

Why using the term "native speaker" should not be demonized: Reflections on assessment standards and political correctness run amok

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This presentation will center on a discussion of the native speaker and standard language from an assessment perspective in light of the existence of multiple varieties of English on the global stage. That language assessments need to be conducted in relation to a standard is not in dispute—this appears to be a source of common ground among theorists in an otherwise contentious debate. However, there are vast differences in opinion on what that standard should be. While some proposals have emphasized use of the standard language variety within a given speech community, dismissing the moot native speaker/native user distinction (Davies, 2013), others have promulgated using descriptions of performance features of multicompetent (as opposed to monolingual) native speakers (Brown, 2013) or indeed the interactional data of users of English as a Lingua Franca as the point of reference (Jenkins, 2006). The feasibility of these proposals will be examined in reference to assessment criteria in oral proficiency scales scored by human raters, some of which make reference to the native speaker standard at the high end of the scale or imply that first language influence is only apparent in the speech of low proficiency performers (cf. Piske et al., 2001). The centrality of native speakers in automatic speech recognition and machine scoring will add a practical dimension to the discussion given current technological constraints. Finally, Jenkins' reference to the native speaker as "the 'n' word" in an apparent effort to demonize those who use the term will be dismissed as highly inappropriate and even offensive (2014, p. 209). Finally, her proposal that international students studying at English-medium universities essentially be treated as though they have a disability (e.g., be given more time to use library books, complete tests, etc. than home students) will be problematized as no way of redressing fairness.

Keywords: nativeness, oral proficiency, assessment, higher education, rating scales.