

Comparison Between Perception of EFL Oral English Proficiency from Native Speakers and Non-Native Speakers

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Abstract: This article conducts theoretical and applied analysis on the differences in perception of oral language ability between native English speakers and non-native English speakers among EFL learners. It proposes that there are two paths for the perception of oral language ability: one is the language processing path based on elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency; the other is the social cognitive path combining accent, identity cognition, and stereotypes. Existing research has confirmed that listeners do not simply equate accent with language proficiency, but the two types of listeners have different emphasis in their evaluations: native speakers are more sensitive to phonological norms and fluency deviations; non-native speakers rely on common experiences in the second language and place more emphasis on communicative effectiveness and familiarity with the accent. The article, referring to the CEFR framework and domestic English proficiency scales, suggests that oral evaluation should abandon the single native language standard and establish a multi-dimensional evaluation system that takes into account dimensions such as comprehensibility and interactivity; at the teaching level, increase the input of diverse accents, optimize pronunciation training and interactive tasks, and improve the training of evaluators, in order to enhance the fairness of oral evaluation.

Keywords: EFL Oral Proficiency; Native Speakers and Non-Native Speakers; Accent Perception; Oral Evaluation; Multilingual Ability

1. Introduction

The spread of English as a global communication language has transformed the concept of "oral language ability" in the EFL context from merely being the ability to

approximate the phonetic norms of a certain English-speaking community, to the ability of learners to convey meaning and negotiate interactions across cultural, dialectal, and institutional scenarios. Consequently, who assesses EFL oral language and what criteria the assessors use for their judgments have become core issues in oral assessment and teaching. The evaluation of non-native speakers' oral language by listeners will further influence their social cognitive inferences about the speaker's warmth and ability [1].

In this context, the "perception of oral language ability" referred to in this paper does not merely mean the listener's impression of the quality of pronunciation. It is a comprehensive judgment of the speaker's overall language performance, including whether the listener can understand, whether it is easy to comprehend, whether the speech is coherent, whether it promotes interaction, whether it conforms to situational norms, and whether it gives an overall impression of being "capable", "credible", and "suitable for communication". Ballard and Winke clearly distinguished the significance of accent, intelligibility, and comprehensibility when discussing teachers' accents, and pointed out that a strong accent does not necessarily hinder intelligibility, while the ease of comprehension often involves the cognitive effort required by the listener [2].

2. Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

2.1 From Native Speaker Norms to Comprehensibility and Multilingual Competence

A key theoretical shift in EFL oral proficiency assessment has been from the criterion of "whether it resembles a native speaker" to "whether it can be effectively understood and complete communication tasks". Many learners do indeed consider "no accent" or "close to

native pronunciation" as the ideal goal, but the focus of applied linguistics is not on eliminating accents, but on whether it is easily understood. This shift implies that oral assessment should not regard the distance from a single language norm as the sole criterion, but should place the communicative function of language at the center. The Council of Europe has further consolidated this shift at the level of the assessment framework. The action-oriented approach of CEFR advocates reversing the curriculum, teaching and assessment from the real communication needs of learners, and emphasizes that the classroom should be organized around purposeful collaborative tasks, meaning construction and the mobilization of multilingual resources. More importantly, CEFR clearly states that the advanced level, especially C2, does not mean a native speaker or near-native language identity, but refers to the performance of highly successful learners in terms of precision, appropriateness and composure. This judgment directly undermines the traditional setting of regarding "native-like" as the endpoint of oral proficiency [3].

2.2 The Dual Mechanism of Listener Perception

The perception of EFL oral proficiency is at least composed of two parallel paths. The first is the language processing path, where the listener uses cues such as pronunciation, rhythm, vocabulary, grammar, coherence, flexibility, repair strategies and interaction to determine whether the speaker's words can be recognized, whether they are easy to understand, and whether they are sufficient to support communication tasks. The second is the social cognitive path, where the listener forms inferences about identity, credibility, professionalism, warmth and competence based on accents and language performance. Even if the listener cannot accurately name a certain accent, positive or negative stereotypes related to that accent may still be activated and affect their attitude towards the speaker.

If the concept of "mediation" from CEFR is also taken into consideration, the construct of oral proficiency will be further expanded. CEFR points out that mediation means that language users, as social actors, bridge between different subjects, different discourses and different language resources to help others construct, convey and negotiate meaning. In this way, oral

proficiency is no longer just the accuracy and fluency of individual monologue, but also includes the ability to explain, clarify, restate, coordinate and facilitate mutual understanding. For the topic of this study, this means that different evaluators' different judgments are not only due to "different standards", but also because they have different understandings of what oral proficiency should serve in terms of communication tasks [4].

3. Comparison of Perception Differences between Native Speakers and Non-native Speakers

3.1 Differences in Evaluation Dimensions and Their Weights

The differences between native speakers and non-native speakers first manifest in the "weighting of evaluation dimensions", rather than a mechanical opposition of "strict" and "loose". Native English speakers, due to their greater familiarity with the local phonetic system and common speech rhythms, are usually more capable of identifying the identity and origin of native speakers, and are more sensitive to phonological deviations, rhythm disorders, and insufficient fluency. Non-native English speakers, on the other hand, are more likely to rely on shared learning experiences, familiarity with accents, and whether they successfully complete communication for overall judgment. The judgment of teacher acceptability is more strongly related to comprehensibility and understanding than to the significance of accent, indicating that "strong accent" does not automatically equate to "low ability" [5].

3.2 Language Experience and Social Cognitive Roots of the Differences

The more familiar a learner is with a certain accent, the easier they tend to understand it and the more likely they are to regard the corresponding speaker as acceptable. In other words, the so-called "ability judgment" is not only a reflection of the speaker's performance but also partly reflects whether the evaluator has experience in handling such variants. Native speakers, due to being immersed in a stable phonetic norm, usually detect deviations at the micro-phonological level more quickly; non-native speakers, due to receiving more heterogeneous and less uniform English input, are often better at finding functional

understanding clues within the variants [6].

