An assessment Norm of Communicative Arabic Proficiency

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[i]Abstract

The concept of the "native speaker" (NS) remains a constant interest in the field of language pedagogy due to the need the field has for models, goals and norms (Davies, 2003, p. 1). On the other hand, some other researchers such as Byram (1997) in his model of intercultural competence (ICC) and Cook (2012) in his model of multi-competence have argued against the NS as a norm of assessment and deemed it an idealistic, unrealistic goal. In the context of Arabic language, given its complex sociolinguistic situation, it is essential to identify the role of NS for assessing the non-native learner's level of proficiency. This paper discusses the usefulness of the NS as the only source of language data, and investigates whether it should be taken as an assessment norm in an Arabic language context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine assessment stakeholders who fall into three categories; assessor teachers, teachers, and learners of Arabic as a foreign language in the UK Higher Education context. Findings showed contested opinions regarding the assessment norm of Communicative Arabic Proficiency (CAP), and pointed out an existing norm of the educated native speaker despite the complex relationship between the concepts "proficiency and education" in the Arabic context. Alternatively, a diglossic competent L2 user was identified as a potential norm, although the definition of this concept remains unclear.

Keywords: Proficiency, Native Speaker, Norm, Assessment, Multi-competence, Intercultural Competence.

Introduction

The field of FL pedagogy remains mostly native-speaker (NS) oriented (Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Maxim, 2006) although the concept of NS is ambiguous, elusive, and has different interpretations (Davies, 2004). According to Ferguson (1983), the NS has always been considered special in the field of language teaching because they are the only reliable source of language data, despite the fact that much of the world's communication is carried out by L2/L3 language users. NS precedence can be attributed to Chomsky's (1965) linguistic theory, which defines language competence as the linguistic system internalised by the ideal NS and ignores the aspects of appropriateness and socio-cultural contexts in which a language is used (Hymes, 1972). The latter aspects have been emphasised by the shift to communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), which provided a welcome transition from form-based approaches to FL pedagogy, yet has not resolved the lingering NS issue (Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Maxim, 2006). Consequently, pedagogical approaches to language instruction continue to be posited that reflect learning towards NS competence, which seems evident when conceptualising language proficiency or scaling its descriptors.

The existing scales of language proficiency such as the CEFR or ACTFL, clearly state that the educated native speaker (ENS) is the norm that identifies the level of a non-native proficiency, and that "near native" is the label for speakers at the highest level of proficiency. In the Arabic context, given its multi-dialectical nature, speaking of an ideal native speaker to be the model of proficiency proves to be particularly problematic. This paper addresses the complexity associated with this concept in the Arabic context and attempts to explore how useful the NS is as a norm for Arabic proficiency. To answer this main question, the paper firstly provides definitions and an outline of the different aspects of the concept. It then explores the implications of applying this concept to the Arabic teaching context, drawing upon the opinions of stakeholders from UK Higher Education (UKHE).

Literature review

The definition of NS can be traced back to Bloomfield (1933) who states, "The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language" (p. 43). Davies (1991) suggests that a NS of any language is the one who "knows what the language is [...] and what the language isn't [...]' (p. 1). Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2000, pp. 150-161) state that a native speaker can be the one who acquired the language 1) by early childhood exposure, 2) by virtue of being a native user, 3) by being educated in the target language, 4) by being an exceptional learner, or 5) through long residence in the adopted country. Davies (2003, pp. 210-214) also provides six ways to define any NS. They include the NS a) in childhood, b) with intuitions about idiolectal grammar, c) with intuitions about the Standard Language grammar, d) who is capable of producing fluent spontaneous discourse, e) who is uniquely capable to write creatively, and f) who is uniquely capable to interpret and translate into their Ll. Clearly, there are multiple definitions given to the native speaker. However, foreign language theories and pedagogies still consider it as a norm for measuring FL learners' levels of attainment. The existing scales of language proficiency such as ACTFL take the ENS as a top level of proficiency regardless of whether that is achievable or not. The CEFR also relies on the NS model for scaling the proficiency descriptors at all levels, although it states that the mastery level (C2) is not meant to conform to any aspects of nativeness or near-nativeness. It rather specifies criteria of precision and appropriateness that should characterise the production of successful language learners (CEFR, 2001).

