NATIVE-SPEAKER PERCEPTIONS OF SPOKEN L2 SPANISH: THE ROLE OF PRONUNCIATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

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Studies suggest that what NSs attend to while listening to L2 Spanish may be different from what L2 instructors attend to and that NS perceptions may be affected by both listener and speaker backgrounds. Therefore, sociolinguistic research on NS perceptions of L2 speech is relevant to the L2 classroom because it offers instructors guidance on what issues a student may face when interacting with a NS outside of the classroom. This paper reviews current research on NSs' perceptions of L2 Spanish speech and considers trends in comprehensibility, acceptability, irritation, and the effect that background of both the NNS and the NS can have on perception. It then considers the application of such research to the instruction of L2 Spanish. While pronunciation is not often taught in L2 Spanish classrooms, this research suggests that errors in pronunciation cause greater misunderstandings for NS than those related to morphosyntax and it therefore lends support to the teaching of pronunciation. Although the body of research is relatively small, it offers us a specific list of errors related to both pronunciation and morphosyntax that instructors can use in order to attend to L2 Spanish more like NSs. It also offers valuable insight into how NS and NNS backgrounds affect NS perception which can be particularly helpful in preparing students to interact with NSs.

INTRODUCTION

This literature review will examine the sociolinguistic research that has been done on the perception of L2 Spanish speech by NSs. While much research has been done to identify what factors help a NS to identify NN speech, this research focuses on NS reactions to L2 speech and it seeks to answer questions such as:

1. How do NSs view the use of their native language by NNSs?
2. What factors affect the reactions that NS have to NN speech?
3. What errors in NN speech are the most salient to NSs and which impede communication most?

Much of the research on NS perceptions of L2 speech has been done in relation to L2 English while there has been less attention paid to Spanish. Considering the role of Spanish in the United States and its popularity as an L2 in both high school and university classes, this lack of attention is surprising. Many authors included in this literature review agree that cultural differences would prevent us from generalizing conclusions found in research on perceptions of L2 speech across different languages (Chastain, 1980; Galloway, 1980; Schairer, 1992). For this reason, this literature review examines only research on NS perceptions of L2 Spanish.

While the research available on this topic is limited, the studies that have been done make some significant contributions that we can apply directly to the instruction of L2 Spanish. One of the most significant conclusions that we can draw from this research is that pronunciation errors in L2 Spanish are more significant to a NS listeners than other types of errors. Furthermore, there

are specific sounds that instructors can focus on to help their students become more comprehensible and improve communication with NSs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his review of research on perceptions of NN speech, Llurda (1995) points out that "some of the methods used to elicit NN performances are not comparable and neither are their results" (p. 48). Therefore, rather than comparing the studies, this discussion will consist of an examination of the trends found in the literature relating to comprehensibility, acceptability, and the effect of listener and speaker backgrounds.

Comprehensibility looks at the extent to which NN speech can be understood by NSs and attempts to correlate it with NNS errors to discover which errors cause difficulties in understanding (Schairer, 1992). Schairer's (1992) data showed that lack of consonant linking to word initial vowels is the error that causes the most problems for NSs in the comprehension of L2 Spanish. The reduced quality of vowels caused the second highest frequency of comprehension problems. She suggests that many English-speaking students of Spanish have the tendency to reduce vowels, which is a common phonological process in English. However, in Spanish "vowels carry both lexical and grammatical information. Gender markers for nouns and adjectives, markers of person, tense and mode in verbs, as well as distinctions between lexical pairs depend heavily on the distinction among vowels" (Schairer, 1992, p. 316). Therefore, vowel reduction can significantly reduce L2 comprehensibility in Spanish. In relation to consonants, the mispronunciation of *r*, which could be [r] or [ɾ], is listed as the only error with significant impact on comprehensibility.

