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# Perception in a Second Language

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## Abstract

Any person who has attempted to learn a second language knows it brings certain difficulties. Although progress can be made with time and practice, even some of the most advanced second language speakers encounter difficulties with replicating the sound production and the accent of native speakers. The realms of speech production and speech perception are closely related. The importance of speech perception in a second language can be expressed in this way: in certain cases, until a second language learner can correctly perceive sounds, they cannot consistently produce those sounds. There are many factors that affect the perception, or the lack of perception, in a second language; these include personal factors, factors of the native language or the new language, and time spent in the language.

Why is the “o” in *row* and *show* pronounced differently than *cow*, *wow*, and *ow* but the same as *hoe*?

Why is the “ou” in *through* different than *thought* or *dough* or *cough* but pronounced the same as the “e” in *threw*?

## A Chicken and Egg Dilemma: Which Comes First?

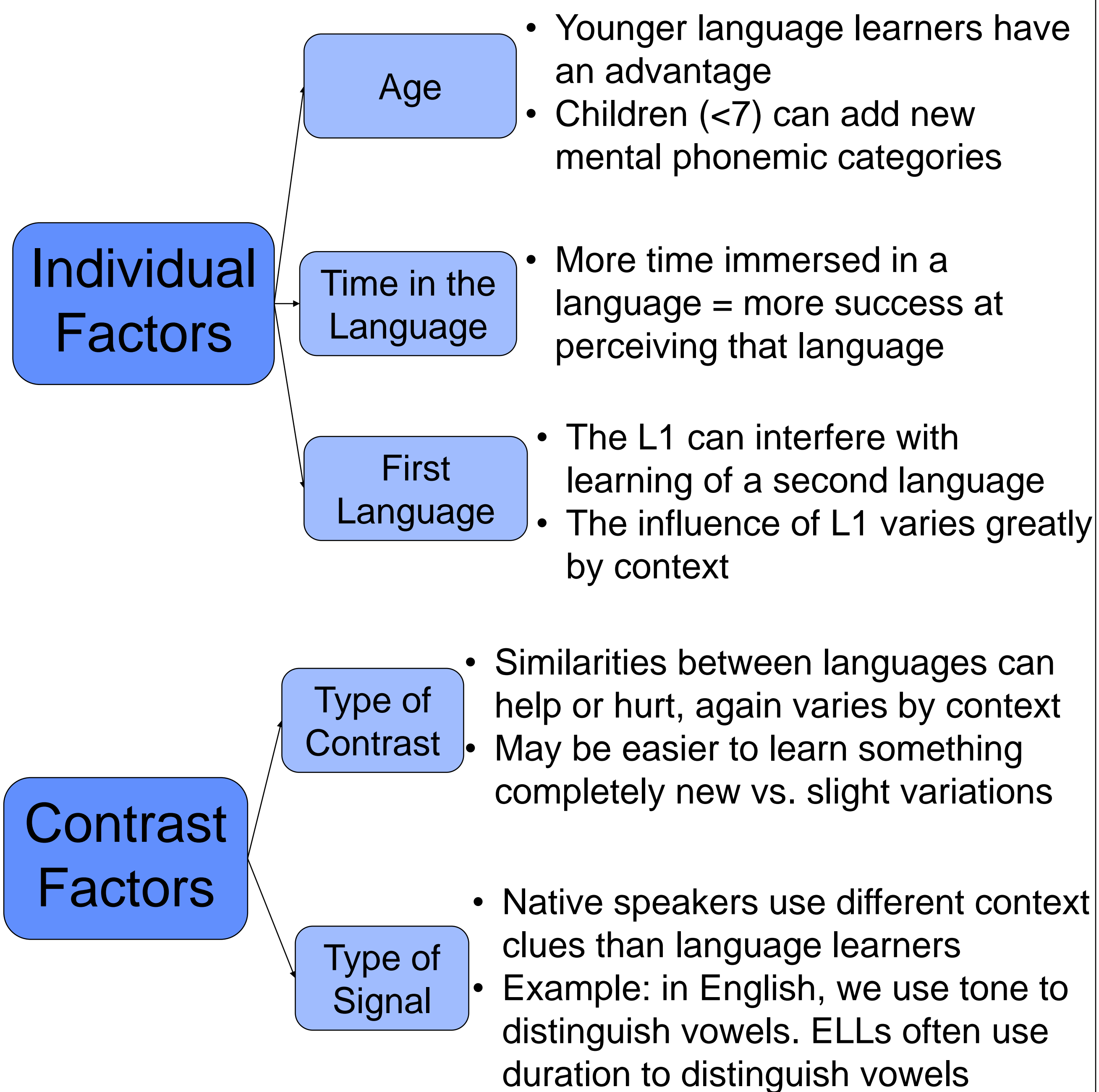
### *Perception Precedes Production*

This theory would read as follows: rather than creating a secondary mental structure for a second language, the learner incorporates their second language into the structure that already exists for their first language. The learner must correctly perceive new or different sounds in order to incorporate the sounds into their language structure and later produce the same sounds.

### *Production Precedes Perception*

This theory presents an opposing view: that correctly perceiving a sound is not always necessary to correctly produce that same sound. There have been investigations that found better production than perception in learners of all ages. This may be due to increased social pressure in the realm of production; mistakes made in sound production are often more obvious than mistakes made in sound perception.

