

# Students' Perception of Interacting with Native Speakers<sup>1</sup>

(La percepción en los estudiantes de su interacción con hablantes nativos)

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## ABSTRACT

This analysis delves into learners' experience when interacting with native speakers. These encounters reinforce the students' learning process, going beyond classroom activities or one dialect. The main goal of this systematization of learners' experience is integrating interaction with English native speakers into the course syllabus. This enables learners to acquire the target language spontaneously and develop their listening, speaking and reading skills. Some of the students' difficulties are presented along with strategies to overcome them.

## RESUMEN

Se analiza la experiencia de los aprendientes al interactuar con hablantes nativos. Estos encuentros refuerzan su proceso de aprendizaje, más allá de las actividades de la clase, o la exposición a un dialecto. La propuesta principal de esta sistematización es incorporar la interacción con hablantes nativos del inglés en el programa del curso. Ello permite el adquirir la lengua meta de forma espontánea y desarrollar las habilidades auditivas, orales y de lectura. Se muestran algunos problemas presentados por los estudiantes y estrategias para superar las limitaciones detectadas.

**Key words:** English as a foreign language, language learning, native speaker

**Palabras clave:** inglés como lengua extranjera, aprendizaje de idiomas, hablante nativo

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## Introduction

Learning a foreign language requires students to master basic aspects such as syntax, phonology, morphology, semantics, and cultural aspects. In many countries where English is learned as a foreign language, students have few opportunities to meet with native speakers and use the language in an authentic conversation. However, the fact that they lack that interaction does not mean that their experience learning a foreign language is negative; hence,

Learning a modern foreign language offers the possibility of breaking down of barriers between people. It is liberating in that it emphasizes common humanity in a world more disposed to emphasizing difference. It offers the possibility of awakening an interest in other cultures and society, in other ways of thinking and seeing and of encouraging positive attitudes toward people from other countries. It is enriching to learn other languages and delve into other cultures, but it is enriching not because languages and other cultures are unique, but because making contact across barriers of language and culture allows us to expand our own horizons and become universal in our outlook.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, language instructors must find ways to enable learners see the foreign language as a tool to explore new experiences and find ways to improve their performance. Learners should also realize that they must make an extra effort to learn a foreign language in a country where it is not the official language. Learners, thus, acquire the language as a tool rather than as a vehicle to interact in a more intimate or friendly way. This gap in the learning process that makes students see the target language as a way to get a job or perform a task has affected students over the course of their major. The lack of experience holding a conversation in a real context has led to learners using standard syntactic structures and avoiding non-standard ones. This usage of the language is exemplified by learners' preference to

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3 Kit Field, ed., *Issues in Modern Foreign Languages Teaching* (London: Routledge, 2000) 48.

practice the target language with those who speak their same native language, to feel confident and less anxious. Donato and Ohta indicate:

Learner-learner interaction provides opportunities for L2 learning because it allows learners to act as both experts and novices. Because no two learners have the same weaknesses and strengths, they can help each other solve their language-related problems and, working together, achieve a level of performance that is above their individual level of competence.<sup>4</sup>

Reducing the scope of usage of the language to classmates and professors can be helpful at the beginning of the learning process, but it cannot be the norm. This inability to practice the language with native speakers who use idiomatic expressions, slang, reductions, contractions, and dissimilar dialectal variations on a daily basis limits learners' capacity to develop their linguistic abilities and sound more natural and native-like. In my teaching experience, I have perceived that those limitations have been a major concern for instructors; to reduce them, language teachers should encourage learners to become fluent, apply grammar rules, and improve phonological issues according to the target language. Nevertheless, the process is full of obstacles such as the lack of native speakers for practice, the limited number of hours speaking the target language, and the dependence on standard rules. Consequently, learners' desire to sound perfect, standard or American, does not allow informal interaction with English speakers from different countries who speak dissimilar dialects and subdialects.

Among several aspects that positively influence someone's linguistic skills, constant contact with native speakers of the target language is a relevant one. Jane Arnold and Carmen Fonseca-Mora refer to these encounters as follows:

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4 Ana Fernández Dobao, "Collaborative Dialogue in Learner-Learner and Learner-Native Speaker Interaction," *Applied Linguistics* 33, 3 (2012) 8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams002>.

Language and cultural encounters, defined here as voluntary out-of-class learning experiences based on contact with native speakers, can be found in a variety of contexts and language learning situations. The common starting point of these experiences is learners' desire to improve their language skills and increase their knowledge of the target language and culture in situations of authentic communication.<sup>5</sup>

This first contact creates a sense of mastering the foreign language and encourages learners to put their knowledge into practice. The second is the development of their listening skills through interaction with several phonological variations, so that they can become accustomed to listening to more varieties other than the one studied in the classroom. The third is a better understanding of native speakers who speak different dialects and come from different geographical areas. Finally, the students practice orally what has been learned and perceived from native speakers, and incorporate that knowledge into their daily speech. Learners' awareness of those dialects opens a new door to language performance since they are exposed to phonological variations, distinct word choice, semantic changes of several lexical items, phrases or sentences, and their understanding of the language regardless of the geographical area, native speaker or dialect. This exposure to the language and its variability makes a significant difference in their learning process and prepares them to face linguistic and professional challenges.

