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Studying the effects of non-nativeness in a business communication context

Experimental studies as input for an advanced level bachelor course

Frank van Meurs, Berna Hendriks, and Brigitte Planken

1. Background

Due to the increasing importance of English as a global language, the number of non-native speakers of English has expanded dramatically (Crystal, 2003). As a result, the relevance of interactions in English between non-native speakers, and between non-native and native speakers, has increased. This is also true for the specific domain of business communication. As a result of the continuing globalization of trade, more and more business organisations around the world have adopted English as a lingua franca (ELF) in communication with their internal and external stakeholders.

Many researchers have observed that English as a lingua franca in international business contexts is widespread (Charles, 2007; Garzone & Ilie, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Nickerson, 2005). However, research has also shown that using English as a lingua franca may be problematic for business professionals who are not native speakers of English (Chew, 2005; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2000; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2008). When non-native speakers (NNS) communicate in English, their English is likely to deviate from the native speaker (NS) norm, i.e. the standard set by speakers belonging to the inner circle of World Englishes, such as British English and General American (Kachru, 1985, 1992). The question is to what extent these deviations have an effect on their audiences, whether these be native or non-native.

Language Expectancy Theory proposes that “[u]se of language that negatively violates societal expectations about appropriate persuasive communication behavior inhibits persuasive behavior and either results in no attitude change or changes in position opposite to that advocated by the communicator” (Burgoon & Burgoon, 2001, p. 86). Non-native speakers who deviate from the native speaker norm in their communicative behaviour could plausibly be seen as violating expectations of appropriate correctness, which could consequently diminish the persuasiveness of their communication. In communication studies, persuasiveness is commonly studied in terms of attitudes towards the message, attitudes towards the sender of the message, and behavioural intentions in response to the communicative goal of the message (see e.g. Hornikx & O’Keefe, 2009).

Within the context of an academic department of business communication, any foreign language programme should sensitize its students to differences between nativeness and non-nativeness, and raise awareness of the

potentially harmful effects of non-nativeness on (the persuasiveness of) their foreign language communications. In this paper, we will discuss how in our department of business communication studies (the Department of Communication and Information Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands) we try to make students aware of such aspects of non-nativeness. In addition to incorporating information about (British English) native norms for grammar, pronunciation, and writing conventions in our language proficiency courses in the first two years of the bachelor programme, our curriculum also includes courses in the second and third year of the bachelor aimed at raising students' awareness of the effects of (their) non-nativeness. In these courses, students study research papers about different areas of non-nativeness research and then conduct their own small-scale experimental study in which they investigate the potential effects of one particular aspect of communication by non-native speakers. In this paper, we will discuss studies from the areas of non-nativeness research that our students investigate as part of one particular third-year bachelor course in our curriculum.

2. Areas of non-nativeness research in business communication

In the third-year bachelor course that will be the focus of this paper, studies from the following five areas of non-nativeness research are dealt with: non-native pronunciation, non-native writing errors, non-native politeness, non-native writing style, and non-native choice of textual and visual elements. Each of these will be presented in some detail below.

2.1. Non-native pronunciation

Students read Nejjari, Gerritsen, Van der Haagen, and Korzilius (2012) about the effects of Dutch-English pronunciation characteristics on native speakers of British English and in particular the effect of different gradations of non-native accent. In the study, 144 highly educated British professionals evaluated a telephone sales talk recorded by Dutch native speakers (all women) with a moderate and a light accent in English, and by native English speakers (all women). The degree of accentedness in the samples was determined prior to the experiment by a trained phonetician with extensive experience in teaching English pronunciation to Dutch students, and by 50 undergraduate Dutch students of English Language and Culture. Participants were asked to evaluate the comprehensibility of the samples, and to evaluate the different speakers in the sales talk with regard to personality characteristics such as friendliness and competence. The findings indicate that the native-speaker sample was considered more comprehensible than the Dutch-accented samples. More importantly, the native English speakers were evaluated as more competent than the Dutch-accented speakers of English. The moderately accented Dutch speakers of English were evaluated as less friendly than the slightly accented Dutch speakers and the native British speakers.

For students, the findings of this study illustrate the importance of getting

rid of any strong traces of Dutch they might have in their English accents. In addition, it sensitizes them to the fact that this type of non-nativeness may not just impede their comprehensibility but may potentially create a bad personal impression, at least with native speakers of (British) English.