The perception of the identity of native speakers by students does indeed affect the evaluation of the acceptability of teachers, even if the teacher has a distinct accent, students can still regard them as acceptable English teachers, which forms an important correction to the "priority of native speakers" assumption. That is to say, the "native speaker requirement" at the institutional level does not always correspond to the actual needs of learners. The research on teacher attitudes and social cognition literature cited in the attached proposal materials also indicate that oral judgment can have an extrinsic influence on the ability, warmth, and suitability of the speaker.

If ability is understood as closely approximating the phonology and speech flow of a certain regional native speaker, then native listeners naturally become implicit gold standards. If ability is understood as achieving clear expression, timely clarification, promoting cooperation and mediation in multilingual communication, then the evaluation of non-native speakers is no longer "deviation from the standard", but a necessary supplement to the real use conditions of international English. CEFR, through the framework of multilingual competence and mediation, precisely provides institutional basis for this conceptual rewriting [7].

4. Application Implications of Oral Assessment and EFL Teaching

4.1 Insights into the Concept of Oral Assessment and Scoring Criteria

The core contradiction in EFL oral assessment lies not in whether to retain classic scoring dimensions such as accurate pronunciation and fluent speech, but whether the assessment system unconsciously equates pronunciation and fluency indicators with "approaching the speech norms of a native speaker of a certain region", thereby falling into the constraints of a native speaker-centric evaluation. The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines have long included "being able to be smoothly understood by native speakers with minimal exposure to non-native accents" within the boundary of qualified expressions, which directly exposes the traditional mainstream assessment framework's default assumption that the inner circle of native speakers is the only pre-determined

communicative audience, and naturally excludes the diversity of accents in international multilingual communication scenarios.

In contrast, CEFR breaks away from the single voice evaluation logic and integrates oral two-way interaction ability, clarification request strategies, social language appropriateness, communicative flexibility, discourse coherence, and cross-linguistic meaning mediation ability into a complete ability description system, achieving a paradigm shift from "voice form evaluation" to "communicative efficacy evaluation"; the CSE (Chinese English Proficiency Scale) issued by the British Council for China further clarifies that all institutions and examination authorities should rely on standardized ability description language to complete the assessment transformation from single quantitative orientation to comprehensive communicative ability development orientation, providing institutional reference for the revision of local oral scoring standards [8].

4.2 Implications for Curriculum Design and Teacher Development

4.2.1 Reconfiguration of the oral language curriculum system

At the level of classroom implementation, EFL oral language training should abandon the conventional teaching goal of "de-accentuation" and instead establish "clear pronunciation, interactive conversations, and resolution of ambiguity" as the high-level orientation for oral language ability cultivation. Pronunciation teaching still holds irreplaceable teaching value, but its teaching goals need to be redefined: prioritize the identification of core phonetic elements, optimize the logical organization of discourse through stress, rhythm, and intonation, and focus on training learners' active clarification and discourse repair strategies when encountering comprehension difficulties, rather than pursuing the idealized pronunciation of "zero accent" that lacks a unified standard.

At the input level, the curriculum actively introduces diverse audio-visual materials of English accents to expand learners' exposure to different accents and enhance their cross-accent listening tolerance. At the output level, relying on the task-based collaborative teaching model advocated by CEFR, the curriculum designs group cooperation activities with real production tasks to guide learners to jointly construct discourse meaning through negotiation,

argumentation, and complementary interaction, transforming oral language training from solo monologue reading to two-way communicative practice. This curriculum design approach is suitable for the actual learning situation in China's native EFL learners, who are mostly engaged in closed classroom learning and have scarce real foreign language communication scenarios [9].

4.2.2 Innovation in teacher professional development pathways

At the construction level of teacher, it is necessary to break through the long-standing recruitment preference and training logic of foreign language institutions that prioritize native speakers. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) possess dual irreplaceable teaching value: first, they have a complete experience of the entire process of second language acquisition and can serve as intuitive demonstration samples for mature second language learners; second, they can actively reveal the difficulties of second language acquisition and predict typical comprehension obstacles in cross-accent communication, and build cross-linguistic teaching scaffolds based on the learners' mastered native and dialect language resources. Accent differences do not inherently weaken the professional quality of teachers' teaching; communicative effectiveness, teaching design ability, and assessment literacy are the core indicators for evaluating the quality of teachers.

The implementation guide for the CSE scale of the British Council further points out that standardized ability descriptions can simultaneously serve the iterative development of multi-dimensional textbooks, the development of layered classroom activities, and the regular training of teachers' oral assessment literacy, achieving synchronous linkage among evaluation standards, classroom teaching, and teacher development. Focusing on the localized EFL education context in China, this integrated reform plan avoids the problem of cultural inadaptability when simply adopting European and American assessment systems, providing an operational and implementable practical path for China's foreign language education to achieve a systematic reform of assessment, curriculum, and teacher development.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the perception differences in oral

English proficiency between native English speakers and non-native speakers are not essential and irreconcilable differences between the two groups. Instead, they are the result of the combined influence of the listener's experience, familiarity with accents, evaluation framework, communication tasks, and social ideology. The action-oriented, multilingual ability, and mediation framework of the CEFR, as well as the ability-oriented approach of CSE, have provided a more practically applicable direction for EFL oral assessment. For EFL teaching and assessment in China, the focus in the future should not be on shaping learners into replicas of a certain native speaker, but rather on helping them achieve clear, effective, appropriate, and mediated English communication in a real-world setting with multiple accents, identities, and tasks.

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