### **Spanish Interference: An Obstacle to Overcome**

Spanish interference is a relevant issue that every learner should overcome. It affects learners' linguistic performance negatively. It is important to clarify this term to understand its relevance in students' learning process. Branimira Lekova refers to interference as follows:

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5 Jane Arnold and Carmen Fonseca-Mora, "Language and Cultural Encounters: Opportunities for Interaction with Native Speakers," *Language Learning Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015) 225-234.

Interference is explicit in cases when learners make mistakes in oral and written foreign language expression transferring language habits from the native to the foreign language and thus they ignore the norms of foreign speech with implicit interference learners do not make mistakes because they avoid using grammatical and lexical difficulty constructing phrases without it. In this way, there are no mistakes but the speech becomes simpler and poorer and it loses its expressive and idiomatic aspect.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the learning process, students inevitably confuse phonological systems: their native system and the foreign one. Nevertheless, this tendency can be reduced during that process and an effective way to do it is to clarify the differences and similarities between the languages. Both English and Spanish originate from other languages that left traces on these languages. In that sense,

Spanish is directly derived from Latin and because its verbal forms are so clearly marked for person, number, tense, aspect and mood, Spanish allows considerable flexibility in the ordering of elements in its sentences. English, however, exhibits less variation with respect to word order. This general observation is particularly important when we consider the positioning of the subject and its verb.<sup>7</sup>

Once learners realize that they are dealing with separate language systems, their daily use of the target language will improve and the idea of switching from Spanish to English without violating any phonological or syntactic rule becomes normal and fluent.

### **First Encounter: Fear and Intimidation**

The first time that language learners interact with native speakers, they normally feel intimidated and insecure. This can cause students

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6 Branimira Lekova, "Language Interference and Methods of Its Overcoming in Foreign Language Teaching," *Trakia* 8, 3 (2010): 320-324 (321).

7 Sam Hill and William Bradford, *Bilingual Grammar of English-Spanish Syntax* (Maryland: UP of America, 2000) 3-4.

to feel that their brain becomes fuzzy and stunned. This reaction can be the result of an irrational belief that they will not understand what speakers are saying and thus will not reply appropriately. Learners who rarely interact with native speakers tend to feel intimidated by someone who has mastered the native language. Why is this reaction predictable? Foreign language learners are immersed in a bubble in their schools or universities. They do not actually use the language in real contexts where formal and informal styles are the norm. Some interact only with the teacher or professor during the classroom time, and as soon as class is over, they speak only their native language. Others can practice the target language in their workplace, for example, in call centers. Nevertheless, in those settings language learners primarily use technical vocabulary and fixed phrases. Spontaneous speech is limited to specific questions and replying in a certain way to please the customer. Consequently, interaction in which topics emerge spontaneously does not take place.

Some of the disadvantages of learning in a bubble are the students' inability to identify different phonological variations, distinctive accents, ranges of speed, and changes in topic. First, when learners is interacting with natives, they do not expect them to pronounce the phonemes and allophones differently from their own. Learners should be prepared to face variability in phonology and be capable of identifying at least some of those differences. Secondly, speakers in the English-speaking community do not have the same accent; instead, they use regional and ethnic accents. For this reason, learners should be open to getting used to accents that have particular traces and distinctive historical backgrounds.

Lastly, speed ranges can be difficult for learners as they are used to listening to their teachers, professors or classmates in the classroom setting. For this reason, students must be trained to face the task accurately and cope with the challenge of figuring out the message although speed may vary. Namaziandost, Neisi, Mahdavidrad, and Nasri assert that

More significantly, listening in English is an active skill requiring listeners to deal with a variety of complicated tasks, for example, discriminating between sounds and interpreting stress and intonation. Listeners utilize a variety of mental processes to give meaning to the information they listen to. These mental stages can be extensively depicted as listening comprehension strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, when natives speak fast or at their normal speed, learners become discouraged because they cannot decode the message. Those aspects can interfere negatively in their learning process and their desire to interact with native speakers.