2.2. Non-native writing errors

Students read Van Meurs, Planken, and Maria (in preparation) about the effects of Dutch non-native writing errors on two groups of readers: native speakers of English and German non-native speakers of English. The study investigated the effect of non-native errors on readers in terms of attitude towards the text, author evaluation and behavioural intention. For the study, 21 native speakers of Dutch (with at least a bachelor degree) wrote a petition in English to make free downloading legal. Authentic errors from these petitions were then selected and included in a composite petition, the stimulus text for the experiment. Errors that were used in the stimulus text included tense errors, preposition errors (*convince for* instead of *convince of*), punctuation errors (the hyphen in *music-and film industry*; the full stop in *10.000*), vocabulary errors (as in *sites as YouTube*), and spelling errors (*benefittal* instead of *beneficial*; *aspect to* for *expect to*). Subsequently, two versions of the text were presented to 133 participants in a 2 (errors vs. no errors) by 2 (native vs. non-native judges) between-subject experimental design. Using seven-point Likert scales and semantic differentials, the two groups of judges were asked to evaluate the text (attractiveness and comprehensibility) and the author (trustworthiness, friendliness and competence), and to indicate their intention to sign the petition. It was found that text version (with or without errors) and participants' mother tongue (English or German) had no effect on attitude towards the text, author evaluation or behavioural intention.

This paper shows students that, contrary to what may be expected on the basis of language expectancy theory, language errors may not necessarily have a negative impact. However, one of the reasons for this may be that the errors selected did not interfere with comprehension. Another reason for the lack of negative impact of the errors is that the text as a whole may have been perceived as reasonably clear and attractive, despite the errors. This means it is premature to conclude that errors generally have no negative effect on readers' perceptions.

2.3. Non-native politeness

Students read Hendriks (2010) about the effects of the non-native use of politeness strategies in English. This study investigated the effect of the lack of syntactic modification (e.g., past tense modals) and lexical modification (e.g., downgraders such as *possibly*) in English e-mail requests written by Dutch learners. In two online experiments, 268 highly educated native speakers of English, aged between 21 and 60, who were recruited via message boards online, were asked to evaluate the comprehensibility and reasonableness of the e-mail requests as well as personality dimensions of the sender of the e-mail (power and agreeableness). The findings indicate that underuse of request modification in e-mails only had a negative effect

(in only one of the two experiments) on the evaluation of the agreeableness of the sender of the e-mail.

This study shows students that deviation from native speaker politeness norms in writing may have limited detrimental effect on how a non-native writer is evaluated as a person, but would not seem to affect comprehensibility of the email and reasonableness of the request.

2.4. Non-native writing style

Students read Hendriks, van Meurs, Korzilius, le Pair, and le Blanc-Damen (2012) about the effects of non-native use of style conventions. The study investigated whether adjusting (or not) to the preferred style in a country in business newsletters influences the persuasiveness of these newsletters. Theories about cross-cultural differences in communication styles (such as Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) claim that preferences for particular communication styles can be linked to cultural value orientations. The implication of this is that members of different cultures have different preferences in communication styles. On the basis of British scores on Hofstede's value dimensions (2001), Hendriks et al. expected British individuals to have a preference for an elaborate writing style (long sentences, adverbs of intensity, adjectives, and dependent clauses) and an instrumental (i.e. sender-oriented) writing style. In contrast, on the basis of Dutch scores on Hofstede's dimensions, Dutch individuals were expected to prefer a succinct writing style (relatively shorter and elliptical sentences, fewer adverbs of intensity, fewer adjectives and no dependent clauses) and an affective (i.e. receiver-oriented) writing style. In two experiments, 344 business-to-business customers of a company in the Netherlands and Great Britain evaluated differently styled versions of a newsletter with respect to comprehensibility, attractiveness, and intention to order the goods promoted in the newsletter. The findings indicated that there were only very few differences between the Dutch and British participants in their preferences for communication styles: as expected, the British participants were more inclined to order goods after reading the (British-style) instrumental newsletter than the Dutch participants. Also, as expected, the Dutch participants thought the (Dutch-style) succinct letter was more attractive than did the British participants.

This study draws students' attention to the fact that there is more to writing according to target language native norms than the accuracy of grammar, vocabulary and punctuation, and that, theoretically, deviations at the stylistic level might also affect the reception of messages, although this was only shown to be the case to a very limited extent in the study.

