, and the actual self –ones' representation of the attributes oneself or someone else believes oneself actually possesses. Now, according to Higgins' Self-discrepancy Theory (1987), individuals work to align their actual selves to their ideal or 'ought to' selves, which can result in two opposite scenarios: learners' whose efforts render positive results feel highly motivated whereas learners' whose efforts are unsuccessful (when their ideal/'ought to' selves are impossible to attain) experience dissatisfaction and demotivation, which can negatively affect their self-concepts.

Given the importance of EFL learners' L2 self-concept, I now turn to discuss the repercussions that the uncritical use of and reference to native speaker as proficiency models may have for learners' perceptions of their own proficiency. In the process, I list some of the criticism that the notions of native and non-native speakers have received on the basis of the privilege, power, and marginalization issues hidden underneath the terms. Additionally, I explain how these can cause learners to develop feelings of incompleteness, inadequacy and deficiency, despite their proficiency, and elucidate how these two terms perpetuate inequitable relations by positioning native speakers as the norm and characterizing EFL learners' proficiency as deviant.

2.2. Native speakerism and its repercussions on EFL learners' self-concept

In EFL classrooms, native English speaker proficiency models –in the form of videos and audios- tend to be favored without critical consideration of its repercussions: overexposure to native speaker proficiency models can construct unrealistic and impossible standards for L2 learners that lead them to believe that, no matter how proficient they become, they will always be second-class speakers of English. Sadly, despite the criticism that the notions of native and non-native speakers have received, the practice of idealizing native speaker competence continues to prevail in EFL classrooms.

An important critique that the terms native and non-native speakers have been the target of is that these have served to divide speakers of English into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', thus perpetuating marginalization on the latter (Higgins 2004). This marginalization is evident in the model porposed by Kachru (1992), who employed three concentric circles to represent the spread of English in the world. In the inner circle, Kachru placed countries where English 'originated' (e.g. USA, Canada, Australia and England) and labeled them norm providing. In the outer circle, he consigned countries where English has been relocated by way of colonization (e.g. India, Singapore and Nigeria) and classified them as norm developing, given that their varieties of English 'deviate' from the norm dictated by the inner circle countries. Finally, in the expanding circle, Kachru placed the countries where English has no official status but is used as a second/foreign language, which he designated as norm dependent (e.g. Latin America).

Another criticism of this dichotomous view, pitting inner circle speakers against outer and expanding circle speakers, is that, "The notion of 'native speaker' has been employed as a mark of power and prestige for the benefit of some individuals, while 'nonnative' has also been used as an instrument to exclude others on the base of race and culture" (Schmitz 2009: 3). In this regard, Schmitz also claims that, in the studies conducted by second language acquisition (SLA) specialists, regarding why outer and expanding circle members fail to acquire the competence of members of the inner circle, the problem lies in the fact that inner circles members have always been perceived as speakers whereas outer/expanding circles members have been seen as perpetual learners.

As a matter of fact, SLA describes the varieties of English spoken in the outer/expanding circles as fossilized interlanguage forms that deviate from the standards emanating from inner circle countries, which undoubtedly plays a part in the marginalization of both outer/expanding circle members. This fossilization approach to L2 learning operates upon the assumption that language use which differs from that of native speakers is taken as evidence that EFL learners, specifically, failed to become native speakers and their proficiency is in a permanent unfinished state, never reaching a final form (Cook 1999: 195-196).

Yet other scholars have pointed to the unsuitability of looking at EFL learning through the lens of the terms in question. On the one hand, native speakers are taken to be those who had exposure to the language from birth and had a monolingual upbringing. On the other hand, nonnative speakers acquired language competence in English later in life and, thus, are constructed "… as possessing (or striving to possess) a derivative and approximate kind of linguistic competence, one that betrays itself in detectable traces of other languages during [...] language use" (May 2014: 35). Under this definition, learners are marginalized as, "It is by virtue of from-birth exposure to, and primary socialization into only one language that the archetypal native speaker is imagined to possess a superior kind of linguistic competence, one whose purity proves itself in the absence of detectable traces of any other languages during [...] language use" (May 2014: 35).

The monolingual upbringing ideal unspoken in the native/nonnative speaker labels creates a dogma of language rights that takes ownership by birth as the most rightful link between a language and its speakers and assumes that a monolingual upbringing affords speakers a superior form of language proficiency. This ideology assumes that L2 learners inhabit an imaginary space where what is acquired by virtue of birth can never be matched by what is learned in classroom contexts. In hindsight, positioning native speaker competence as benchmark and taking L2/L1 learning to be the same is problematic for research because, "[...] the bi/multilingual participants that inhabit SLA studies, once reconstrued into aspiring monolinguals of the new language, must be characterized by deficit by being less than a full language user [...]" (May 2014: 36-46).

Mouse and Llurda (2008) also brought forth three main arguments against the native and non-native speaker dualism: (1) that classifying EFL users as nonnative speakers based on their proficiency in the L2 is Anglo-centric since it erases the fact that these individuals are native speakers of their L1 and positions English as the only language that deserves attention, (2) that the native and nonnative notion treats indigenized varieties of English spoken in India and Africa as nonnative based on the fact that these do not abide by the norms of the hegemonic varieties spoken in the USA and England (Kachru 1992), and (3) that the notion disregards the interdependence between EFL teaching/learning and its context, where English is utilized for purposes entirely different from those in settings where English is used as the main and official language.

