Positive Psychology Can Help Overcome the Pernicious Native Speaker Ideology

Jean-Marc Dewaele
Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

Kazuya Saito
University College London, United Kingdom

Abstract: The world of applied linguistics and the profession of foreign language teaching needs to finally sweep away the notion of "Native Speaker" (NS) and the deficit perspective surrounding foreign language learners. We argue that Positive Psychology is a source of inspiration for a new and more positive perspective on foreign language learners and users. Rather than obsessing about negative aspects of life, Positive Psychologists defend a more holistic perspective. By transforming the view of learners as failed "NS" of the target language to that of increasingly competent and happy users of a foreign language would lift a huge burden from the shoulders of foreign language learners and their teachers alike. We argue that the unexpected longevity and ubiquity of the NS in the foreign language teaching profession have deep historical roots in linguistics and culture, and that only a radical paradigm shift can dislodge it.

Keywords: *First Language User; Foreign Language User; Native Speaker; Positive Psychology.*

Introduction

Walking around in Japan, we have been struck by the number of English foreign language (EFL) schools that advertise that their staff are "Native Speakers" and hence that the high price for the classes is justified because of the supposed quality of the teachers. Whether or not the presence of teachers who were born with English as a first language is indeed a guarantee for better language teaching is not an issue we wish to address in the current contribution but rather the prominent place of the concept of the Native Speaker (NS) in EFL schools in Japan and around the world. We argue that there really is no place for the NS concept in FL education because it is the cornerstone of a deficit perspective in FL teaching and learning. If the implicit or explicit aim of FL learning is to become like a NS, students (and teachers alike) are in for a major disappointment, as extremely few FL learners become indistinguishable from NS at the end of their schooling. As such, the FL education operates a deficit perspective that drains the enjoyment and excitement of acquiring a new language and learn unimagined cultural knowledge. FL learners are caught in a system where they will never reach the mythical endpoint of the NS, and where the eternal focus will be on the gap between their current performance as Non-Native speakers (NNS) and the NS standard. This situation is profoundly demoralizing for both learners and teachers. and it needs to change. The goal of EFL education should not push students approximate linguistic nativelikeness because it is not realistic nor necessary in a globalized society. Rather, teachers should help students become a functional user with intelligible, comprehensible, and communicatively adequate linguistic skills. In our view, what drives such major paradigm shifts in EFL education may come from

Positive Psychology, an increasingly popular branch of Psychology that rejects the disproportionate focus on problems and deficits, and argues for a more holistic take on both the negative and positive aspects in the life of individuals and in institutions and societies at large. We argue that the fresh perspective from Positive Psychology may help to bring down the outdated view of the NNS as a problem, and thus bring about much needed social change in the field of FL education.

At this point we need to declare a potential conflict of interest: both the first and second author are instantly detected a being foreign language users in English -which is our dominant language for academic activities- because of our foreign accent. We don't mind this at all because it reflects our identity and our journeys across seas and oceans and we wish more FL learners and users felt equally relaxed about how they come across in their foreign language.

The Ideological and Theoretical Flaws of the NS Concept And ıts Implications

Hackert (2012) dates the first attested use of the term "native speaker" to a lecture given in the United States in 1858 by George P. March, a politician, businessman and lawyer with an interest in philology, in which he pleaded for the establishment of an English "native philology", praising the virtues of "home-born English" and expressing his admiration for "the domesticity of Saxon life" and "the nutriment drawn from the maternal breast" (p. 63). March's aim was to proclaim Anglo-Saxon superiority over the Roman world (Hackert, 2012). The obsession with linguistic purity is probably as old as humanity itself. Although it seems superficially to be about language, it is really about how people think, and how a "contaminated" language may have dire consequences on the thinking processes and cultural-political loyalties of its users (Dewaele, 1999). In other words, there is a strong link with discriminatory and racist views of languages, and especially of bilingual and multilingual users who are often viewed with a certain degree of suspicion by people steeped in monolingual ideologies. The dichotomy between NS and Non-Native Speakers (NNS) that is still prevalent in education and society is simply an extension of these outdated neo-racist views. As Pavlenko (2014: 4) points out, "debates about 'language effects' are rarely about language only and sometimes not about language at all: at their core are concerns about political power, nationhood, citizenship, immigrant assimilation, and distribution of economic resources".