Despite these disadvantages, students also face positive factors that can enable them to come out of their shell. In the first place, once learners become aware of the restrictions of a limited knowledge of phonological variations, they are pushed to explore and learn more about dialects other than the one they learned in formal classes. In the “real world,” there are many allophonic variations depending on the speaker’s dialect, subdialect, generational group, context and style; this knowledge can expand learners’ linguistic perspective. In the second place, the perception of an accent as a representation of an ethnic group and its geographical location encourages the idea that the English language is not static; it varies depending on the place where the learner is interacting. Lastly, language learners who are not used to listening to native speakers whose range of speed is fast can be encouraged to develop their listening skills through audio resources. Indeed, constant interaction with native speakers can help learners to improve their language proficiency. According to Arnold and Fonseca-Mora:

This [interaction] has advantages over other useful outside-the-classroom work with the language in that, among other reasons, learners have more direct channels for receiving feedback. It can also help

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8 Ehsan Namaziandost, Leila Neisi, and others, “The Relationship between Listening Comprehension Problems and Strategy Usage among Advance EFL Learners,” *Cogent Psychology* 6, 1 (2019): 1-19 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1691338>.

to develop their sociolinguistic, strategic and cultural competences, and learners' confidence in being capable of interacting successfully in the target language.<sup>9</sup>

In brief, fear and intimidation are factors that must be overcome if learners genuinely want to improve their language skills.

Another factor that positively influences their understanding of the target language is natives' slow way of speaking; this way, a learner can more easily understand the message. One example is a study conducted by Christine Goh, based on tertiary-level students from mainland China studying in Singapore, who were taking a six-month intensive English program preparing them for undergraduate studies in local universities where English is used as a medium of instruction.<sup>10</sup> She pointed out:

78% of the students believed that speech rate greatly influenced their comprehension. When some students reflected on their success during specific listening events, many invariably attributed it either entirely or partially to speech that they perceived as not fast.<sup>11</sup>

A slow speed can make learners feel more confident when decoding the message and using the language; however, if they are constantly nervous about sounding perfect and not making errors, they can start sounding like robots that repeat phrases or sentences mechanically. Focusing on a natural reaction towards the language empowers learners as speakers.

### **Interaction: A Face-to-Face Conversation and Social Media**

To travel abroad and visit countries where English is the official language is not a privilege that all foreign language learners can

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9 Arnold and Fonseca-Mora, 226.

10 Christine Goh, "How Much Do Learners Know about the Factors That Influence Their Listening Comprehension?," *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics* 4, 1 (1999): 19-26 (19).

11 Goh, 26.



afford. Many speakers restrict their contact with the language to the classroom setting, listening to music, watching movies, interacting over social media, and playing videogames. These are ways to be exposed to the language and practice their writing and listening skills. As these resources provide updated information about language use by native speakers, learners find them useful to be in contact with the target language and improve their linguistic skills.

Nevertheless, a question arises when this panorama is looked at carefully: Do learners really improve their skills when using those resources? The answer is not clear enough; some experts consider that exposure to the target language is one way to enrich the learner's experience with the language. Alptekin indicates that

Another advantage of being in a context where their concern is not just to learn the rules of the language but to actually communicate with native-speakers is that learners develop useful compensatory strategies to overcome the inevitable conversation breakdowns, that is to say, they build up their "ability to cope in an authentic communicative situation and to keep the communicative channel open."<sup>12</sup>

Personally, I have seen many students improve their listening and oral skills through singing songs, listening to music, watching sitcoms or movies, and playing videogames. Indeed, they get closer to language and native speakers indirectly; however, this indirect contact is limited to certain conditioning environments and topics.

To a certain extent, those resources can replace real contact with native speakers and their English-speaking world. Unfortunately, this is not enough to develop their linguistic abilities, since interaction with natives is essential to reacting naturally and facing unknown situations. At the beginning of their learning process, students use prefabricated structures, topics related to their subject matter, and fixed rules in predictable contexts. Those aspects can work for beginners

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12 Arnold and Fonseca-Mora, 228.

when a minimal knowledge for speaking the language is required. However, after some time, they must take the next step which consists of interacting in a face-to-face conversation with native speakers. Nevertheless, this interaction is restricted by the lack of capacity to travel, access to only a few native speakers to practice the language, and learners' hesitation to interact with native speakers.

For learners to interact with native speakers, language teachers should implement strategies to encourage their students to participate in activities that involve both language learners and native speakers. Certainly, language teachers cannot expect learners to become proficient if they rely only on class activities.” Alison Wray remarks that

A learner's use, or failure to use, native-like language, cannot be put down only to what has been taught, and neither should it be expected that teaching, alone, can lead a learner to native-like competence.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the vision of a learner as a doer who can allow external participants, native speakers, to be involved in his learning process can reinforce the idea that others can be of assistance in improving the use of the target language. Using the target language in class and having students interact among themselves is not sufficient support for them to be immersed in an environment where their proficiency improves. Language teachers should provide strategies to facilitate comprehension and support the development of linguistic skills with a native speaker. They can have students prepare a chart where they identify their syntactic or phonological errors, number of meetings, and activities to be carried out to improve their errors. A second activity can be to choose a topic and prepare a questionnaire with open or closed questions to be answered by a native speaker and then responded to by the learner. A third activity is to explore learners' capacity to differentiate distinctive traces among dialects and guide them to identify

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13 Alison Wray, “Formulaic Language in Learners and Native Speakers,” *Language Teaching* 32, 4 (1999): 213-231 (228). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800014154>.

variants in the English-speaking community. The last activity consists of meeting with native speakers and exchanging cultural experiences, slang, idiomatic expressions, and idiosyncratic words natives use in their geographical area and everyday speech. Those activities will allow learners to experience face-to-face conversations in a real context.