Gynan (1985a) seeks to consider the possibility that pronunciation can lead to irritation but he also looks at comprehensibility. In his study of NS perceptions of beginner and intermediate level L2 Spanish speech he concludes that, when comparing pronunciation to morphosyntactic factors, pronunciation correlates more highly with comprehensibility than does morphosyntax. This is because while both intermediate and beginner level L2 speakers had a higher rate of accuracy for morphosyntax than for pronunciation, NSs rated both groups of L2 speakers as having a lower rate of morphosyntactic accuracy. Therefore, Gynan reasons that although pronunciation has a greater effect on native Spanish speakers' understanding of L2 speakers, the aspect of L2 speech that is the most salient for beginner L2 speakers is morphosyntactic errors. Although the difference between the ratings of morphsyntax and pronunciation were statistically significant for the beginners, they were not for the intermediate students. Gynan suggests that NSs rate intermediate L2 speakers globally and that neither pronunciation nor morphosyntax has more of an effect on the NSs' perception. While Gynan began his study with a discussion of irritation, he concludes by saying that no error in particular was irritating to the NSs. This might lead us to believe that there are other factors, like comprehensibility, that are more important to the way L2 Spanish use is perceived than irritation.

Acceptability, according to Gunterman (1978), is a NS's evaluational reaction to L2 errors, in other words whether or not the error is acceptable according to a NS. She examined what types of grammatical errors hindered communication and elicited evaluational reactions from NSs. Gunterman found that in Spanish incorrect substitutions with the verbs *ser*, *estar* and *haber*, errors in tense, and the omission of the conjunction *que* caused the greatest number of misinterpretations. However, the errors most frequently committed in L2 Spanish, agreement-type errors, caused the fewest misinterpretations. She discovered an inverse relationship between

acceptability and comprehensibility because NSs judged agreement-type errors to be less acceptable than errors made regarding verbs even though agreement-type errors were the easiest to comprehend. The only errors that caused severe comprehension difficulties were those that appeared in the same sentence with another error. Since the most frequent errors were the most comprehensible and only multiple errors per sentence caused severe difficulties for NSs, Gunterman concludes that most errors in grammar do not significantly affect comprehensibility even if they are judged to be unacceptable by NSs.

All of the studies reviewed so far have focused on factors relating specifically to L2 speech but extra-linguistic factors may also play a role in the way that L2 speech is perceived. It is important to consider a judge's background due to the fact that it is likely to color perception. Galloway (1980), for example, played video taped segments of NNS to four groups of judges. The four groups consisted of NNS teachers of Spanish, NS teachers of Spanish, non-teaching NSs living in the US with a good command of English, and non-teaching NSs living in Spain with little to no command of English. She found that both non-teaching native groups were sympathetic towards the NNSs in the videos.

Gynan (1985b) carried out a similar study focusing on the degree of bilingualism of the raters. The three groups of judges included bilinguals who learned English by the age of five, bilinguals who learned English between the ages of six and fourteen, and those who were essentially monolingual having only recently moved to the United States. He found that regardless of the degree of bilingualism, NN speech samples were consistently rated lower than native speech samples. He does, however, suggest that his data point to the fact that judges with the lowest degree of proficiency in English were the most forgiving. This is consistent with Galloway's (1980) findings, so it seems reasonable to conclude that background of the listener does play a role in the way that L2 Spanish language use is judged.