All in all, taking native speaker proficiency models as the arbiter of learning does a great disservice to EFL learners: it leads them to feel apologetic that their performance does not match the native speaker standard. EFL classrooms, where the terms native and nonnative speaker are used uncritically and native speaker models are favored over proficient non-native speaker ones, are bound to become spaces where EFL learners buy into unrealistic and impossible ideal and

'ought to' selves. Sadly, as EFL learners realize that their actual selves do not align with the ideal and 'ought to' selves praised in the EFL classroom (no matter how proficient they become), they are led to develop an unfavorable L2 self-concept regarding their language proficiency.

The landscape described above can have a serious repercussion: EFL learners develop a tendency to characterize their own English as deficient, unfinished, unpolished, and inadequate. It is for this reason that I sustain in this paper that we should abandon the native speakerism tendency still circulating in EFL classrooms and replace it for alternative practices that allow students to see their L2 proficiency in a more positive light. The criticisms listed in this section point to a much-needed de-colonization of EFL classrooms from marginalizing narratives of native speaker competence ideals.

3. Methodology

The data analyzed in this paper was drawn from open-ended interviews conducted with 11 senior students completing a B.A. in English as a Foreign Language and another 11 senior students finishing a B.A. in English teaching. These students were in the last semester of their four-year academic program, which formed them in areas such as general English (listening and speaking, reading and writing, coupled with specific courses on grammar and pronunciation), culture, literature, and linguistics (general linguistics, morphology, syntax, phonetics, phonology, and diachronics). The four hours of data (22 interviews) provided insights into the students' perceptions of their current proficiency (actual self) and ideal/expected proficiency in the program (ideal, and 'ought to' selves).

Fourth-year students were selected because they have been exposed the longest to the discourses and practices that idealize native speakers and belittle the linguistic achievements of nonnative speakers/emergent bilinguals. Thus, the repercussions of native speakerism on EFL learners' self-concept can be found in them to a greater extent. The questions that comprised the interviews were grouped into three major themes: (1) How do you feel about your English proficiency in general? What rating (from 1 to 10) would you give to your English language proficiency? Why? What will it take you to achieve the proficiency that merits a 10? (2) Would you consider yourself to be bilingual? Why? How would you describe the language proficiency of a bilingual speaker? How is your proficiency similar or different from that of a bilingual speaker? (3) How often do we, professors, incorporate into our lessons videos/audios featuring native or nonnative speakers of English? What do you think about that practice? What could be some consequences of that practice?

The data coming from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively as well as quantitatively using percentages. The emerging patterns were classified into major narratives of actual, ideal and 'ought to' selves, as the repercussions of the native speakerism that still prevails in the EFL programs under scrutiny were traced. These narratives are described in the subsequent section.

4. Analysis of findings

In this section, I present the themes that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data. Overall, the data confirmed that there is a circulating unspoken narrative that instills in the learners' ideal and 'ought to' selves expectations based on native speaker competence and that this narrative has an impact on the students' overall L2 self-concept regarding their EFL proficiency. The findings are divided in three major sections: (1) students' perceptions of their actual/ideal selves and exposure to NS models, (2) circulating narratives/discourses regarding EFL Learning and EFL proficiency, and (3) students' resistance to narratives of NS competence as Ideal.

4.1. Students' perceptions of their actual/ideal selves and exposure to native speaker models

Overall, diverse perceptions were found regarding students' actual self (current proficiency) and ideal self (aspired proficiency). As noted in Figure 1 below, a high number of the students (8) rated their current English proficiency with an eight, which can be assumed to be a good rating. Likewise, however, six students also considered their proficiency to deserve a seven, a low rating considering they have had four years of formation in their corresponding majors (B.A. in English Teaching and B.A. in EFL). Furthermore, five students vacillated between a seven and an eight. If these students are put together, the number becomes more revealing: half population (11) still hesitates to give their proficiency a good rating. Alarmingly, however, the lowest number of students (3) falls in the group that rates their proficiency with an eight or nine, which reflects a more favorable view of their current English proficiency.
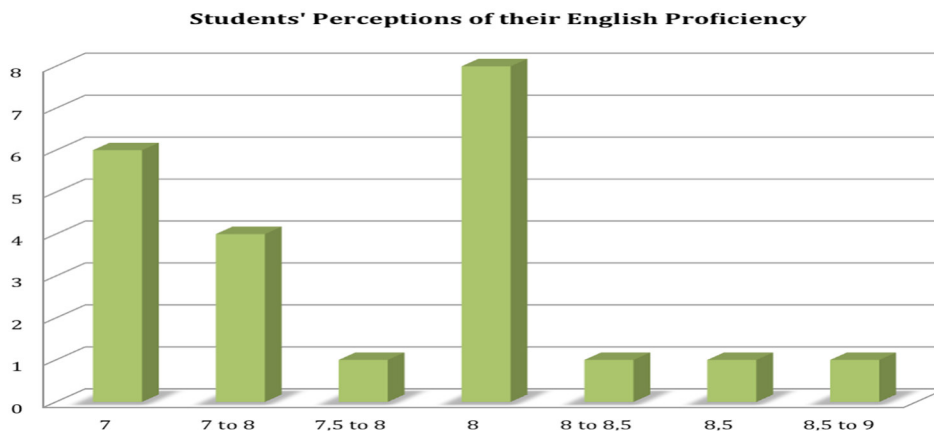

Figure 1. *Students' perceptions of their English proficiency*

Why did the minority of the students rate their English proficiency more favorably? Why did the other students hesitate/refuse to rate their proficiency with a nine or a ten? Which benchmark are they evaluating their proficiency against? And what does this imply about their ideal self (aspired language proficiency)? The students' ratings of their current proficiency are further illuminated by what they stated they must do to advance their English proficiency closer to a ten.