On the other hand, in his intercultural model, Byram (1997, p. 11) argues against using the NS as a model for two reasons; firstly, it creates an impossible target and consequently inevitable failure. Secondly, it shows the learner as an incomplete NS. It also implies that 'a learner should be linguistically schizophrenic', as they should seek to become accepted as a native speaker by other NSs. That would separate the learners from their own culture and get them to acquire a native socio-cultural competence and a new socio-cultural identity, whereas one of ICC's objectives is to let the learner speak for oneself in the second language, bringing up their own culture, identities and social contexts.

Cook (2002, 2012) argues for the model of multi-competence, which refers to the knowledge of more than one language in the mind of the L2 user, and views the L2 user as a "whole person" rather than a "monolingual native speaker". Cook's argument is based on the potential implication of the NS model, which is that interaction is put in the hands of one group (NSs) and this would give them the power over the other group (non-native learners), which should not and would not be the case of language use. The alternative as suggested by Cook (2002, 2012) is a successful L2 user's model to compare the learners with; either by developing a more flexible version of the NS, or by establishing descriptors of a non-native model. However, Cook (2002) states,

> At present there are no adequate descriptions of successful L2 user goals. It may of course be that no single L2 user goal will suffice but that, rather like English for Specific Purposes, teachers need in principle to specify where, when and why each student needs to use the second language before settling on their goals. But the logic is nevertheless that teachers should aim at getting people to use the second language effectively (p. 335).

Cook seems to be putting the task of identifying the successful L2 user in the teachers' hands. He points out that the decision would be made based on the learners' needs and effective language use.

Reflecting on the Arabic context, one can notice that the concept of nativeness covers a wide spectrum of language varieties since the term 'Arabic' is applied to a number of speech-forms across the Arab countries i.e., the different varieties spoken in the Arab region besides the formal written form. Despite there being many (sometimes essential) differences among these speech-forms, they still share the title of 'Arabic language varieties' (Beeston, 2006, p. 1). Those dialects or 'vernaculars' are almost entirely spoken forms of language. There is only one fundamental division of these varieties, which is what has been called Modern Standard Arabic; (MSA) the contemporary written form of Classical Arabic (CA). Each country in which Arabic is an official language has been described as a diglossic speech community where two varieties of a single language exist side by side. Therefore, Arabic linguistic competence is often discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective. The existing models of Arabic

proficiency conceptualise it in the light of its existing varieties (CA, MSA and the various dialects). Each of these provides a number of language categories spoken by different types of NSs based on their level of formal education (e.g. Badawi, 1973; Meiseles, 1980; Ryding, 1991). Badawi (1973, pp. 92-93), for example, distinguishes between five varieties[1] used in every fully functioning linguistic community; CA (*Classical Arabic*), MSA (*Modern Standard Arabic), colloquial of the educated, colloquial of the enlightened*, and *colloquial of the illiterate*.

Ryding (2008) argues that the notion of the "ideal native speaker", especially when the speaker is an Arab, is extremely broad and very hard to achieve. The elaborative, expressive and culturally bound competence of an Arab NS makes it rather challenging for a non-native speaker to approximate unless there are clear stages of attainment (p. 225).

Nielsen (1996) states that adopting the NS as a criterion has led to teaching and testing the native rules only, which resulted in developing learners who cannot carry out successful communicative tasks with NSs (pp. 230-233). For instance, most Arabic programmes teach Arabic (MSA) to non-native speakers in exactly the same way that they do to native speakers. Let us take teaching grammatical rules as an example and see how this influences the way it is tested. I illustrate this by introducing the argument posed by Nielsen based on the definition of four different types of language rules provided by Faerch & Kasper (1984);

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[1] *According to Badawi (1973), those varieties can be referred to as: :*