## What Affects Perception?



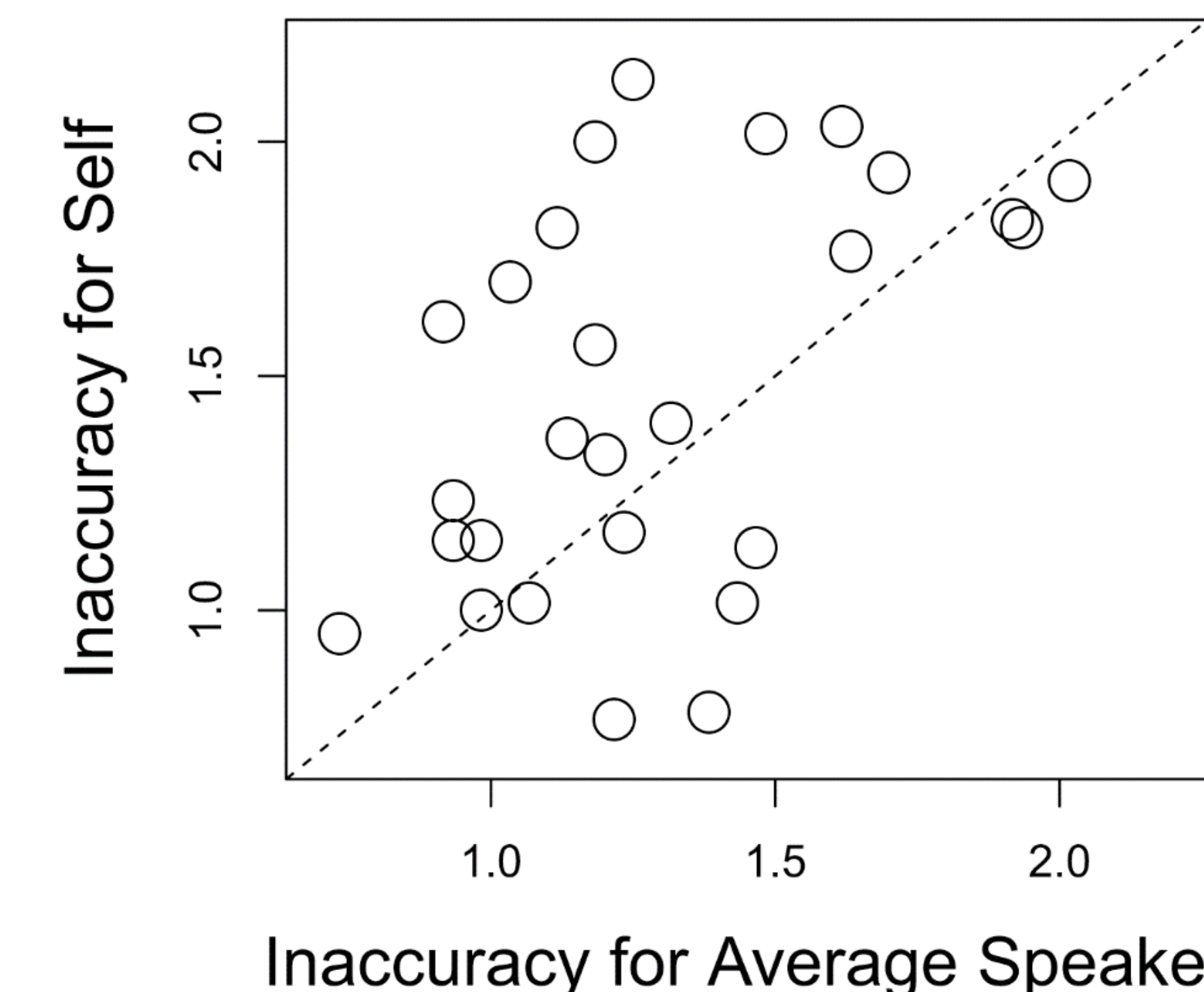
## Self-Perception: Does it Help or Hurt?

### *Common Code Theory - the Average Speaker*

The common code theory proposes that perception of speech should be more accurate when a person is listening to their own sound production, and expands into the fields of sign language or lip reading. On the contrary, some research has suggested that learners of a second language have an easier time with perception of an “average speaker” than when listening to their own speech.

### *(Self)-Perception and Production*

Self-perception may not actually be helpful to language learning. Simply said, a learner who is interested in improving their production of a language would be better off working on perceiving the “average” speech of a group than trying to improve by listening to their own speech.



**Figure 1:** Schuerman et. al compare perceptual inaccuracy for subjects listening to their own speech versus a regionally “average” speaker. It was found that listeners consistently had better perception for an average speaker than for their own speech ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## Why Perception is Complicated: An Example - the English Language

		monophthongs				diphthongs		
VOWELS	i:	ɪ	ʊ	u:	ɪə	eɪ		Phonemic Chart voiced unvoiced
	sheep	ship	good	shoot	here	wait		
	e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə	ɔɪ	əʊ	
	bed	teacher	bird	door	tourist	boy	show	
	æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə	aɪ	aʊ	
	cat	up	far	on	hair	my	cow	
CONSONANTS	p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
	pea	boat	tea	dog	cheese	June	car	go
	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
	fly	video	think	this	see	zoo	shall	television
	m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j
	man	now	sing	hat	love	red	wet	yes

The 44 phonemes of Received Pronunciation based on the popular Adrian Underhill layout

adapted by EnglishClub.com

Special thanks to my father, for his genuine inability to hear and say certain words, and for giving me an interest in languages for as long as I can remember.

Special thanks to Professor Woolsey, Ph.D., the Spanish Linguistics class, and the Modern and Classical Languages Department at Hope College.

References available upon request.