To ensure students are in contact with native speakers, language teachers can encourage an effective use of the internet and befriending native speakers through social media such as Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and other social media platforms and applications. The internet is an effective tool for learners. This is seen in Singhal's explanation:

Communication with native speakers furthers literacy development for authentic purposes, enables language learners to compare student perspectives on an issue, and allows them to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying meaning, requesting information, and engaging in true-life, authentic discussion. Promotion of literacy also occurs within a social context. The interaction that results from the above situations can lead to cooperative projects and increased communication between students from all over the world, in turn leading to the development of social skills.<sup>14</sup>

In today's world, there are many ways to establish contact with native speakers to improve listening, writing and oral skills. Those are vehicles to allow students to interact in real settings, hold real conversations and receive profitable feedback. By means of feedback,

The sender is able to judge the extent to which the message has been successfully received and the impact that it has had. Monitoring receiver reactions enables subsequent communications to be adapted and regulated to achieve a desired effect. Feedback, therefore, is vitally important to successful social outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Meena Singhal, "The Internet and Foreign Language Education: Benefits and Challenges," *The Internet TESL Journal* 3, 6 (1997): parag. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Singhal-Internet.html>

15 Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Communication: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011) 18.

In conclusion, social media can also be perceived as a positive vehicle enabling language students to learn and practice the target language in a real context with no physical contact, but by being connected to the English community.

### **Dialectal Variability: A Major Problem in Understanding**

When people decide to learn a foreign language, they often believe that learning one variety of the target language will enable them to understand and interact with any native speaker of the language. That perception of the target language is erroneous and does not reflect reality. It is essential to take that into account when learning any foreign language. English is divided into many dialects spoken around the world. *Dialects* can be defined as:

Those varieties of English whose features have, for one reason or another, become widely recognized—and usually stereotyped... If a language variety contains some features that are generally acknowledged and commented upon, then it may be recognized as a dialect even by the speakers themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Dialects represent particular groups that share unique idiosyncratic traces. Those features will display particularities in terms of morphology, syntax, phonology and semantics. Moreover, each dialect is divided into subdialects that are influenced by the people within and outside a certain geographical area.

When an English dialect is analyzed, the influence of foreign languages should be taken into account. When a group of immigrants settles somewhere, this may influence their native language, and cause both languages to mix. This results in a local variety that the group of immigrants uses at home and in their community. A particular group can identify with a regional dialect. Constant immigration and the

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<sup>16</sup> Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling, *American English: Dialects and Variation* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2016) 3.

fact that foreign languages encounter local languages results in other dialects. These dialects are referred to as ethnic dialects or socioethnic dialects, defined as “a variety associated with an ethnic group regardless of its language history.”<sup>17</sup>

Dialects are also associated with generational groups and the way the dialect has evolved through time. The elderly, adults, young adults, teenagers, and children use the language differently. They adapt it according to their needs, style, target group and intention. The style of some elderly speakers may be perceived as more formal than that of speakers from younger generations. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines formal and informal languages as follows:

Formal language is more common when we write; informal language is more common when we speak. However, there are times where writing can be very informal, for example, when writing postcards or letters to friends, emails or text messages. There are also examples where spoken English can be very formal, for example, in a speech or a lecture. Most uses of English are neutral; that is, they are neither formal nor informal<sup>18</sup>.

As a result, learners may find that an elderly person uses a lexical item in referring to a particular object and pronounces that word in a unique way. On the contrary, a teenager refers to the same object using another word or pronounces it differently. For this reason, learners should view the foreign language as a set of varieties of the same language.

Considering the previous perception of the foreign language, language teachers should expand their view regarding the teaching of a foreign language and formulate a plan in which learners' understanding of the language is not reduced to one dialect, but to as many dialects as possible. Through this view, class activities will

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17 Wolfram and Schilling, 184.

18 *Cambridge Dictionary*. <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/formal-and-informal-language>>.

focus exposing learners to dialectal variability. By interacting with dialects and subdialects of a language, in this case English, students can get accustomed to different phonological characteristics, syntactic structures and semantic changes. The more contact they have with differences and similarities among dialects, the more skills they develop for facing native speakers from any English-speaking country. Effective teaching strategies will allow learners to face the challenge of listening, speaking and writing.

### **Teachers' Language Environment: Main Concern and the Beginning of Improvement**

At the beginning of the learning process, language teachers choose the variety of English and the mechanism students will use in their class activities; some have students perform their tasks in groups rather than individually. "A number of studies have reported that students working in small groups produce a greater quantity of language and also higher quality language than students in a teacher-fronted, lockstep classroom setting"<sup>19</sup> This is very acceptable when learners do not have enough knowledge and confidence in the usage of the foreign language to do it alone, but when they have achieved certain level of proficiency, they should be assigned tasks that require the contact with those who are not their peers. Here is when interacting with native speakers and understanding their variety may become part of the learning process.

