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What Is a Near-Native Speaker? Perspectives of Job Seekers and Search Committees in Spanish

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IN RECENT years, the great majority of position announcements placed by departments of foreign languages and literatures in the MLA Job Information List or in the Chronicle of Higher Education have included “native or near-native proficiency” as a criterion for employment. Yet experience tells us that this qualification is honored more in the breach than in fact, for most job searches include only passing attention to the candidates’ ability to speak the language with the precision and elegance over a range of contexts and functions that the term near-native proficiency (NNP) implies.

As Dorothy James has pointed out, attention to students’ language skills drops off sharply after the lower-division courses and disappears almost entirely by the graduate level (“Bypassing” and “Re-shaping”). By that point, oral proficiency in the foreign language is implicitly considered the responsibility of the individual student, except perhaps in the most extreme problem cases. Since formal and informal policies of language choice and language use differ widely, graduate students who respond to position announcements have no way of knowing how a particular department understands NNP nor how they may be expected to demonstrate that they possess it.

This essay explores the concept of near-native proficiency in the context of the job search in Hispanic literature or linguistics from two perspectives: that of native English-speaking graduate students who are about to enter the market and that of search committees who advertise for a native or near-native speaker of Spanish and must decide whether applicants whose subject-matter preparation makes them appealing as candidates also qualify as near-native speakers. Our data come from a questionnaire and narrative “linguistic life story” supplied by graduate students nearing the PhD and an open-ended questionnaire sent to heads of search committees who advertised for a native or near-native speaker of Spanish in the October 1997 Job Information List. Our intention in this essay is to examine critically the construct of near-native proficiency as the phrase is understood by our two groups of informants and, in so doing, to discuss the impact and usefulness of this phrase in the context of the academic job search.

NNP, the ACTFL Guidelines, and the ILR Speaking Level Descriptions

The second language acquisition (SLA) literature on near-native proficiency largely deals with issues of critical periods and ultimate attainment—whether and to what degree students who begin to learn a second language (L2) after acquiring their first can achieve nativelike competence in the L2 (see, e.g., Ringbom). Some researchers (e.g., Patkowski; Johnson and Newport, “Second Language Learning” and “Universal Properties”) have examined the critical period hypothesis—the notion that the ability to acquire near-native competence in a second language is limited to a particular chronological, biologically based time frame—by comparing the linguistic competence of speakers whose acquisition of the L2 began at various ages. Another strand of studies (see, e.g., Birdsong; Coppieris; Hyltenstam; Ioup, Boustagui, El-Tigi, and Moselle; Sorace; White and Genesee) has analyzed the linguistic competence of adults considered by native speakers to be nativelike in their speaking performance.

The intention of all these studies is to examine linguistic competence rather than linguistic proficiency or performance. Researchers seek to design linguistic tests that tap speakers’ unconscious knowledge about how a language works, regardless of how that knowledge may be instantiated in real-time processing and performance. Linguistic competence, in the sense of an unconscious
feel for the grammaticality of utterances, is elusive on both theoretical and practical grounds. Claire Kramsch, for example, quoting Thomas Paikeday in a recent PMLA guest column, argued that the idealized native speaker represents not reality but, like the Dick and Jane of basal readers of the past, a convenient fiction (362). On the empirical side, Lydia White and Fred Genesee have suggested that the discrepancies among various critical period studies—findings of more or less divergence between native and near-native speakers—may be a direct result of the failure of researchers to operationalize the distinction between competence and proficiency.

The definition and elaboration of NNP in the foreign language job search in higher education has followed a path unrelated to the SLA research described here but a path influenced by the continued idealization of the academic, the “canonically literate [. . .] and middle class” native speaker of Kramsch’s analysis (363). The inclusion of the word proficiency in near-native proficiency takes the issue out of the realm of “linguistic competence” as this term is understood in SLA and places it squarely in the realm of surface-level performance, specifically, speaking ability as manifested in professional and social settings.

We hypothesize that the term near-native proficiency in this academic context became common currency beginning in the late 1970s when the Foreign Service Institute, the language-training arm of the United States Department of State, held a series of workshops to introduce professors of foreign language and literature to their oral proficiency rating scale and assessment procedures (Liskin-Gasparro). In the early 1980s the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Educational Testing Service developed the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, an adaptation of the government scale, and began training people to conduct oral proficiency interviews and to rate students’ speaking ability according to the scale. Since that time, both the ACTFL guidelines and the government’s ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) proficiency level descriptions have evolved. Level 3 on the current version of the ILR scale represents a level of proficiency not quite as developed as Superior in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking. Speakers at the ACTFL Superior level, which five of the sixteen respondents to the search committee questionnaire identified as their criterion for NNP, are able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They explain their opinions on a number of topics of importance to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured argument to support their opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, they use extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations. Such discourse, while coherent, may still be influenced by the Superior speakers’ own language patterns, rather than those of the target language.

Superior speakers command a variety of interactive and discourse strategies, such as turn-taking and separating main ideas from supporting information through the use of syntactic and lexical devices, as well as intonation features such as pitch, stress and tone. They demonstrate virtually no pattern of error in the use of basic structures. However, they may make sporadic errors, particularly in low-frequency structures and in some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal speech and writing. Such errors, if they do occur, do not distract the native interlocutor or interfere with communication.