As shown in figure 2 below, the vast majority of the participating learners agree that further exposure to native speaker models (ideal self/proficiency) —either in their home country, in an English-speaking country, or by way of videos or music— would aid them in attaining the proficiency that merits a rating of ten (columns 1, 2 and 5). Interestingly, two students confessed that losing the fear or insecurity, triggered by not sounding native-like, would allow them to perform better in the target language and thus earn them the rating of ten. Likewise, one student, who stated that speaking only with fellow nonnative speaking classmates deprives him from opportunities to further proficiency, affirmed that speaking with other EFL speakers outside the class would also help. On the other hand, some students mentioned working on their proficiency on their own and more general speaking practice as ways to get closer to that rating of 10. Table 1 illustrates the prominent trend in their answers ("I" means interviewer and other acronyms stand for the students' names).
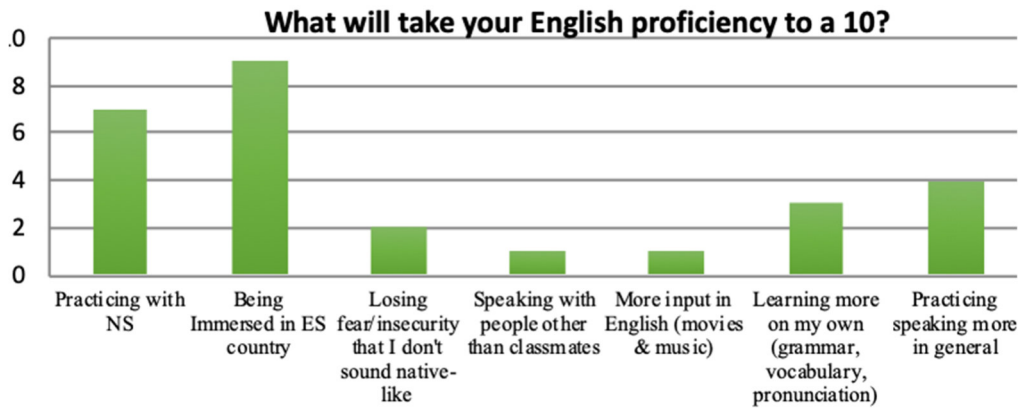
Figure 2. *Students' perceptions of what is needed to deserve a rating of 10*

Table 1.
Students' perceptions of what they should do to bring their proficiency to a rating of 10

I: And what do you think is gonna take you to that 10? **AEA:** Effort and... I think that, well it's like my personal opinion, but I think that to be a 10, you should be immersed in an English speaking country, because here, you practice English with your professors and your classmates...
I: What do you think is gonna take you to that 10? **RD:** To go to the United States or any English speaking country and spend time there. **I**: Is this something you've done already? **RD:** No. But I think it's important to do it because you need, you really need to be immersed in the language and live it and the culture and in the context that maybe that's going to make me improve.
I: In the future, how do you know that you've come to that 10? **CS:** When I can keep any kind of conversation with an American... because here in class, it's just very deficient because nobody, I mean, the classmates not professors, because you know, they are not... native speakers....
I: And what do you think is gonna take to that 100%? Cuz you're 90% sure... **JG**: Interaction in the native culture, I mean being immersed with native speakers, not with classmates, but also interaction, not only with them, I mean, it's not the same if they come to Costa Rica, but if I go there and interact with them in their culture, in their country, surrounded only by people who speak English….

The frequency with which professors exposed these students to videos or audios featuring native or nonnative speakers helps shed light on the driving force behind the students' unfavorable rating of their English and their opinions that more exposure to native speaker proficiency models will push them closer to a rating of ten. As shown in Figure 3 below, in both programs, there is a clear trend to prefer videos/audios featuring native speakers rather than nonnative speakers. As a matter of fact, as some students explained, oftentimes when videos of nonnative speakers were used in class, it was the students who brought them. On the rare occasions that professors brought them, it was in linguistics courses for the purpose of studying second language acquisition processes in adults and analyzing the mistakes they make. Thus, one might infer that the barrage of native speakers models that the students have been exposed to has led them to buy into a narrative that native-like proficiency is the ideal. Concomitantly, their noticing that their proficiency does not align with this tacit ideal and unspoken expectation drives them to hesitate to rate their mastery of English more favorably. This conclusion is further supported and elaborated in the subsequent section of this paper.
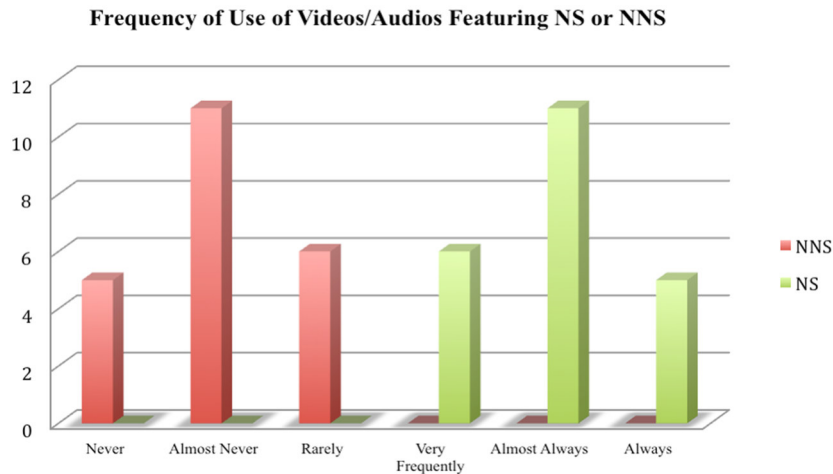
Frequency of Use of Videos/Audios Featuring NS or NNS