The ideal NS, the mythical beacon for all NNS, resembles those heavily photoshopped impossibly thin models in fashion magazines. Just as these images cause psychological distress among those wanting to resemble their idols, the NS model causes distress among learners and teachers, who have been indoctrinated that to be successful in the target language they should become indistinguishable from NS. Notably, research has shown that the attainment of linguistic nativelikeness is limited to *exceptional* learners who possess not only high-level motivation but also certain cognitive aptitude. Such unrealistic expectations generate anxiety and shame that can lead to silence in the classroom, low levels of enjoyment and disengagement which leads to poor performance on tests which further undermines levels of motivation (King, 2013). It can also can affect learners' and users' mental health and their sense of joy in being able to communicate in their LX. Given that most of interactions in English take place between Lingua Franca users in a globalized society, what matters in such LX communication is comprehensibility, intelligibility and communicative adequacy rather than nativelikeness (Jenkins & Leung, 2019).

Holliday (2015) argued that the roots of English "native-speakerism" are ideological rather than merely linguistic. It reflects firstly the idea that NS are "the best models and teachers of English because they represent a 'Western culture'" (p. 6) and, secondly, the cultural disbelief that NNS teachers could make a good cultural and linguistic contribution. In other words, NNS speakers may be able to use the language fluently but they do not necessarily think or act as NS speakers. The NS ideology perpetuates an eternal deficit view of NNS and leads to exclusion, discrimination, including lower salaries for language teachers who do not teach their L1. Vencer Comprendio and Savski (2020) reported that the NS/NNS dichotomy often overlapped with race. The monthly salary of a white English L1 teacher in Thailand was 38,000 baht, compared to the 18,000 paid to an Asian Enlgish LX teacher from the Philippines. Holliday (2015) has branded the ideology as neoracist as it reflects "rationalisation of exploitation, oppression and domination" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1988: 80). It is not simply racist because "race is not an explicit agenda in the minds of the people concerned" (Holliday, 2015: 13). It is Swan, Aboshiha and Holliday (2015, p. 1) who expressed disbelief that despite the constant stream of papers and books against native-speakerism the "tyranny of native-speakerism" in the worldwide English language teaching profession is on-going.

Although there is increased acceptance that measuring learners' performance in terms of some mythical unattainable norm is unrealistic and that the measurement should be based on individual local context (Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Tsang, 2019) there is less unease among many practitioners who use the concept of NS as an idealistic goal (Leonard, 2019). To get rid of the highly resilient NS/NNS dichotomy in education and in society, it remains crucially important to explain why this dichotomy is both theoretically and ideologically unacceptable. NS/NNS are static categories that mask a much more complex and dynamic reality. It is close to impossible to establish scientifically who is and who is not a NS of language, and even NSs can occasionally be mistaken for NNSs (Hyltenstam, Bartning & Fant, 2018). A crucial point is that proficiency and performance are independent of the NS/NNS categories.

Following this avenue, Dewaele, Bak and Ortega (2021) issued a call to language professionals everywhere to acknowledge that the mythical 'NS' has mud on its face and that there is thus an urgent need to ditch this term. They pointed out that how we name and categorize people matter because it shows how we see and value them. Using terms that reflect equality and equity shows a desire for a more just and inclusive society. Racist and discriminatory terms should be banned completely from our vocabulary, just like racist, sexist or homophobic slurs, as their mere use contributes to the perpetuation of a pernicious ideology.

The "L1 Users/LX Users" Dichotomy

Because it is useful to have terms to refer to those who have acquired a language very early or later in life, Dewaele (2018) suggested using 'L1 user/LX user'. He followed the avenue opened by Cook (2002) who suggested replacing 'NNS' by 'L2 user' but who kept the term 'NS' (Murahata et al., 2016). Cook (2002) defined the L2 user as "any person who uses another language than his or her first language (L1), that is to say, the one learnt first as a child" (p. 1). Cook consciously used the term 'user' rather than 'speaker' because he defended a broader and more inclusive view of people using languages in different ways, including sign language. Some people might not actually speak a

language but may be able to understand it when they hear or read it. 'LX' refers to any foreign language acquired after first language is entrenched within the first three years of life. Crucially, the label does not imply any level of proficiency. L1 users are more likely to have higher levels of proficiency in most speech domains in their L1 but not necessarily. It means that people whose L1 has attrited still remain L1 users, even if they have become dominant in an LX. LX users may equally have varying levels of proficiency in their LX, and could even be undistinguishable from L1 users, or surpass them, in certain speech domains, but there is no suggestion that they are somehow lacking something. They are legitimate users of the LX in their own right, no matter whether they have a foreign accent or not (Cook, 2002). Also, the new L1/LX dichotomy is free of any ideological connotations and allows comparisons between L1 users and LX users that do not imply a deficit view. Moreover, the new dichotomy is holistic since multilinguals are L1 users as well as LX users. In other words, any judgment about the L1 and the LX is not about the whole person but only about some languages in their repertoire.