The background of the L2 speaker can also play a role in how L2 speech is perceived. Callahan (2004) examined how native and heritage speakers view the use of Spanish by NNSs, whether they believe that Latinos have an obligation to speak Spanish, and how native/heritage speaker's backgrounds affect their attitudes towards ethnicity and the use of Spanish. Based on questionnaire data, Callahan was unable to quantitatively confirm that NSs of Spanish consider it inappropriate for NNSs to use Spanish in certain situations nor that the use of L2 Spanish is more appropriate among Latinos than non-Latinos. There was much agreement among the participants that Spanish-speaking ability is essential for ethnic group membership and self identity, especially among those with higher language proficiency and age. This begs the question as to whether NSs view L2 Spanish use negatively since they consider it to be so closely tied to ethnic group membership. Although the quantitative data could not, qualitative data can offer some insight. Comments written at the end of the questionnaire used in the study range from support of anyone speaking Spanish as an L2 to caution about using it unless the L2 speaker has a very high level of proficiency. The attitudes expressed in this study may not all have been positive, but overall it seemed that many of the participants accept and encourage the use of Spanish by Latino and non-Latino NNSs. A negative attitude towards the use of L2 Spanish by NNSs could negatively affect perception, but Callahan's (2004) study seems to suggest that L2 speaker background would not play a strong role in the case of the perception of L2 Spanish.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

While the number of studies related to NS perceptions of L2 Spanish speech is limited, many useful conclusions have been drawn which may be applied to L2 Spanish pedagogy. Nearly all of the authors mentioned in this article review related their research to practical applications in the classroom. We will examine these applications and other useful contributions made by this research and we will also suggest practical guidelines for listening to and assessing L2 speech in a way that is more consistent with NSs' perception of L2 speech outside of the classroom.

In her review of research on the perceptions of L2 language use, which includes languages other than Spanish, Ludwig (1982) offers several imperatives for second language teachers, one of which says "teachers must redefine their concepts of irritation to resemble more closely that of NS" (p. 281). She emphasizes that what a NN teacher may attend to while listening to students' speech may be different than what a NS would pay attention to. Galloway (1980) showed that NSs were actually more sympathetic than the NN judges in her study. Therefore, teachers, especially NN teachers, should listen more sympathetically and pay close attention to what they are focusing on in terms of student errors.

Schairer's (1992) study shows that in terms of pronunciation, teachers should focus on consonant linking, vowel pronunciation (ie. not reducing vowels), and the pronunciation of *r*. In terms of grammar, Gunterman (1978) shows that errors with the verbs *ser*/*estar*/*haber*, problems with tense, and the omission of the conjunction *que* caused the most misinterpretations for NSs. Agreement errors, which are focused on heavily by Spanish teachers, surprisingly caused the fewest misinterpretations. In addition, Gynan (1985a) shows that at the intermediate level, NSs judge NN speech globally. This suggests that teachers should pay closer attention to evaluating students' discourse and not focus solely on individual errors in pronunciation and grammar. While Gynan does not make reference to any specific discourse features, he seems to imply that teachers focus on overall meaning rather than on individual errors.

It is interesting to note that Chastain (1980), Gynan (1985a), and Schairer (1992) discuss the creation of a hierarchy of errors based on NS ratings of L2 Spanish. They believe that a hierarchy of errors in these areas will give teachers a concrete idea of where they should be focusing their energies in error correction. Since these studies are based on what makes communication with a NS effective, error hierarchies would likely be beneficial to Spanish students and they would give guidance to Spanish teachers. With more research, we might be able to construct error hierarchies in all areas of Spanish language learning so that teachers will have an idea what NSs actually struggle with when listening to NN speech.

While this paper consistently assumes the importance of teaching pronunciation in L2 Spanish classrooms, pronunciation is often neglected. This may be due to the fact that the explicit teaching of pronunciation has been viewed as incompatible with the focus on language as communication in the Communicative Approach (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979). Some researchers have recently been revisiting the topic of teaching pronunciation because they see pronunciation instruction as beneficial to communication and therefore not contrary to the goals of the Communicative Approach. Arteaga (2000) argues that pronunciation as an integral part of communication and intelligibility and she points out several reasons including the fact that accented speech may not be "neutrally received by the listener" (p. 342). Elliot (1997) suggests that although the absence of phonological instruction in communicative classrooms does not seem to affect pronunciation negatively, it does not appear to improve without instruction, even

with increased amounts of input. His study, as well as Lord's (2005) study, show that explicit instruction can actually improve the pronunciation of many common L2 errors in Spanish. All of these researchers advocate for the explicit instruction of pronunciation and the research on NS perceptions of L2 speech reviewed earlier in this paper supports this need for explicit instruction. For example, Galloway's (1980) study shows that the highest percentage of errors produced by NNSs was errors in pronunciation. Schairer's (1992) research on the phonetic factors that affect the comprehensibility of L2 speech shows that there are pronunciation errors that hinder comprehensibility by changing the meanings of words, as with the mispronunciation of vowels. Gynan's (1985a) study also supports pronunciation instruction with the conclusion that pronunciation correlates more highly with comprehensibility than other types of error.