Figure 3. *Frequency of use of videos and audios featuring NS and NNS models*

4.2. Circulating narratives/discourses regarding EFL learning and proficiency

The interviews conducted with the participating students provided insights into the specifics of the narratives, regarding EFL learners' proficiency, that currently circulate in the B.A. programs under scrutiny. These narratives/discourses were lumped into the following categories: (1) indicators of proficiency, (2) role of native speaker models in EFL teaching and learning, (3) and perceptions of nonnative speakers' proficiency.

Regarding the first category, the students reported that being able to successfully communicate with native speakers (and by this they meant mostly USA citizens) is the ultimate proof that they have acquired an advanced proficiency level. Similarly, they sustained that knowledge of the culture of English speaking countries is compulsory to gain membership into an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) of proficient EFL speakers. Interestingly, they also claimed that having the capacity to code-switch from L1 to L2 naturally and fluently is indicative of advanced proficiency. At a more structural and semantic level, they reported that grammaticality, fluency and naturalness in the use of English, which is to be peppered with idioms and phrasal verbs, indicate mastery of the target language. Finally, they stated the sounding native-like and being able to 'think' in English are two crucial factors in determining proficiency level.

Table 2.
Students' perceptions of indicators of high English proficiency

I: In the future, how do you know that you've come to that 10?   **CS:** When I can keep any kind of conversation with an American... because here in class, it's just very deficient because nobody, I mean, the classmates not professors, because you know, they are not... native... speakers....
KG: [excellent proficiency] is not only a matter of language but also a matter of culture, and I think that I need to learn more about the culture in order to learn the way the language works....
I: And what is your evaluation of that practice of favoring native speaker models?   **GP:** It is good because we realize that even though we have a lot of time studying English here, reading in English, being bombarded with everything in English, speaking in English, reading in English, and listening English, even though we have that background in the language, when we get to the point to listen to a movie completely in English, we realize that maybe we are not that good at listening, or we are not understanding like native speakers in the way we believe, so I think, I personally believe that it is necessary to have more contact with native speakers...
SZ: I cannot say I'm an advanced speaker; to be advanced means that you are like an American, that you can speak like them...
I: And what do you think is gonna take to that 100%? Cuz you're 90% sure...   **JG:** Interaction in the native culture, I mean being immersed with native speakers, not with classmates, but also interaction, not only with them, I mean, it's not the same if they come to Costa Rica, but if I go

there and interact with them in their culture, in their country, surrounded only by people who speak English, then it would be something, but of course, there are many other things I could do in here that would help me, but I think that the most effective one is that one...

As to the role of native speaker models in the EFL classroom, several interesting perceptions arose (see table 3 below). First and foremost, they reported that exposure to native speakers pushes them to further their proficiency and that they are a source of 'real practice'. Similarly, they claimed that input that exposes them to native speaker models is crucial since it shows language 'as it should be', granting native speakers the status of 'best models'. Likewise, they sustained that native speaker proficiency models play an important role as they serve as a roadmap to where they need to get. One student even went on to affirm that she finds the practice of exposing students to native speaker models abundantly to be good and that she will replicate the practice as a future EFL educator. Finally, another student said that she feels that the expectation in the program is for students to get as close as possible to native-like proficiency.

Table 3.

Students' perceptions about the role of native speaker models in EFL teaching and learning

NAL: I believe that [listening to NES important because it's to get closer to native, it's more like to practice, it's not the same when I'm talking to another student....
JG: [Being exposed to NES models]… makes us, uhhhhhh, it punish... uhhh, no, punish no, it pushes us to go further because […] because it's not the same to listen to professors in here, and then go to the states, or when native speakers come here, we don't have the same interaction.... because of the accent and everything is different....
I: What do you think is gonna take you from that 7 or 8 to a 10? **EA:** Maybe practicing with a native speaker... That would help a lot because I would get used to the way they speak.
I: And what do you think of this tendency for us to show you videos almost only [featuring] NES? **EA:** I think it is very useful and especially if it is about a native speaker because they use the language as it should be.
FF: ... Native speakers of English, they, I mean, the way they use the language is natural, spontaneous, they don't care about, they don't care as we do about making grammar mistakes, pronunciation mistakes, so when you listen to native speakers…you feel like immersed a little bit in like their culture, in the way they use the language.
I: And what is this evaluation of this preference for videos or audios featuring NES? **HB:** I think it's the best to hear like native speakers because, as I said before, they speak differently.... we're like very wordy and they help us to, uhhh, to reduce that usage of a lot of words, and I think that helps me a lot.
I: In the future, how do you know that you've come to that 10? **CS:** When I can keep any kind of conversation with an American... because here in class, it's just very deficient because nobody, I mean, the classmates not professors, because you know, they are not... native... speakers....