1. *Classical Arabic (CA)/written: the language of Quran, and the Arab literary heritage.*
2. *Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It is the contemporary classical used in news bulletins, written texts and sometimes read aloud from texts.*
3. *Colloquial of the educated: colloquial influenced by MSA, often used for formal discussions by the well-educated, but, is not normally written.*
4. *Colloquial of the enlightened (basically educated): daily spoken form of speech used by people who have basic level of education.*
5. *Colloquial of the illiterates: spoken form characterised by the absence of MSA influence.*

a) Linguistic rules: established to account for language data, formulated in linguistic terminology, and belonging to a specific model of language description

b) Psycholinguistic rules, which are psychological entities, activated by individuals when they produce language, these are not organized in the same way as linguistic rules.

c) Native rules, that is rules used by native speakers, or rules that aim at being descriptively adequate, for the performance of native speakers; and

d) *Interrules, used by learners for a foreign language, or formulated for the benefit of foreign language learners* (Nielsen, 1996, p. 229)

Nielsen (1996, pp. 230-233) argues that in the TAFL context[2], studies focus on identifying, teaching and testing the native rules because there are limited existing studies that discuss what Arabic psycholinguistic rules might be, and even fewer talk about the inter-rules. Consequently, the majority of Arabic programmes end up focusing on teaching NS rules in a native-speaker teaching style; where a non-native speaker should employ a series of complex cognitive processes in order to produce an accurate utterance under time pressure, which a beginner learner would struggle to manage in a real-life communicative task. Therefore, linguistic competence should be achieved through the inter-rules that draw on learning strategies that empower successful communication such as association and automatisation. Such strategies are valid not only for learning towards communicative competence, but also for creating an achievable norm for assessing it. The current teaching practices still rely on teaching towards the highest level of attainment based on the NS rules, which is reflected in the only existing scale of Arabic proficiency (ACTFL). ACTFL has chosen to define the NS in a way that is based on the knowledge of MSA and one formal colloquial form which is, in my opinion, realistic but not reflective of the generalisability the scale claims, since Arabic nativeness is far wider and deeper. Thus, in this study, I questioned the usefulness of NS as a norm of linguistic attainment and sought to explore some realistic alternatives.

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[2] *TAFL stands for Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language*

Methodology

The theoretical discussions underpinning my study revolved around the issue of NS and the implications of applying the concept within an Arabic language-learning context. Given the exploratory nature of my research, I conducted it holding a social constructionist view, which implies that the objects under scrutiny "exist only in relation to our interpretations of them as they are locally constructed" (Fulcher, 2014, p. 431). I adopted this philosophy to allow for an investigation of the issue by multiple sources, and with others rather than on others. This choice has informed my use of qualitative methodology, which allowed me to focus upon different issues and approach them in different ways (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 1989, p. 8). Semi-structured interviews seemed to be the best way to explore the diverse opinions, and make meaning out of them, in order to create a deep discourse and not just collect information.

My study took place in the UKHE context that has been witnessing recent rapid growth in demand for Arabic language learning, particularly across university-wide language programmes. Therefore, practitioners in this context (assessor teachers (ATs) and teachers (Ts)) were consulted regarding the area under scrutiny, and opinions and experiences of learners were taken into account. The main research question that this paper addressed was how useful the NS model could be for developing and assessing Arabic proficiency. Two semi-structured interview schedules were developed; the first included two questions and targeted the assessor teachers and teachers. Those were:

- Who can be identified as a native speaker of Arabic?
- Should the native speaker of Arabic be taken as a norm for assessing Arabic proficiency? Are there any other alternatives?

The second interview schedule targeted learners and comprised the following two questions:

- What do you understand by the NS of Arabic?
- Do you aim to achieve a native-like state in Arabic? Any other alternative model you aspire to sound like?

The two interview schedules were initially piloted to trial their usefulness for eliciting the desired rich data. Four participants volunteered; two teachers and two

learners. Based on the pilot study, some modification to the rubrics of the learners' interview questions were made to elicit responses drawing on experiences rather than opinions. The main data collection process then involved 12 interactive face-to-face semi-structured interviews (5 learners and 7 teachers). Based on the kind of experience provided, I placed the 7 teachers in two categories; assessor teachers (ATs), and teachers (Ts). I gave each participant a pseudonym beginning with initial of his or her real name. The names reflected actual gender and ethnic background (whether or not they are native Arabs). The interviews were conducted in English based on the participants' preferences and transcribed verbatim.

