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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 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?

- Younger language learners have an advantage
- Children (<7) can add new mental phonemic categories
- More time immersed in a language – more success at perceiving that language
- The L1 can interfere with learning of a second language
- The influence of L1 varies greatly by context
- Similarities between languages can help or hurt, again varies by context
- May be easier to learn something if native speakers use different context clues than language learners
- Example: in English, we use tone to distinguish vowels. ELLs often use duration to distinguish vowels
- Native speakers use different context clues than language learners
- Example: in English, we use tone to distinguish vowels. ELLs often use duration to distinguish vowels

Why Perception is Complicated: An Example - the English Language

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” rather 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 perception of 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).

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.

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References available upon request.