On the other hand, as regards the status of nonnative speakers, they also reported revealing perceptions that point to the native speakerism trend in the department. Rather blatantly, one student sustained that including nonnative speaker models is counterintuitive because students cannot improve their proficiency by listening to mistakes. Relatedly, another student casted doubt on the usefulness of nonnative speaker models by saying that they do not speak in 'the best way', probably referring to the overall stigma of deficiency that nonnative speakers bear. Another student echoed the previous ideas by stating that being exposed to nonnative speaker proficiency models hinders the students' opportunities to further their English proficiency. All these perceptions may be triggered by what they reported to be the trend in the programs: to use videos/audios featuring nonnative speakers for the purposes of discussing SLA in adults and analyzing their mistakes.

Table 4.
Students' perceptions of nonnative speakers' proficiency

I: And what is your evaluation of the practice of favoring videos featuring native speakers?   **CC:** I think it is how it is supposed to be because you cannot train your ear by listening to people making mistakes, which is something we do here; that's why people are constantly making mistakes, sometimes people don't learn at all...
I: And what do you think about this practice or this 'reality'?   **JG:** Maybe we think that's the best way language can be expressed, maybe we think that nonnative speakers don't do it the best way.
I: And what is your evaluation of this practice of favoring NES over NNES in our classes, in the videos and audios we bring?   **FF:** Ok, I like the idea and I think I'll do the same, like, to bring more videos about native speakers... I don't know if I'm right, but I think it's better...
NAL: I believe that it's important because it's to get closer to native […] it's not the same when I'm talking to another student....

All in all, the students' perceptions that successful communication with native speakers is the ultimate proof of EFL proficiency, that native speakers are the best examples to follow, and that exposure to nonnative speakers may hinder the advancement of their proficiency, I suspect, are rooted in the trend described above of favoring native speaker models and describing nonnative speakers in terms of deficiencies. And yet, some of the students seemed to find fault in this overreliance on native speaker models. These counter narratives are presented the next section.

4.3. Students' resistance to narratives of native speaker competence as ideal

Although the majority of the students agreed with the native speakerism trend in operation in the programs, they also showed partial disagreement and seemed to find fault in it. These counter narratives represent the students' over/covert resistance against the native-like ideal circulating in the classroom. As with the previous section, the emerging categories were grouped into themes: (1) the diversity of interlocutors, (2) nonnative speakers' capacity to be highly proficient, (3) the unsoundness of expecting students to sound native-like, (4) exposure to nonnative speakers creates a sense of community, (5) and the repercussions of unrealistic proficiency benchmarks.

Some students appeared to be aware that an overreliance on videos and audios featuring native speakers only can be problematic. As one student acknowledged, the programs are in need for a balance of videos/audios featuring both native and nonnative speakers because they will engage in communication with a large diversity of interlocutors. Another student showed preoccupation about this unrealistic expectation or one-sided goal for communication to happen between them and native speakers of English only. Likewise, other students are concerned that exposure to native speaker models only may deprive them from becoming able to understand international English. Finally, resisting against the native speaker ideal, one student noted that exposure to videos and audios featuring nonnative speaker models has the potential to demonstrate how diverse nonnative speakers can be in their accents and levels of proficiency.

Table 5.
Students' awareness of diversity of interlocutors

I: And in your opinion, what would be an effective practice? To have students watch videos featuring only NES or both?   **JL:** I would say like a combination because many people I know like to work in a call centers and sometimes there are people who call from other places and they don't get what they were saying because they weren't exposed to that type of pronunciation.
I: And what is your evaluation of that practice of including in the videos only native speakers of English?

KV: I think that's not real life because they are not only native speakers but also professionals, but when it comes to real life, when you're speaking with people from the states, you'll see that there are different accents and different ways of speaking, and if we see English just from one perspective, then when we hear a Chinese speaking English, we don't understand that person.

I: Would you see any value in professors incorporating more often videos featuring bilingual speakers?
WZ: Yes, because they show us how diverse we can be, because if not, we will, of course we listen to these TV shows with their perfect English, and that is what we have as a reference...

I: Would you recommend incorporating videos of people from China, India, the Netherlands, [etc.] speaking English?
AEA: Yeah, since the first year teachers should do that... As I mentioned, I worked at a call center, I worked with an Indian person and I couldn't understand anything.... […] and I think that if you start listening or watching those videos since the first year, you are going to get used to their accent and you are going to understand when they speak.

JRB: I think that there should be a balance and I think that it doesn't work much if you watch a video in which there is an English native speaker, if you're only going to use your English with bilinguals...

On the topic of linguistic attainment, students also claimed that nonnative speakers can achieve a high/advanced proficiency level. As one student asserted, despite her awareness that she still needs to improve, experience has shown her that she is a proficient bilingual speaker able to communicate with both native and nonnative speakers. This same student reported that nonnative speakers can also be proficient and that she does not need to sound native like to be able to use the language. Similarly, another student sustained that having a foreign accent is not bad. Yet, another students defended that she has her own accent and that she finds people's expectation for her to sound native like to be unreasonable. Finally, there also seems to be a concern around the unfairness of judging the proficiency of a nonnative speaker against a native speaker model.

Table 6.
Students' awareness of nonnative speakers' capacity to be highly proficient

I: Do you agree with this practice of favoring videos featuring only native speakers of English?
MA: I don't think so... because there are people who are not native speakers who are very good at speaking English... and I think that sounding or, yeah, like, speaking like a native is not a way to say that you know English. You don't need to be a native to be able to speak the language....