The three groups of participants involved were:

▪ Assessor teachers (ATs): experienced teachers in the UKHE context who are also involved and experienced in (placement/proficiency) test design and validation. They have different levels of Arabic teaching experience: Luna had 34 years of experience, Fida had 26 years of experience and John had 30 years of experience. The three ATs teach a module of Arabic (MSA and a Levantine/Egyptian dialect) as part of a university degree or a Masters course.

▪ Teachers (Ts) of Arabic as a foreign language who have at least two years of experience in Arabic language teaching in the UKHE context: Walid had 16 years of experience, Farah had 2 years of experience and Iman had 7 years. They all have taught different varieties of Arabic (Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic and Colloquial) for graduate students, Masters' students, young professionals and diplomats. They taught at either university departments, language centres affiliated to universities or at private language centres.

▪ Learners (Ls) of Arabic who have studied Arabic in the UK and in an Arabic-speaking country. Naya is a fourth-year undergraduate student of Arabic and History, who is interested in learning Arabic for professional purposes. She has studied MSA at university and Moroccan Arabic during her third year abroad in Morocco. Glen is a British convert; he has done his degree in Oriental Studies and learned Arabic as part of that course. His Arabic course included the teaching of CA, MSA and the Levantine colloquial. At the time of the interview, Glen was in

his fourth-year of PhD study in Arabic literature at a UK university. Yaman is a heritage learner of Arabic who was born and raised in the UK. His motivations for learning Arabic were Islamic, historical and cultural at the same time. He has learned MSA over 8 years with some gaps in his study, and has been able to practice speaking Egyptian with his family.

Data Analysis

This study was conceived as an exploratory study with a research question that focused on the opinions and experiences of three groups of participants. After listening to the 12 recordings, I selected nine of them to use for this study. My selection criteria were based on the background of participants and richness of responses. The process of analysis started by transcribing the emerging data, and then coding it for patterns based on the interview questions. The goal here was to identify the "telling" (K. Richards, 2003): particular personal experiences and professional insights, which resonate in terms of the connection they make. Such telling by participants helped to capture perspectives on the patterns identified. Those two patterns were:

- The meaning of Arabic NS
- Whether or not it can be taken as an assessment norm

The findings and discussions, which follow, are based on these patterns of analysis. I first present a summary of the overall account of the responses and then, in the discussion section, I focus on the two patterns mentioned and link some of the participants' responses to existing theoretical concepts.

Findings

In this section, I provide an overview of the responses to the interview questions I obtained from each of the three different groups of participants.

The ATs and Ts were all asked to provide their opinions regarding the use of NS as a norm for identifying non-native Arabic speakers' levels of proficiency. They were then required to reflect on the Arabic situation, and whether this model could/should be applied. In addition, they were asked to describe the NS of Arabic that they felt should be taken as a norm and explain their choice.

The ATs seemed to look at the model of NS from different perspectives. When it came to describing the NS of Arabic, Luna and Fida gave a definition of the type of NS to be taken as a norm. However, while Luna opted for the educated NS to a university level to be the norm, she wanted her students to meet, Fida identified Aljazeera Channel news presenters as the norm currently followed in the field of Arabic pedagogy, with which she did not agree. Unlike Luna, Fida seemed to strongly reject the model of NS in general and to consider a successful L2 user as an alternative. There seemed to be some contradiction in John's response in this regard. He hesitated at the beginning to use the term NS as it is "old fashioned" and discussed how there can be many types of NSs of Arabic according to their level of formal education. However, this hesitance ultimately turned into assertiveness when it came to considering the NS as a norm. Despite the agreement between Luna's and John's opinions on choosing an ENS as a norm, disagreement emerged over the NS's level of education and whether it should be to university level (as Luna suggested) or to secondary school level (as John recommended).

The teachers also seemed to have different perspectives on the NS as a concept and as a norm. None of the teachers seemed to be particularly assertive in terms of either describing the NS of Arabic or identifying the norm. Formal education appeared to be a very important variable for defining the NS according to Walid, hence, he excluded illiterates and others unable to read MSA from the nativeness umbrella and selected the ENS as a norm instead. Farah made a distinction between imitating a native speaker and studying it as a norm. She agreed with the former and suggested focusing on communicative skills as an alternative to the latter. Iman, like Walid, clearly adopted the educated NS as a norm but interestingly provided a different view of education, which did not always relate to doing a university degree or passing secondary level at school, it was more to do with life experience.