When choosing a variety of the target language to be used in the classroom, language teachers usually teach the one they use. This is understandable because mastering several dialects of the same language is not an easy task. However, mastering every dialect is not a requirement to introduce learners to dialectal variability. One practical way to achieve this goal is to encourage the exploration of an

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19 Rod Ellis, *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012) 13.

English-speaking community and teach students basic characteristics to differentiate dialects and subdialects. To begin with, the language teacher can choose other dialects, besides the one established by the course syllabi, that are well known and have many speakers. Hazen addresses this approach to dialects as follows:

Language variation, or dialect diversity, reflects the fact that languages change over time and that people who live in the same geographical area or maintain the same social identity share language norms; in other words, they speak the same dialect. Although dialects differ geographically and socially, no dialect is better structurally than another. While many people believe there to be only one correct form of a language, what is standard actually varies from dialect to dialect.<sup>20</sup>

This view of dialectal variability can enrich students' scope of the language and encourage their willingness to use dissimilar varieties and identify their geographical area. Inevitably, establishing communication with speakers from different dialects and preparing learners to face any potential differences will give students the tools to become better language speakers and professionals.

### **Constant Contact: The Key to Successful Linguistic Competence**

Once language teachers and learners of foreign language understand the relevance of not being limited dialectically, the possibilities of improving and trying to understand and identify dialects will encourage students to interact with others outside of the classroom. Students' linguistic skills will not be fully developed if they do not interact in real settings. Most of the activities developed in the classroom are done within a controlled atmosphere in which the language teacher and students can control the situation and modify it according to their necessities. In real contexts, when a native speaker asks a question

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20 Kirk Hazen, "Teaching about Dialects," *ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics* (Washington DC, 2001) 1-9 (1-2).

or makes a comment, the speakers will do so at their own speed, use idiosyncratic words and avoid repeating the question; therefore:

In verbal encounters between a native speaker of a prestige language and a non-native speaker of that language, the native speaker will have a higher status, and he will expect the non-native speaker, consciously or unconsciously, not only to use that language but also to speak the way he does. Otherwise, the non-native speaker will be considered as strange, offensive, devious, etc., depending on the type of communicative collision or friction.<sup>21</sup>

At that moment, learners can either become almost paralyzed by their limited understanding of the target language if they are not used to a different speed or dialect, or they can demonstrate their mastery of the language and other dialects. Language learners can benefit from collaborative work with native speakers as part of the learning process. Regarding collaborative dialogue among 24 learners of English as a foreign language and 8 native speakers of English, Fernández Dobao reported the following:

When lexical difficulties arose, [native speakers] quite often collaborated with the learner not only to achieve the successful communication of the message, but also to build the lexical knowledge needed to convey this message with accuracy and precision. In other words, they used their linguistic expertise to help learners enhance their use and knowledge of the language, even though this was not a specific requirement of the communicative task. Learners were not always able to provide each other with this kind of linguistic assistance.<sup>22</sup>

To feel supported by someone who masters the variety and has the ability to provide positive feedback enriches learners' accuracy and cultural view of the language.

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21 René Appel and Pieter Muysken, *Language Contact and Bilingualism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2005) 144.

22 Fernández, 24.



As constant contact is essential when acquiring a second or foreign language, this question arises: Could having students interact systematically with native speakers improve their learning process and fluency? According to Peter Hartley, interpersonal communication can have certain characteristics:

1. There is communication from one individual to another.
2. Communication is face-to-face.
3. Both the form and content of the communication reflect the personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their social roles and relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, real and effective interaction among native and non-native speakers should involve a face-to-face conversation that allows speakers to appreciate facial expressions and gestures as part of the communication. This interaction has a positive effect upon students' language proficiency and accuracy.

## **The Study**

### ***Justification***

This is the systematization of a group of English learners' experience when interacting with native speakers. They are students in four-year English majors offered at the Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica. As professor of linguistics courses, I realized that some learners did not have the opportunity to practice the foreign language outside of the classroom. A few only do so when working in call centers or teaching informally. Some of them had the opportunity to practice the language only in discussions or conversations with the professor or classmates. Through the activities developed in the classroom, they always used very formal and prefabricated

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23 Peter Harley, *Interpersonal Communication* (London: Routledge, 1999) 20; Fernández, 24; Harley, 20.

structures that prevented them from sounding more natural or native-like. When informal syntactic structures and spontaneous speech were required, some of them were unable to reply rapidly and express their ideas without hesitation. That led to the realization that an effective strategy was necessary to help students be closer to a real interaction, by including it on the course syllabus. Initially, it was somewhat difficult as learners were intimidated by having to look for a native speaker of English. Certain aspects affected their willingness to do this: lack of learners' self-confidence, only a few volunteers to talk to for a number of sessions, and time availability for meetings. Once all those obstacles were overcome, the students fulfilled the assignment successfully.