I: And what do you think could be potential consequences of showing a group of students videos showing only NS?
MA: One consequence could be that they have to be or sound like that person that is in the video...

I: So what is your evaluation of the practice of favoring videos that feature native speakers only?
JG: I think I like it, it's good that we use native speakers as a reference for us to learn the language, but it wouldn't be bad if we included nonnative speakers that also can do it well, that can also teach us something, because that's also the way we speak, we don't speak like native speakers, we never do it, it would be real difficult too...

I: Try to remember your journey, your trajectory here from beginning to end, and tell me how often teachers here showed you videos or audios featuring native and nonnative speakers...
HB: Well, I remember in linguistics, prof. V, she likes videos, and since she was teaching linguistics, she showed videos of native and nonnative speakers, so that was very nice because you can see that they have their own accent and that's not bad...

I: What do you think is the expectation in that person's head?
WZ: [silence] Like they expect that I talk like a native... they, they, they are waiting for me to talk, or they're expecting that I talk like those people they watch on television or TV shows […] and they start telling me "Oh, can you talk like a British, for example, can you talk, can you make the accent they do....? How come? I mean, I have my own accent...

JG: Nonnative speakers also can speak well... maybe teachers can also bring videos or audios of nonnative speakers that they also speak the language very, very, that they also do it well....

Although not all, some students found the native-like competence ideal to be unrealistic. As they reported, this overreliance on native speaker models gives students false expectations and creates unrealistic benchmarks against which students learn to assess their current English proficiency. A reflection also arose as to the fact that professors were taught to rely on native speaker models as a point of reference and that the students themselves are being taught to do the same, the implication being that the uncritical use of native speaker models continues to be perpetuated. In this regard, one student reported that her dream, at some point, was to sound native-like and that she has recently freed herself from that difficult pursuit.

Table 7.

The unsoundness of expecting students to sound native-like

I: And just to close the interview, what do you think could be the consequences of exposing students to only NES? **JRB:** I think you would be showing a fake reality, you won't be focusing on, you'll be targeting your students to one simple goal that might not be achieved here because it's not that possible... So I think you might be giving false expectations to students....
KV: We cannot say that the person is not bilingual because that person is not speaking properly.... **I:** And what do you think people mean by 'properly'? **KV:** Properly, perfectly, but it's the same, it goes to the same point, always comparing people with native speakers....

Additionally, students also mentioned several reasons in favor of the inclusion of nonnative speaker models in EFL teaching and learning. As one student stated, exposure to native speaker models is good, but there is also a need to include nonnative speaker models as they create a sense of community and camaraderie among speakers of international English. That is, exposure to speakers, who just like them, have had to or have chosen to learn EFL, demonstrates that there is a community of proficient nonnative speakers who succeed at international communication regardless of the foreign-ness in their accents. Other students referred to how exposure to nonnative speaker models can bolster motivation as these depict a more reasonable and realistic benchmark. Further, other students stated that videos or audios of nonnative speakers create a sense that language use that is not native-like but still proficient is valuable and worth of admiration.

Table 8.

Exposure to nonnative speaker models creates a sense of community

NAL:.... I'm talking about an idea that is behind that, that if I hear only native speakers and if I hear how they speak, I want to speak in that way, but then when I speak, I don't speak in that way and I feel bad because of that, but I know that that is not the intention of it..... but if I see people who also speak well, and they have this, uhhh, not mispronunciation, but they have this trace of their mother tongue, so you say, it's not bad if I say this in this way, or maybe I can feel more relaxed when I'm talking to another person because I accept that in myself.
FF:... I don't know if I'm right, but I think it's better, but it is also important maybe to listen to people who are nonnative because you can see, and maybe you can feel identified and say "Oh, that person is saying that and that is wrong!", so, because, natives are not going to make mistakes, but the people who are nonnative, they can make mistakes and you can feel identified, and you can see how much you know by seeing what other people do....
EA: [It would be] great to have a native speaker to practice, but if you also have a bilingual speaker to practice with, you, like, get... it is, you are more like in contact with that person because you both, both of you have gone through the same process and it if it's in a video, you feel more identified with the person, and if the person has a good proficiency in English, so you say like "If I practice I can be like that person", so you get motivated....
NAL: I believe that [using NNS models] would be better, you would feel more comfortable with your way of talking because you have examples of people that also have English as their L2, so in that way, you don't feel that bad when you make a mistake or when you pronounce something in this particular way, you say ok, you feel more relieved.

Finally, regarding the repercussions of having unrealistic EFL proficiency benchmarks in the classroom, some of the students provided important opinions. One student expressed that the expectation to attain native-like competence is overwhelming. Other students state that they are aware of such expectation and confess that they try hard to achieve native-like competence and that the realization that they cannot sound native-like makes them feel bad, nervous, insecure and deficient. This native-like competence ideal is so deep-rooted, one student confesses, that even classmates mock each other on the basis of pronunciation that does not resemble that of native speakers. This situation, she reported, has hindered her confidence in her proficiency and deflected her participation.

