On choosing native speaker participants in critical period hypothesis research: common practices and practical consequences

Sible Andringa
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

SLA research often includes native speaker groups to serve as a norm for non-native speaker linguistic behaviour. A notable example is research into the critical period hypothesis (CPH) and ultimate attainment. Many studies have tried to falsify the hypothesis that second language learners can reach native speaker levels of attainment and therefore have needed to select native speaker comparison groups to provide yardstick norms. Andringa (2014) has shown that native speaker sampling seems to have been given very little careful consideration. This may well be because we tend to underestimate the amount of variation present in native speakers. However, a more serious problem is that we lack proper theories of native speaker ability, theories that acknowledge native speaker variation, to inform native speaker sampling procedures. You could argue that we should not speak of ‘the native speakers’, simply because we cannot define them. However, in the case of CPH research, the issue involved in native speaker sampling are not solved by resorting to the concept of ‘expert users’.

In this contribution, I will review past practices in native speaker sample selection for critical period hypothesis research, and empirical data on how such practices may affect study outcomes. I will also elaborate on native speaker variation and propose a theoretically motivated procedure for testing the critical period hypothesis and native speaker sampling based on Hulstijn’s (2015) recent theory of language proficiency and the constructs of basic versus higher language cognition that feature in this theory.

Keywords: native speaker, expert user, cph.