### ***Purpose***

The main purpose of this systematization is to illustrate the benefits that language students obtain when they are directly involved in their learning process. They move from being spectators to active participants since they are free to choose the native speaker, identify their language difficulties and plan the activities to be developed in each session. The learners' constant interaction allowed them develop language skills, self-confidence, and spontaneity. This suggests that second language acquisition cannot be separate from teaching strategies that encourage learners to practice the language in natural contexts. Language teachers should guide their students to understand that the more they are exposed to different varieties of English, the more they develop the ability to combine formal and informal styles that adapt to the context and listener. Limiting learners to using bookish English (phrases and sentences in books) and prefabricated structures makes them sound like robots and can prevent them from acquiring a native speaker's natural speed and intonation. Finally, the systematization of the information provided by the students is a collective vision of learners and the professor who organized the data.

### ***Methodology: Participants and Instrument Used to Gather Data***

To record students' main problems, strategies used to overcome them and their reactions when interacting with native speakers, three groups of students from a 4-year program of the majors in English and in Teaching English as a Foreign Language were chosen since they have a B2+ level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They were attending linguistics courses and their ages ranged from 21 to 24. One way to collect the data and systematize it was to assign a task to be carried out during the semester. They contacted one or two native speakers and had at least twelve sessions in which their linguistic skills were developed. The learners presented a table (see table 1) specifying three aspects: (1) the day each session will take place; (2) troublesome consonants and vowels, as well as difficulties with syntactic structures, speed, stress patterns and intonation; and (3) speaking, listening and writing activities to implement in each session to overcome their errors. Finally, they wrote a one-page reaction paper to externalize their perception of the experience and its benefits. After the interaction experience, the students reported that they felt somewhat more confident when interacting with native speakers since they were able to develop their oral and written skills, and experience real and natural conversations.

**Table 1. Instrument Used by Learners to Provide Data**

Date of the session	Troublesome consonants, vowels, syntactic structures, speed, stress patterns and intonation	Oral, listening and written activities (planned and implemented in each session) to overcome errors	Learning strategies to overcome errors in sounds and syntax

Source: Table designed by researcher

At the end of each semester, the learners presented their results in written and oral reports, explaining the experience and advantages of meeting with a native speaker in more than one session. The students' written report contributed to the systematization of data that provided some errors that blocked their learning process. It also included strategies used to overcome the problems faced in their journey toward successful linguistic performance.

### *Analysis of the Results*

The following systematized data were collected from the information provided in a report by students attending different linguistics courses over three years. This represents 122 students from General Linguistics I, 66 students from General Linguistics II, 105 students from Morphology and Syntax and 114 students from Phonetics and Phonology. The students' report was an assignment in some of the Linguistics courses and its main objective was to encourage learners to experience a face-to-face conversation with native speakers. Students were willing to participate, expose their results and share their experience to help others improve their linguistic performance. The credibility of the information presented in the tables is reinforced by their reports; the data were not manipulated or distorted. The systematization of the information reflects respect towards students' perception of their own learning process and the data provided. Learners interacted with English native speakers whose age, sex, profession, dialect or geographical area were not relevant since their prime objective was to talk with them for twelve sessions in a natural, spontaneous and relaxed environment. In each session, they had to work on specific errors in phonology, syntax and prosodic features that students consider problematic in their learning process, develop an activity to improve their language proficiency, and develop activities to overcome errors in sounds and syntax. Tables 2, 3 and 4 provide summaries of the students' main errors in those areas, and table 5 provides a list of activities used to overcome troublesome sounds and ungrammatical structures.

**Table 2. Troublesome Vowels and Consonants**

Aspirated, unaspirated, unreleased /p, t, k/	/s/ versus /z/
Reduced vowels /ə/; /ɜ/ vs /ɚ/	/w/ versus /hw/
Long or short vowels: /ow/ vs /ɔ/, /u/ vs /ʊ/	/m/, /n/, /ŋ/
/ɑ/ versus /æ/	Allophones of /z/
/i/ versus /ɪ/	/tʃ/ versus /dʒ/
Glides /y, w/	Clear /l/ versus dark /l/
/fi/	/tʃ/ versus /ʃ/
/f/, /v/, /b/ as the onset or coda in a syllable	Tapped /t/-Flapped /d/
Devoicing /b/, /p/ as the coda of a syllable	Glottal stop [ʔ]
/ð, θ/ in initial and medial positions	Retroflex /ɻ/-trill /r/

Source: Based on students' data provided in their reports

Through the data presented in table 2, it can be inferred that errors in phonology are not exclusive to students in a particular group. They can overlap since learners share the same native language (Spanish). Students of a foreign language with a similar linguistic background share related pronunciation errors. Some of these weaknesses are caused by Spanish interference, and the fact that certain English sounds are not part of the Spanish phonological system. As a result, students tend to confuse their native system with the English one. These sounds are produced correctly when learners understand how to articulate them and become familiar with the phonological rules governing the deletion, insertion, or replacement of a sound and assimilation processes.

