

Learner or native speaker? Native speaker perceptions of learner status and appropriate communicative behaviour

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The role of pragmatic competence in language testing and certification, despite its prominence in general frameworks of language competence, is still problematic. In addition to theoretical differences, operationalising the measurement of pragmatically competent language use lacks a sound methodological basis and is therefore often delegated to the individual competence of expert raters. Our aim in this study is to establish if it is immediately obvious to native speaker raters whether a given utterance was produced by a learner and what these attributions are based on.

In a perception study that is part of the large-scale project Pragmatic Profiling (see Sickinger & Schneider 2014), native speakers of English were prompted to indicate the learner or native speaker status of the producer of a written request. The items themselves were chosen from a DCT-elicited data pool of native English and German L2 speakers, collected over the last two decades (cf. Schneider 2005). In addition to this binary distinction, informants were asked to rate the utterances on different perceptual dimensions, namely politeness, appropriateness, intelligibility, estimated communicative success and perceived authenticity.

Data from more than 90 native speaker informants suggests that the success rate in distinguishing native speakers from learners purely based on their performance is close to chance level. Correlating these results with the respective perception ratings, it becomes clear that both intelligibility and perceived authenticity make classification as a native speaker more likely. Interestingly, politeness ratings negatively correlate with estimates of native speaker status, meaning that learners are generally perceived as more polite. Perception ratings for communicative success, furthermore, are strongly correlated with ratings for politeness and acceptability. Overall our findings illuminate the role of these criteria in native speaker assessments of pragmatic competence and how they could help to establish methodological standards relevant for testing and certification practice.

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