Table 9.
Repercussions of unrealistic proficiency benchmarks

I: And what do you think could be potential consequences of showing a group of students videos showing only NES? **MA:** One consequence could be that they have to be or sound like that person that is in the video...
I: And what do you think about this tendency for us professors to favor videos and audios featuring NES? **AEA:** Well, I would say, somehow that's how you and we are taught to do, because, well, when I teach, I use those kinds of videos with only native speakers... and I think it's very important to use Spanish speakers speaking in English because that's what we are listening here, so it's important because you can analyze the pronunciation and ways of speaking.
I: And what do you think is one of the consequences of that practice on students? **WZ:** Students like me! [laughs]. Like professors teach you all the theory, all the dialects that there can be, all the variations that we can have, but they don't teach you how the real world is, okay, you can have this, this, this and this... you know it because you have looked for it, but not really in the context of the class, really exemplified....
RD: I don't know, sometimes I feel like very well, some days after a presentation I say I'm the best but some other days I say my pronunciation is awful. I don't know, it's… maybe regarding… maybe when I compare myself to native pronunciation I know that's almost impossible, but I always want to get as close as it can be, so… sometimes when I talk to native people I feel like… (laughs) I'm not even close to that! So I feel very bad…
I: But what triggers [that fear of speaking]? **VS:** My classmates [laughs]... It's not even the professor.... it's my classmates because they are so picky, and they criticize my pronunciation when I'm giving like oral presentations in front of the class... I'm from Coto, and [there] I was so happy, I used to talk a lot and here I'm just so quiet, and that is actually affecting me and I can see it, I can feel it... and it's my classmates...
I: And what's gonna take you to that 10? **AEA:** I think more conversations, I think you need to talk more.... Well, last semester we were assigned to have certain conversations with native speakers and I realized that it was really hard for me because I get so nervous and I'm so afraid to make mistakes that I.... I was making a lot of mistakes, indeed.... pronunciation mistakes, and grammatical mistakes, and I knew they were mistakes, but it was unconscious, let's say...

In sum, these opinions comprise students' resistance to institutionalized and normalized narratives and practices of native speakerism. Despite overall acceptance of the status quo, students carry with them counter narratives that are based on the idea that nonnative speakers' proficiency needs to be understood through a lens of diversity and community building so that reasonable, realistic, fair, and sound expectations are created within the program. These

expectations, the general sentiment seems to be, should acknowledge the linguistic attainment of students in the programs regardless of whether or not their proficiency is native-like.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

> *I: So, if you're saying that you are fully bi…(corrects himself) bilingual at this point, um, why did you give yourself a seven?*
> *RD: (laughs) I don't know… I don't know when can you get a 10. Maybe you cannot because you cannot actually talk as a native speaker. So, maybe you can never… **(RD interview # 22)***

Instructors might think that there is no harm in favoring native speaker models in the form of videos and audios in the EFL classroom. However, implicit in this practice there is an unspoken narrative of native speaker competence as ideal L2 self that students learn to aspire to and eventually use to evaluate their present EFL proficiency, as noted in the interview segment above. In all interviews, regardless of the rating the students assigned to their L2 proficiency, the number always came accompanied by the phrase "...but I still need to improve a lot." And maybe their desire to further their skills is valid, reasonable and even commendable. And yet, the question remains: if they acknowledge they can communicate with both native and nonnative speakers, what image(s) do they hold in their minds when they think of future improvements?

Interestingly, and unfortunately as well, I also found that the students not only have doubts regarding the incorporation of nonnative speaker models in the form of audios and videos but also seem to question the value of interacting with their fellow nonnative speaker classmates and even getting used to the way their nonnative speaker teachers use language. As student overtly stated, "... here in class, it's just very deficient because nobody, I mean, the classmates not professors, because you know, they are not... native... speakers...." (CS, interview #9). Although this was the most blatant response among all responses, other students more covertly suggested that limiting their interactions and practice opportunities to their nonnative speaker classmates and teachers can potentially hinder their attempts to advance L2 proficiency. This unspoken narrative of native speakerism that positions native speakers as the best examples of language use and constructs nonnative speakers as norm-dependent at best, I sustain, necessitates efforts on the part of both teachers and students to clear the EFL classroom from feelings of incompleteness, deficiency, inadequacy, and in turn, rid the latter from the tendency to cast doubt on their L2 proficiency.

All in all, the participating students' hesitation to assess their EFL proficiency (actual self) more favorably and their tendency to think that further exposure to native speaker models will earn them a rating of ten may be linked to that fact that, throughout their academic programs, they have been exposed exclusively to native speaker proficiency models. This practice has led them to aspire to native-like proficiency; an ideal self that, over the course of four years, they have not been able to attain. Thus, it comes as no surprise that these students have also bought into the discourses (1) that being able to sustain conversations with native speakers of English is indicative of advanced proficiency, (2) that native speaker models provide exposure to language 'as it should be used', (3) that exclusive exposure to native speaker models is only logical, and (4) that nonnative speaker models are not as advantageous as their language use is deficient/filled with mistakes.

As explained in the theoretical framework, given the fragile and ego-involving nature of EFL learning (Arnaiz and Guillen 2012), instructors should be careful of the intended or unintended subliminal messages they may send their students by exclusively exposing them to native speakers models. The uncritical use of these models can create unrealistic benchmarks (ideal self) against which students assess their current proficiency (actual self). Concomitantly, when students' efforts to align their current proficiency to the ideal praised in the classroom (ideal self) render themselves fruitless, they may develop unfavorable self-concepts that leads them to see their proficiency in a

permanent unfinished state (Cook 1999) as it bears traces of their L1 (May 2014) and to, consciously or unconsciously, consider themselves to be second-class speakers.