During their oral report to explain the information they provided, the learners also highlighted the dialectal variability of the native speakers while interacting during the sessions. Since they have different regional accents, learners must face certain misunderstandings initially, and gradually get used to them. Finally, to master the correct pronunciation of distinctive sounds and become capable of identifying phonological variations, learners must be exposed to various dialects that share certain tenets of the language, but differ significantly in lexicon, some syntactic traces and semantic issues.

**Table 3. Prosodic Features**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intonation making statements, asking questions (Wh- and yes/no questions) and listing</li><li>• Rhythm</li><li>• Word stress</li><li>• Linking words in rapid speech</li><li>• Lengthening</li></ul> |
|--|

Source: Based on students' data provided in their reports

Table 3 highlights the students' problems with certain prosodic aspects when speaking the target language. One of them is students' constant monitoring of the syntactic structures and pronunciation. They are so concerned with articulating sounds and producing well-formed sentences as similarly as possible to those found in their textbooks that they pause constantly, hesitate and speak unnaturally. One of the alternatives to improve their speed is to stop over-monitoring their linguistic performance and use the target language naturally as when speaking their native language. To relax about their oral production does not mean that they will stop caring about it and accept ill-formed sentences; it means that their speech production may be natural and more native-like.

**Table 4. Syntactic Structures**

Subject-verb agreement	Noun phrases
Inverted word order	Relative clauses; noun clauses
Transitive/intransitive verbs	Usage of slang
Verbal tenses: simple past, third person singular,	Questions with "whom" and "whose"
perfect tenses, present perfect progressive, future	Countable/uncountable nouns
perfect progressive	Linking words
Passive voice	Blending, acronyms and generified
Modal auxiliaries	words
Conditional forms	Parallelism (pronoun reference)
The subjunctive	Collective nouns agreement
Gerunds	Run-on-sentences
Phrasal verbs	Use of fillers ( <i>it, there</i> )
Reported speech	Affixes of negation
Compound nouns	Usage of collocations
Double negation	Prepositions
Relative clauses; noun clauses	
Umlaut, ablaut, affixation, suppletion	
Inflectional and derivational affixes	

Source: Based on students' data provided in their report

Table 4 summarizes the students' main difficulties in mastering the syntax of a foreign language. It requires the learner to apply grammatical rules used according to context, level of formality, listener, generational gap, and culture. This points to why students who are acquiring the target language produce ungrammatical syntactic structures, as a result of misunderstanding a new grammatical system that does not resemble the syntactic patterns, word order and affixation of their own native language. One way to enable them improve their syntactic skills is to establish a comparison and contrast between the two grammatical systems.

It is essential to enable students to understand aspects such as the use of determiners, adjective word order, complexity in verb phrases, affixes to denote categories and functions, and absence of subjects when a sentence does not require them. Learners will then begin using both systems separately, thus preventing Spanish interference. Once students became aware of their errors, they developed some activities to correct them, such as those included in table 5.

**Table 5. Activities to Overcome Troublesome Sounds and Ungrammatical Structures**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read paragraphs or tongue twisters to monitor the pronunciation of the endings.</li> <li>• Role-play a TV show or interview a friend to practice certain sounds.</li> <li>• Read sentences that have certain troublesome sounds.</li> <li>• The native speaker can read passages from a book and the learner can try to identify distinctive sounds.</li> <li>• Work on online practice to improve the articulation of troublesome sounds and imitate native speakers' pronunciation.</li> <li>• Record passages from a book or free-talk to allow native speakers to check learners' pronunciation and correct the errors.</li> <li>• For a short period, write all words with troublesome sounds that come to mind.</li> <li>• Native speakers can provide sentences for learners to change into passive voice, invert word order or use conditionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a natural conversation to develop fluency and check pronunciation and vocabulary.</li> <li>• Read minimal pairs to check the difference between two sounds.</li> <li>• Sing a song to control speed and practice fluency.</li> <li>• Play a game in which the pronunciation of certain words can help improve fluency.</li> <li>• Search for a poem and express an opinion about its moral value.</li> <li>• Interview someone and switch from formal to informal style.</li> <li>• Listen to different videos and identify dialectal phonological features.</li> <li>• Read an academic article and highlight the unknown words; divide them and identify the stem or root and affixes.</li> <li>• Read a few paragraphs, imitating American or British pronunciation.</li> <li>• Invent words following morphological rules.</li> </ul>
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Source: Based on students' data provided in their report

Table 5 lists the activities suggested by the students to improve their pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. Those strategies enrich the students' language learning process since they promote critical thinking, the use of an updated lexicon, identification of phonological variability and a close encounter with the target language culture. The students' activities enable them to approach the learning process dynamically, spontaneously and effectively. The students can view the improvement of their language proficiency as a personal task, and they can plan and create practical tools to overcome their problems and become successful speakers.