2.5. Non-native choice of textual and visual elements

Students read De Groot, Korzilius, Gerritsen, and Nickerson (2011) about non-native deviations from native-speaker preferences for textual elements and visual elements in annual reports. This study specifically compared the effectiveness of texts and photos in the management statements of annual reports (i.e. written introductory statements by the CEO at the beginning

of annual reports) composed according to what is typically found in annual reports written in English by Dutch companies and what is typically found in UK annual reports. The study was based on a corpus analysis (De Groot, Korzilius, Nickerson, & Gerritsen, 2006) which revealed that UK annual reports typically contain different textual elements (e.g., use of headings and information about shifts in composition of the company's board) and visual elements (e.g., photographs with individuals looking away from camera). In the experiment, different versions of the texts were evaluated by 35 British financial analysts. The typically British communication features yielded more positive attitudes than the features that are typical of the Dutch-based statements with regard to corporate reputation and text comprehensibility. When explicitly asked to choose between the two text versions, the British analysts also showed a greater preference for the British-based statement than for the Dutch-based statement. Similarly, the British analysts preferred British-style photographs of managers looking away from the camera to Dutch-style photographs of managers looking into the camera.

This study alerts students to the fact that choices in textual and visual elements may vary across countries and that non-native writers may need to adjust their texts to textual and visual preferences in the target country.

After students have read and discussed the articles about aspects of non-nativeness in business communication, they carry out their own experimental studies on one of the aspects of non-nativeness discussed. Usually, these constitute small-scale variations on or replications of the studies dealt with in the course. In addition to raising students' awareness of the effects of non-nativeness, the purpose of these research projects is to familiarise students with the different stages in the research process: reviewing the literature, formulating a research question, developing materials and instrumentation, collecting data, analysing data using appropriate statistical tests and interpreting statistical test results, linking findings to the literature and theoretical framework, reflecting on the limitations of the experimental study, and making suggestions for further research. Students are required to report on their study in an English academic paper in which they apply style and content conventions for experimental papers written in English (as discussed in e.g. Weissberg & Buker, 1990). The articles they have read not only provide them with relevant topics, but also with literature they can build on, and with methodologies and statistical tests they can apply in their own studies.

3. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of an increase in the number of non-native users of English, research into aspects of non-nativeness has become highly relevant. For students to become successful communicators in a foreign language (in this case English), they first need to be aware of potentially harmful effects that their non-nativeness might have on the (non)native speaker recipient of their messages. In this paper, we have illustrated a way of doing this. A follow-up to such an awareness-raising course would be to give stu-

dents exercises aimed at improving their language proficiency in areas that research has shown to be problematic in terms of communicative effectiveness, such as strong Dutch pronunciation. However, since we have not compared groups who have and have not taken part in the course with regard to their foreign language proficiency, we cannot say whether the research they do in the course actually does contribute to their language proficiency.

A limitation of most of the studies dealt with in the course is that they focus on *native speaker* responses to non-native English, by using native speaker judges. In the literature on English as a Lingua Franca, it has often been pointed out that global communication in English takes place more and more between non-native speakers, as a result of increased internationalization in various domains of society, including business and education (e.g. Charles, 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; Jenkins, 2007; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). In order to make sure that studies on the impact on audiences of aspects of non-nativeness (and ELF) remain relevant to real life, it is therefore essential that such research investigates how non-native aspects of speech and writing affect not only native speakers' attitudes, but particularly fellow non-native speakers' attitudes. Findings from such studies can provide directly relevant insights on international communication for our students, whose future international careers (as e.g. trainers, business professionals or communication consultants) are perhaps more likely nowadays to involve work - and communication - with fellow non-native speakers, than with native speakers of English. It may even be that some non-native features are in fact received more positively than features of English. For instance, a non-native accent may be clearer to fellow non-natives - and even to natives - than a strong regional native English accent. Another limitation of most of the studies dealt with in the course is that the native judges were mainly from only one of the inner circle countries, i.e. Great Britain. Future studies should also focus on responses to non-native English by native speakers other than British speakers.

The research-based course described here not only aims to make students more sensitive to the possible effects of non-nativeness that are relevant to their future communicative needs and practices. In addition, the course also aims to enhance students' language awareness by having them develop experimental materials with clearly native and non-native features for their own research projects, for instance a text with and without grammatical errors, or a recording with and without features of accented speech. Furthermore, the English academic paper students are required to write about their research project provides them with further training in English academic writing skills and conventions. In this way, the course also serves as preparation for their BA and MA theses; it introduces them to potential research themes they can explore in their theses; it gives them a grounding in experimental research methods, and it provides them with knowledge of and practice in academic register, style and conventions.

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