The three learners shared similar opinions regarding the adoption of the Arabic NS as a norm but described their norms differently. Naya and Glen's opinions related to the knowledge of the colloquial, while Yaman's incorporated the colloquial and the standard form as well. The reasons behind their choices also differed: Naya's choice was

associated with the equality she needed to feel when interacting with Bahraini people; Yaman justified his choice by his desire to maintain his heritage identity, whereas Glen's decision was based on the need to imitate the accent and dialect of the inhabitants of the Arab state where a learner would live.

In general, the data indicated the complexity of the NS concept in the Arabic context. Most of the participants supported the idea of taking the ENS of Arabic as a measure of Arabic proficiency. The disagreement lied in the meaning of education the participants referred to and the level of education that they felt was necessary for the NS norm. The assessor teacher and teacher who disagreed with using the NS as a norm proposed an L2 user norm or a set of non-native rules to be used as a benchmark for proficiency as an alternative.

Discussion

I here set out the data, which evidences the findings. I then discuss how these data intersect based on the two patterns of analysis mentioned earlier; native speaker as a concept, and native speaker as a norm. I finally link that to the theories of NS as a norm of language proficiency.

As mentioned above, the model of NS appeared to be very contested. ATs, Ts and Ls have diverging opinions in this regard, and that is in terms of two enquiries: the first is who is the NS of Arabic? And the second is who should be/is taken as a norm of proficiency?

There was no agreement amongst the participants on **who the NS of Arabic would be**: Farah (T) defined the NS of any language as: *"the person who speaks this language as their first language, they have it at home, they think in that language"*. Whereas, Walid (T) highlighted that *"Nativeness is not confined to knowing a language but it is also connected to the social context of the language"*. Neither was there an agreement on **whether the NS should be taken as a norm**. John (AT) said: *"Yeah, I think we should take the native speaker as a norm'*. Luna also supported the idea of the NS as a norm*: "Good question. I think, yes'*. In contrast, Fida (AT) queried *"why…we need to choose people to put them as a norm'*, which was in agreement with Farah's (T) who stated*: "at a university level, we*

should not aim to be like a native speaker."

Those who supported the idea of taking the NS as a norm had diverging opinions on the specific type of NS that should be used. Two variables stood out in this regard: [3]Diglossic competence and level of education. The role of **diglossic competence** was perceived as essential in identifying the meaning of NS, with disagreement on which variety is more significant. Naya (L) for example stated: *"fuṣḥā is not something; it doesn't have any native speaker really. And it is something people learn later in life, something, of course when I want to say like I want to sound like a native speaker to me it is always the dialect".* Walid (T), on the other hand said*: "For me the Armenian, who speaks the dialect but can't read fuṣḥā is not a native speaker".* John (AT) used the term of NS with some hesitance, and described it as *"old- fashioned".* He also said; *"Not every Arab has got a university degree, and there are plenty of children, they're very fluent in Arabic [...] in the Arab world you could be illiterate; you could have beautiful Arabic".*

In his statement John seemed to refer to categories of NSs that Badawi (1973) talked about, which are the colloquial of the cultured, the colloquial of the basically educated, and the colloquial of the illiterate. John's opinion resonated with Naya's (L) who described the NS of Arabic as *"Anyone who speaks an Arabic dialect and as any native speaker, a person who acquires the language as his first language as a child".* Some participants also referred to the bi-dialectical knowledge but emphasised the NS **level of formal education**. Luna (AT), for instance stated that NS should be *"fully literate [...] educated up to at least university level".* Walid (T) said that the NS *"should be educated, and I mean the one who successfully passed his secondary school education".*

Only two of the participants – one AT (Fida) and one T (Farah) – considered it unnecessary to take the NS as a norm. Fida provided the advanced NNS who is skilful to a near native level as a norm as **an alternative of the NS**. She said: *"There are some students who come to us and we turn them back. We tell them, 'no you don't need our courses' because they know how to speak, they know how to write, they know how to read, they understand everything … So, this is the person that I choose {to be the model}".* For her, the model of