## **Learners' Perception: Achievements and Drawbacks**

For three years, a total of 407 learners presented their perception of contact with native speakers in an oral and written report. They stated that they felt afraid, shy and hesitant when having a face-to-face conversation with native speakers. Since they are not used to doing so, the feeling of being in a natural environment when speaking the target language is unusual for them. However, they expressed that the sensation diminished with every session and finally they felt natural when interacting with native speakers and trying to imitate their accent. Native speakers' commitment to help learners influences their improvement as their constant feedback helps them become aware of their weaknesses and become more confident of their strengths.

Moreover, they emphasized that this recurring contact gives learners the opportunity to hold spontaneous conversations for an extended period with no interruptions and they became part of cultural exchange. The latter indicates that learners may experience a cultural shock that enhances their awareness of the large number of contrasting elements presented by both cultures—that of Costa Ricans and that of the English-speakers. What is relevant here is that learners can get used to native speakers' speed and linking of sounds according to style, and avoid nervousness when interacting. At the same time, native speakers acquire an objective perception of learners' performance since students leave a safe classroom setting and enter a more spontaneous environment that reinforces students' self-confidence.

Another result highlighted by students is the fact that contact with native speakers pushes students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Regarding their weaknesses, they emphasized the need to improve the articulation of some troublesome sounds, their use of simple syntactic structures instead of complex ones, their lack of fluency, and Spanish accent interference. Once aware of those weaknesses, they became better involved in their learning process, developed the ability to discriminate between sounds, put syntactic theory into real

practice, and avoided seeing grammar as complicated or difficult to acquire. Syntactic structures were used in everyday speech according to the context and listener. Furthermore, moderate hypercorrection in language production can benefit their learning process since students pay more attention to their pronunciation to prevent fossilization and develop strategies to improve their linguistic performance. As a result, students will draw a connection between theory, practice and contact with native speakers. One last beneficial aspect of interacting with native speakers is that this oral and emotional connection enables learners to participate in a foreign culture. Being part of a group allows learners to become critical and curious about the target language, improve their critical thinking skills and speaking techniques, and develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

## **Conclusions**

To become proficient in a foreign language requires more than sitting in front of a language teacher and listening to explanations about syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics. It involves being aware of other factors that can affect students' linguistic performance directly. An artificial atmosphere in which different sources such as video games, music, social media, the language teacher, and classmates is the norm for foreign language learners. It reflects a context in which language use revolves around specific topics and subject matter, but those are sometimes far from the reality outside the classroom setting. In the class, language teachers monitor the classes and correct students when they do exercises or participate. At the beginning of the learning process, that may be acceptable since novices' encounter with the target language requires the learning of basic rules to speak the language. However, after a certain period of time teachers should provide learners with a more realistic and natural type interaction to use the foreign language.

Through their linguistic development, students realize that they face certain difficulties when speaking the language; they feel fearful, frustrated, and intimidated when first encountering native speakers. They are not used to speaking the language spontaneously in a free environment since the language teacher has guided their learning process. As a result, their response towards unknown environments and speakers reflects hesitation and doubts. To enable them to experience a real-life situation and use the target language in a natural environment, language teachers should include interaction between students and student-native speakers in their syllabi. These tasks enable students to develop their self-esteem as speakers, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and plan strategies to overcome their problems. Nevertheless, sometimes it is difficult to find native speakers willing to participate in a face-to-face conversation in the learners' country. One effective strategy is to have students contact native speakers through social media. Useful platforms put learners in contact with native speakers regardless of country or time zone. Finally, native speakers will help students improve their linguistic skills and cultural knowledge of different English-speaking countries.

From the perspective of getting closer to the language, students face another challenge: dialectal variability. Students' limited knowledge of dialects, accents and particular features can become an obstacle to effective communication. When these students interacted with native speakers whose variety is different from what they have learned, students said they felt frustrated and could not understand the message easily. To include dialects and their distinctive features in classroom activities and tasks can enhance their language skills and ability to communicate. Indeed, improvement in speaking a language begins when learners realize that English is a language with many different dialects. Interacting with people who speak different varieties helps learners improve their language skills and worldview. Native speakers corrected the students' pronunciation and offered updated information on context and language use. They were not language teachers; they

were ordinary people who were willing to have a casual, natural and uncontrolled conversation.

Regarding correct or natural usage of the language, through their interaction with native speakers and constant feedback, learners identified specific errors and designed strategies to overcome them. They used these learning strategies to improve and keep working on troublesome sounds, syntactic structures, prosodic features, Spanish interference, and intonation patterns that were affecting their progress as foreign language learners.

Including interaction with native speakers in course activities not only guarantees learners a constant improvement of their speaking, listening, writing, semantic and cultural skills, but also guides them on the path to naturalness. When learners speak the target language as well as they speak their native language, they become linguistically successful. Their success as speakers is not only in their hands; language teachers can also integrate different options into their teaching strategies and course syllabi.