Awareness of equity and inclusivity extends to research designs. This implies a move away from comparing LX users with monolingual controls, in order to highlight how the latter fail to reach L1 standard. This process has been likened to comparing apples with pears: "it distorts the picture considerably and it never yields the distinctive qualities of apples that make them different from pears" (Cook & Bassetti, 2011, p. 171). We thus need to compare apples with other apples and pears with other pears. In other words, any aspect of LX learners' proficiency should be compared within other groups of LX learners (Ortega, 2013) or multilingual LX users with different language profiles. In the case of EFL learners, for example, they should be encouraged to think of other functional EFL users as a realistic role model (e.g., long-term LX residents; Saito & Hanzawa, 2016).

A More Positive View of Foreign Accent Among Foreign Language Learners and Users

Tsang (2019) laments the disconnect between researchers in applied linguistics who reject the idea of a single standard language model, and people working in education for whom only standard, NS accents are "right" whereas other accents are "wrong" (p. 581). He attributes this mismatch to the fact that teachers are either unaware or unwilling to venture beyond the NS models. Moreover, they may never have received "clear directions as to how to incorporate nonstandard accents in their classes" (p. 581). He argues that EFL teachers should take their learners' genuine, local needs into account rather than blindly adhere to some global norm as presented in international textbooks. It is useful, for example, for Hong Kong EFL learners to be familiar with Filipino, Thai or Singaporean accents in English. As all users of English co-own the language, there is no reason why EFL learners and users would have to accommodate to the accents of others. Referring to the paradigms of World Englishes, International English and English Lingua Franca that have challenged the privileged status of standard accents, Tsang (2019) argues that the lack an L1 accent in the evaluation of English speech should not be penalized in speaking tests and that it may in fact be better to abolish the evaluation of accent altogether since it is unfair, subjective and unnecessary (p. 585).

The debate about NS accents in EFL teaching (Fang, 2019) is only the tip of iceberg of a much deeper problem that has consequences in societies around the world. The foreign accent may not impede communication but that is beside the point. The foreign accent marks that individual as not sharing the identity of the majority of the community, and

as such it becomes an instrument of exclusion and social inequity (Tan et al., 2021). However much we appreciate Tsang's argument for removing the NS as the ideal that EFL learners should strive to imitate and become, we fear that it may not be radical enough to really dislodge the position of NS in the current system of beliefs. What we need is a profound shift in perspective on the foreign language learner, away from one of inevitable and eternal failure to live up to impossible standards, to one of progress and promise. We feel that Positive Psychology might be the key to such a paradigmatic shift.

Positive Psychology

The recent growth of Positive Psychology (PP) has made researchers aware that the long-standing exclusive focus on negative issues in psychology meant that psychologists had in fact gradually developed a blind spot about the positive aspects of life. Diener (2009) pointed out that PP is as old as humanity itself: "In one sense, positive psychology is thousands of years old, dating back to the thoughts of ancient philosophers and religious leaders who discussed character, virtues, happiness and the good society" (p. 7). Somehow, however, psychologists' intensive focus on describing problems and disorders took focus away from things that matter to "normal" people. The aim of PP is thus the empirical study of how ordinary, non-pathological people live with the ultimate aim of helping them to thrive and flourish in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP researchers do not put on rosy glasses to consider reality. They acknowledge the existence of problems, but they also look at positive traits such as hope, courage, well-being, optimism, creativity, happiness, flourishing, grit, resilience, positive emotions, life longings, emotional creativity, strengths, wisdom, health, laughter. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) distinguished three main pillars for PP that cover both the individual and the wider social context: "positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions" (p. 5).

Positive Psychologists are keen to underline that interdisciplinarity is fundamental to their research, as well as the use of solid empirical methods and the involvement of practitioners in research: "practitioners are always either implementing empirically supported protocols, or helping generate the empirical basis for new programs. In this way, we could ensure that PP interventions remain firmly in the realm of science rather than pseudoscience" (p. 6). Reacting against accusations that PP was no more than a quack science, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) underlined that PP is rigorously scientific: "positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads, or hand waving; it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity" (2000, p. 7).

PP interventions in schools, using experimental and control groups, allowed PP researchers to establish the beneficial effects of the interventions. These typically involved students writing down good things that had happened to them each day for a week and helping them identify their own character strengths in order to face challenges and to overcome obstacles (Seligman et al., 2009). After 18 months, the experimental group was found to outperform the control group for enjoyment and engagement in school and they also scored higher on social skills.