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[3] *Diglossic competence is a term I established in my doctorate thesis to indicate the learners' ability to interact in both fuṣḥā and ammiyyah according to the context, maintaining social and cultural appropriateness.*

proficiency that we should take as a norm is a specific type of NNS who *"understands everything"* in Arabic in the different skills, which in a way corresponded to the L2 user concept for which Cook (2012) argued. Cook (2012, 243) stated that '*an L2 user should be compared with another successful L2 user, a member of the same group, not with a native speaker, who by definition is a member of group that the L2 user can never join'*. The teacher, however, did not give an alternative but indicated the communicative abilities as those to be measured instead of aiming for a norm. She said: *"we should aim to have communicative abilities because it is limiting the students by saying you need to speak Arabic like a native speaker".*

The three learners seemed to share similar opinions regarding the adoption of NS as a norm regardless of having different reasons beyond that. Naya, for example spoke about her desire to sound like the Bahrainis when she spoke their dialect, so that she would not be treated as a foreigner. She said: *"I'd just like to understand it more to, sort of be, you know, to have a conversation when I'm treated as an equal [...] especially I feel this a lot here now that I'm a foreigner, they don't speak to me the way they speak to each other".* Glen also said: *"You do have to adopt an accent in a dialect [...] I mean fuṣḥā is a different thing [...] if you can only speak fluent fuṣḥā I don't know that is not, in an important way that is not nearly as pleasing [...]no one is a native speaker of fuṣḥā".*

Their perspectives generally corresponded to those of the ATs and Ts who went for that choice as well (AT, Fida and T, Farah excluded), but they defined their norms differently. Unlike the ATs and Ts, advocates of the ENS norm (the Ls Naya and Glen) made no reference to the standard language represented by the knowledge of MSA. Yet, Yaman (L) described the NS of Arabic he would aim to sound like as *"Anyone who speaks a dialect of Arabic and picks it up informally and anyone who is from that background and then goes on to study formal Arabic formally, standard Arabic formally".* So only Yaman's opinion seemed to refer to the knowledge of formal language some ATs and Ts referred to by the term "educated".

In summary, the responses based on the two patterns of analysis were as follows:

- **Native speaker as a concept**: Opinions regarding what the NS is, are different due to the different interpretation of this concept: e.g., the five categories

provided by Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2000) and the six categories of Davies (1991, 2003) mentioned earlier. Most of the participants (ATs: Luna and John, Ts: Walid and Farah, L, Yaman) related the concept of NS to the individual who acquires the two varieties of Arabic; the colloquial and the standard. The AT, Luna and the T, Walid emphasised the level of education in their definition of NS, which includes MSA, the written form, as it is learnt through the colloquial, not naturally acquired. The AT, John spoke about different NSs; those who acquire the colloquial only and others who continue in learning MSA through it; but both are considered native speakers of Arabic. The learner Yaman spoke about one NS who has the colloquial and learns the standard. In the Arabic context, the language variety acquired in childhood is colloquial and it is through this medium that MSA is normally learnt. So, a native speaker would either have the colloquial, or the colloquial and MSA; which conforms to John's definition and contrasts with those of Luna, Walid and Yaman.

- **Native speaker as a norm**: One variable that appeared repeatedly through the discussion on the concept of NS is their level of formal education. The ATs, Luna and John and the Ts, Walid and Iman have emphasised the native speaker's level of formal education since it guarantees the knowledge of MSA. It is worth noting that the AT, Fida suggested that there should be some "*communicative specifications*" or successful L2 users to be taken as models other than the NS. The T, Farah gave a similar opinion in this regard; that is, focusing on communicative skills rather than on an NS norm. The Ls all seemed to confirm their aspiration to the NS as a norm but defined it differently. It was related to the knowledge of the colloquial only in Naya's and Glen's responses, whereas the knowledge of MSA alongside the colloquial appeared as essential in Yaman's opinion. Davies (2003) referred to this distinction between the model of NS and native speaker-like, which raises important questions. For instance, to what extent can the L2 user become a native speaker? Or can they ever become so? Cook (2012) stated that the status of NS is no longer relevant and that even imitating the NS has resulted in L2 learners' successive failure in looking like NSs. The successful L2 user that he

suggests as an alternative model helps the L2 learners maintain their social and cultural identities while communicating with the NSs and the other L2 learners of the target language who come from different cultures (Cook, 2012).