A final area in which this research contributes to L2 Spanish pedagogy is the relationship between "traditional" students and heritage students of Spanish. Galloway (1980) urges teachers to "deal openly with cultural sensitivities in the classroom, allowing students to know, if only in very general terms, the persons with whom they will be communicating" (p. 433). Sometimes these cultural sensitivities are already present in the classroom as in the case of heritage-language learners where the perception of NN speech may affect the dynamic between the heritage-language learners and the traditional learners. With the growing Spanish-speaking population in the United States, this type of research is ever more valuable. Callahan (2004) wonders what effect heritage speakers' attitudes towards out-group members using Spanish could have on NNSs. The data reveal "a more positive, or at least benign, attitude on the part of the target language group toward out-group members' use of their language than some publicly expressed opinions" (Callahan, 2004, p. 30). Research along this line should be continued because there is much more to understand in the relationship between "traditional" and heritage learners, especially in programs where they are put into the same classes.

The following is a list which summarizes the applications of research for Spanish instructors when listening to and assessing L2 speech:

- Listen like a native by focusing on the errors that cause comprehensibility problems for NSs.
- Focus more on pronunciation errors than morphosyntactic errors.
- For pronunciation, focus mostly on errors in vowels like (1) consonant linking to word initial vowels and (2) vowel reduction. The only consonant error to focus on is the distinction between r sounds in Spanish.
- For morphosyntax, focus on the verbs ser/estar/haber, tense, and the omission of the conjunction *que*. Do not focus heavily on agreement errors.
- For intermediate students, listen globally and assess discourse rather than errors in morphosyntax or pronunciation.
- Deal openly with the attitudes that NSs, heritage-learners, and NN students have towards the use of L2 Spanish (see Callahan, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Although the body of research reviewed in this paper is small, it suggests that some factors do affect NS perception of L2 Spanish. It is clear, however, that much more research in the field is needed, especially considering the importance of Spanish as an L1 and its popularity as an L2 in the United States. The goal of learning a second language, like Spanish, is to become able to

communicate effectively with NSs outside of the L2 classroom. Research on NS perceptions of NNS use of Spanish helps us discover what it is that makes a NN Spanish speaker effective when communicating with NSs. It allows instructors to become more aware of those errors in grammar and in pronunciation that impede comprehensibility for NSs. It also aids both instructors and students in understanding the ideologies that surround the use of L2 Spanish in the United States. The following are directions for future research that could help us to continue developing our sociolinguistic knowledge and improving L2 Spanish instruction:

1. Further studies of global judgments of L2 speech since all of the studies indicate that none of the individual factors that have been tested, whether phonetic or morphosyntactic, *significantly* impede communication on their own.
2. Studies to determine what combination of errors impedes communication. Gunterman's (1978) study seems to suggest that in combination, some errors do cause significant comprehensibility problems.
3. An examination of whether L2 Spanish teachers are addressing the morphosyntactic and phonetic problems in their classrooms that have been shown to make comprehensibility more difficult, rather than other errors that NSs do not have issues comprehending.
4. Studies to possibly create an error hierarchy for use by L2 Spanish instructors based on the perceptions of NSs.
5. Further exploration of language attitudes related to speaker and listener backgrounds and their effect on perception including how "traditional" and heritage-language students in mixed L2 Spanish classrooms view each other's use of L2 Spanish.

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