The EFL department of this public university cannot afford to form students who, upon graduation, will step out into the world filled with insecurities/fears around their EFL proficiency. Proficient EFL speakers who believe native-like proficiency is the marker of success in the EFL learning endeavor are likely to perpetuate views that marginalize nonnative speakers on the basis of language use that bears traces of their L1. As Motha (2014) sustains, "The idea that nativeness in English is more desirable than fluent, comprehensible, NNES (nonnative English speaker) speech and an unquestioned belief in the necessity of passing [as a native] in order to be truly successful are rooted in both racism and colonialism" (94). These are narratives our graduates should not continue to spread if the aim is to break away from structures of oppression and discrimination.

The interviews I conducted revealed that the EFL department of the public university in question still continues to operate upon the native speakerism ideal, which was evident in the students' report of an underrepresentation of videos featuring non-native English speakers and a clear overrepresentation of native English speakers, especially the USA. As one student noted:

> I think we all are here focused on the United States.... Somehow, if you think, here, if you think about English, you think of the United States, so... uhhh. I don't know, like, for example, in my case that I want to sound like a native speaker, I think of a native speaker in the United States, but I don't think about a British, yeah, from England, and I think that we... I don't know.... unconsciously relate English to the United States, at least here in Costa Rica, I think. So we focus mainly on that and I think professors focus mainly on that because they want us to learn their vocabulary and their idioms and their pronunciation.

Despite the fact that students reported that professors occasionally incorporated videos featuring outer and expanding circle speakers of English, the preponderance of videos featuring native English speakers mostly from the USA and England demonstrates that the latter continue to be the norm and the models to follow.

And yet, I should not so hastily blame the body of instructors alone for the students' problematic views of their L2 concept and their perceptions of native-like competence as ideal. As Motha and Lin (2014) note, the desire for native-like competence is co-constructed and permeated by the institutional, social, political and economic contexts in which the students are embedded. As such, I must acknowledge that the students' current aspiration to native-like competence is a composite picture of their own desires, the desires of teachers, the desires of the communities in which they are embedded, the desires of the institution, and the desires of governments. However, what I do question is that the EFL department in this university uncritically endorses practices that mirror socially constructed hierarchies where some hold privilege (inner circle countries) while others are excluded and marginalized (outer and expanding circle countries) in the field of EFL teaching and learning. Likewise, I question the lack of initiative in the department (1) to engage in critical dialogue with the students around the desire for native-like competence and (2) to allow students to move their L2 aspirations from an unconscious to a conscious plane.

At this point, I must clarify that the purpose of this paper is not to demonize native speaker proficiency models. Instead, I intend to raise awareness about the consequences that uncritically overlying on native speaker models can have on EFL learners' L2 self-concept. More specifically, I aim to advocate for changes in the EFL department in this public university in the direction of problematizing the terms native and nonnative speaker and diversifying the proficiency models that the students are exposed to. In this endeavor, engaging in debates with EFL students regarding the inequitable relations that the terms native and non-native speaker perpetuate would lay fertile

ground for more critical examination of (1) the spread of English around the world and (2) prescriptive proficiency standards implicit in EFL teaching practices. Equally, incorporating into the classroom proficient nonnative speaker models can also aid us in clearing the classroom of any hegemonic narratives negatively affecting the learners' L2 self concept.

As difficult as this enterprise may appear to be, some students have already developed a critical stand towards the expectation for them to sound native-like, as evident in the interview segment quoted below. This student is very emphatic that there are two perspectives through which she can assess her current EFL proficiency: her own experience as an L2 learner and circulating narratives that idealize native speakers.

> **I:** Ok, in general, how do you feel about your proficiency in English?
> **KV:** I feel good, cuz I think that I've been working hard... that I have improved many aspects, but it depends on the perspective... If I see it from my perspective, I have been working hard and I would say that I think it's good, but if I compare myself to a native speaker, I would say that it's not good, not at all.... So I think it's a matter of perspective, and a matter of if I compare myself to someone else, maybe I'm not good enough....
> **I:** Who would like to look at you from perspective #2?
> **KV:** Maybe someone that has been living in the states, or someone that masters the language very well would look at me from the second perspective....
> **I:** Have you ever, at any point, felt pressure to be like perspective #2?
> **KV:** Of course...
> **I:** Can you tell me about it?
> **KV:** Yeah, because we always try hard to speak like a native speaker, but then, I have been changing my mind because I'm thinking that I will do my best, but I will never be like a native speaker because it involves like a cultural process that I have, that I haven't been in.
> **I:** and where do you think this pressure comes from?
> **KV:** from outside....
> **I:** Can you describe that 'outside'?
> **KV:** Professors, the environment, and grades...

To conclude, just as the students reported that the trend of portraying native speaker models as ideal was more prominently found in oral communication and linguistics courses, I take the liberty here to recommend that the instructors in charge of these courses take the lead in the enterprise I here suggest. These professors (I am included among these body of faculty) should take the initiative to analyze with the students how narratives of native speakerism make their way into and are reflected on the textbooks, the teaching practices and the curriculum at large. This endeavor, Motha and Lin (2014) caution, should be carried out non-coercively and respectfully with emphasis on (1) raising awareness about what and whose desires are embedded in the curriculum and (2) envisioning ethical pedagogical practices through which students are empowered to analyze their desires and aspirations and make responsible and potentially liberatory decisions.

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