The idea of an ideal NS has probably come up through the distinction that Chomsky (1965) drew between competence and performance in his linguistic theory. The former refers to "the linguistic system that an ideal native speaker of a given language has internalised, whereas performance mainly concerns the psychological factors that are involved in the perception and production of a speech" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 3). This theory was later criticised by Hymes (1972) for lacking social factors and by Wesche (1983) who disagrees with the NS model as ideal. The NS as a norm has been questioned by many researchers in the field of second language teaching (e.g., Kramsch, 1997; Cook, 1999). Davies (2004) also stated that this concept is rich in ambiguity. According to Piller (2002, p. 180), the NS as a baseline provider of data against which higher levels of attainment can be measured is no longer tenable. At the same time, research in second language learning has not suggested any other approaches. One possible alternative approach would be to emphasise the communicative skills associated with the linguistic knowledge. Models like Byram's ICC (1997) and Cook's multi-competence (2012) argued against the NS model for its idealism, which could not be achieved in reality. The calls for the L2 learner to be considered as a whole real person in an L2 social setting have brought the learner's identity and its role for developing language learning into focus (e.g. Ushioda, 2009). Dörnyei's (2009, p. 29) L2 Motivational Self System has also put emphasis on the learner's perspective and the different motivators in learning a foreign language. Cook (2012) suggested a successful L2 user to be the norm against which non-native speakers' performance can be measured but has not clearly identified it.

In my opinion, it seems unrealistic to maintain the Chomskyan notion of competence and performance and consider it the only absolute criterion, particularly for an Arabic proficiency scale. That is due to the complexity of actual Arabic language use given its diglossic nature. That is to say, more focus should be given to describing the language use of Arabic NSs in real life situations in the light of the learners' needs.

Although the Chomskyan concept has been and can be theoretically justified and defined, it remains hard to operationalise in reality. Therefore, linguistic competence in Arabic should be redefined from the non-nativeness perspective of language pedagogy where "intelligibility" might be validated as a norm of communication and interaction. First, though, the linguistic rules used by NNSs themselves need to be identified, following which the linguistic competence in Arabic can be redefined from the perspective of non-nativeness.

A great deal of complexity appears when talking about the NS in the Arabic context, particularly in relation to the level of formal education as a variable. For instance, given that the "illiterate" are considered NSs, can they be norms for L2 learners? If yes, then the learners would be missing the formal variety of Arabic (MSA). If no, then the NS of Arabic as a norm should include, together, the colloquial, as it is the language of acquisition and MSA as it is the language of formal education. That is to say, if the NS of Arabic should not be taken as a model, then an alternative L2 user norm should have the possible end state of proficiency in the two varieties; someone who is a diglossic competent L2 user (DCL2).

Research limitation

The present research was a small-scale study using only semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. Dividing the teachers' category into assessor teachers and teachers was basically based on the assumption that distinctive data would emerge from the two different groups due to their different experiences. Yet, there was no significant discrepancy noticed in the responses. Instead, opinions were mainly class-oriented and thus shared similar points.

Research implications

My research calls for an L2 user as a norm of assessment to replace the model of ENS, which entails the following implications. First, it requires a change in Arabic teaching and testing practices in the different TAFL contexts to take into account learners' needs and aspirations.

Using an L2 user as a norm of assessment entails creating an L2 user through the whole journey of learning Arabic. That is to say, the syllabi, and teaching materials and activities should take into account what is special about the L2 user's grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Cook, 2012). Second, it recommends that approaches to Arabic language teaching need to resonate with the actual use of Arabic language in different settings. Spoken varieties should be introduced as part of the Arabic language continuum based on learners' needs and learning purposes. MSA needs to be taught as a foreign language, not as it is taught to the native speakers. Finally, more research need to be conducted on the Arabic inter-rules and the communicative abilities appropriate to the social context of Arabic language before we clearly adopt for a non-native assessment norm.

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