When PP was introduced in applied linguistics, it caused a stir followed by a wave of new studies on learner emotions (Dewaele et al., 2019; Li and Xu, 2019; MacIntyre, et al. 2019). Researchers interested in learner emotions realized that it was time for a more holistic perspective, and that rather than focusing overwhelmingly on negative emotions, it was crucial to complement this with positive emotions. It also soon emerged that teachers can boost learners' enjoyment more easily than eliminate their anxiety. More importantly, there is longitudinal evidence showing that students with greater positive emotion can make the most of every practice opportunity with deeper psychological and cognitive engagement, resulting in more language development in the long run (Dewaele et al., 2022; Saito et al., 2018).

A broader pedagogical implication was the realization that it was time to turn away from a strong focus on learners' deviation from the norms and on their anxiety. We argue that this deficit thinking is very much connected to monolingual ideologies in which the concept of the NS is central. In framing the performance of Foreign Language learners as being inferior to that of monolingual speakers of the target language, the teaching profession unwittingly added a heavy psychological burden on the shoulders of learners. One way to counter such views would be the inclusion in the learning material (preferably audiovisual) not only of different varieties of L1 English (South African, Australian, North American, Irish, British, Jamaican) but also of so-called "mixed" varieties like Singlish, Chinglish, Tex-Mex, and of people who combine different languages in their work, like the singer Wyclef Jean who highlights his Haitian roots (and his experience as an immigrant) by switching from French to Creole and to English in his music. Teachers could also include examples of LX users of English who may be heavily accented (like the Flemish singer Arno who sang in very accented French and became very popular in the Francophone world) or barely accented at all (the Swedish group ABBA). It would also help to include songs by singers who perform in different languages that they do not necessarily master "perfectly", like the Cuban-American singer Gloria Estefan who sings in English, Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese. Could the learners detect an English accent in her Romance languages? By showing students how much linguistic variety exists in the world, and how it can be used creatively and playfully, teachers can nurture a holistic perspective on languages among their students. In so doing, they combat the pernicious idea that LX users should be punished for not speaking (or singing) like L1 users. This is the basic idea of Positive Psychology: an antidote for deficit thinking and an emphasis on the development of learners' strengths and well-being (Oxford, 2016; Seligman, 2018).

PP has the potential to inform social change. It could bring fresh arguments to turn away from the deficit perspective of the NNS. We argue that the very essence of PP is in fact an antidote against the NS model. Metaphorically, once could say that those enlightened by PP see the glass as being half-full whereas those who stick to the NS model see the same glass as being half empty and complain about it not being filled to the rim. Rather than seeing FL learners and LX users as people with a problem, on the long road to improbable linguistic perfection, it would be much better to see these people as courageous, resilient, gritty individuals on the bumpy but exhilarating road of language acquisition and use. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that these are real individuals whose well-being matters more than their mere linguistic gains. In other words, they are not just receptacles waiting to be filled by grammar rules and vocabulary lists. They need to be encouraged by optimistic, wise and creative teachers who believe in the learners' capacity to learn, to absorb new information, to experiment with the target language in a positive and safe atmosphere where there is room for laughter and joking, to challenge themselves to excel in the new language, to try out exciting new identities in the language class, to learn about new cultures and practices, and to become more rounded and happy individuals as a result. There is no place for shame and ridicule in such a place, no risk of being humiliated or considered as a stumbling fool in the new language. More fundamentally, there is no expectation that the apples should look like pears at the end of the journey. The ultimate aim is for LX users to be comprehensible and intelligible in the LX by both L1 and other LX users (Saito & Hanzawa, 2016, Saito et al., 2019). There is of course no problem if an LX user wishes to become indistinguishable from L1 users. Crucially, we argue that a foreign accent in the new language is normal, does not impede communication, and could be considered a distinctive characteristic of that person, just like the color of their hair or eyes.

Conclusion

The world of applied linguistics and language education has gone round in circles for several decades, unable to shake off the splinter at its center: the concept of the NS and the deficit perspective it entails. We argue that a fresh, more positive perspective is needed, informed by Positive Psychology. In this new perspective, progress in the new language is celebrated and encouraged and FL learners and LX users are presented with a realistic goal of becoming functional, legitimate LX users rather than being pressured by an unrealistic expectation of sounding like L1 users of the target language. This positive turn will also be a relief for teachers because they will realize that they can guide students to achieve these attainable goals in a positive classroom environment. By throwing off the shackles of the NS model, they will no longer face a classroom of anxious, discouraged and silent students, but they will be able to create enjoyable, exciting classes where students will participate, learn and thrive.

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Corresponding Author Contact Information:

Author name: Jean-Marc Dewaele

University, Country: Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

Email: j.dewaele@bbk.ac.uk

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8480-0977

Conflict of Interest: None

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publisher.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable

Ethics Statement: Not applicable

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the paper