It is interesting to note that the term near-native speaker does not appear in the description of the Superior-level speaker. Nor does it appear in the explanatory appendix that describes in greater detail the characteristics of each proficiency level and differentiates between “baseline” proficiency and performance above this threshold. In the descriptions of levels 4 and 4+ on the ILR scale, frequent references are made to the ability of speakers to interact with well-educated native speakers with a high degree of effectiveness and what might be called linguistic transparency. In other words, their proficiency is nativelike enough that interlocutors simply do not notice the minor or occasional infelicities that may occur.

The term near-native speaker may have begun to appear in job advertisements in the late 1980s as a consequence of growing familiarity with the ACTFL scale in foreign language circles, ACTFL workshops, articles in pedagogical journals, national-level discussions about foreign language proficiency in professional organizations and agencies that certify K–12 foreign language and bilingual teachers, and discussions about proficiency-based foreign language requirements for undergraduate education and a proficiency component to the foreign language major. These factors apparently all converged to convince chairs in college and university departments to extend the notion of a proficiency requirement to the selection of new colleagues.

Despite the widespread dissemination of the ACTFL Guidelines in foreign language teaching circles in the United States, it is safe to say that relatively few people in the profession, and even fewer among those who are preparing to enter it, are familiar with the technical definition accorded by ACTFL to Superior-level proficiency. It is not surprising, therefore, that there should be a diversity of perspectives from job seekers and academic employers about the meaning of Superior-level proficiency or near-native proficiency, if they are indeed one and the same. Our intention in this essay is to explore these different perspectives on the NNP construct to see whether there is sufficient consensus to justify the universal inclusion of the phrase in position announcements for new PhDs entering university life as teachers and scholars.
Graduate Student Questionnaire

To find out what the people most affected by this NNP requirement—nonnative graduate students preparing to enter the job market—thought about issues related to NNP, we gathered information from them by various means: a questionnaire, a written narrative in the form of a linguistic life story, and, for a small subsample of informants, an extended ethnographic interview. We sent the graduate student questionnaire to chairs and other colleagues in departments of Spanish at thirty-eight PhD-granting universities in the United States. We also asked these administrators and professors to give the questionnaire to ABD graduate students of Spanish language or literature who were preparing to go on the job market in fall 1997 or fall 1998. Our response group, which came from twelve institutions, included representation from both public and private institutions and from across the country—both coasts, the South, the Southwest, and the Midwest.

The questionnaire stipulated that respondents be graduate students in Hispanic literature, Hispanic linguistics, or foreign language education (emphasis in Spanish) and meet the following criteria: (1) native speaker of English; (2) raised and educated in the United States; (3) no extended periods of residence in a Spanish-speaking country before puberty; (4) no more than two years of postpuberty residence or study in a Spanish-speaking country; (5) not married to a native speaker of Spanish. We also excluded from the study Hispanic bilinguals raised in this country. As a result, we were able to use sixteen graduate student questionnaires, which included those of thirteen women and three men. (For the full text of the questionnaire, see the appendix.)

Results

To explore in depth the graduate student respondents’ perceptions and opinions about NNP, we asked about it in a number of different ways: the respondents’ definition of NNP (questions 5 and 10), their characterizations of fellow students whom they considered near-native speakers (question 9), whether they thought NNP was necessary for teaching at the postsecondary level (question 6), whether they thought departments were looking for when they advertised for a native or near-native speaker (question 11), and whether it is possible to attain NNP by this stage of their careers (questions 11 and 12).

Table 1 shows the features of near-native proficiency that the respondents ranked as either most or least important. Of the six identifying features of NNP given in the questionnaire, which respondents ranked in order of importance, we have put in table 1 the extremes of opinion—the number of times a feature was listed as most important or as least important. Note that almost everyone ranked “no trouble communicating any ideas in the second language” and “fluidity” highest, while “use colloquial expressions easily and naturally” was viewed as least important. “Very few grammatical errors” and “always knows how to express things appropriately” received more low rankings than high, but opinion, as reflected in the respondents’ comments on their rankings, was mixed. Some respondents set an extremely high standard for NNP, including nativelike pronunciation and pragmatic competence. Others, perhaps more realistically, gave pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and pragmatic competence lower rankings because, in their experience, nonnative speakers are rarely, if ever, totally nativelike in these areas. One respondent commented:

I perceive pronunciation and grammatical errors as the points on which I will be most closely scrutinized when I am compared to a native speaker. I think they are more mechanical aspects of language, but I sense that they can be conceptualized (primarily by native speakers) as markers of the degree to which Spanish and its speakers are valorized.

Respondents also described fellow graduate students whom they characterized as having near-native proficiency. Frequently named characteristics included having spent an extended period of time abroad, either for study or work, and having an intimate relationship with a native speaker, which usually implied a circle of native-speaker friends and extended visits to a Spanish-speaking country. Others mentioned being of Hispanic heritage; having hobbies or interests connected with Hispanic cultures, such as Latin dancing and Spanish-language soap operas; and reading extensively in Spanish. Practices of sheer determination, such as insisting on speaking Spanish all the time with both natives and nonnatives, doing extensive pronunciation exercises at home, and even imitating native speaker body language, were also named.

In addition to reporting their views on NNP, respondents indicated what they believed departments were looking for when they advertised for a native or near-native speaker. Although there was considerable varia-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Least important</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>No trouble communicating any ideas in the second language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fluidity (rate, pace, smoothness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellent pronunciation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Always knows how to express things appropriately the way a native speaker would</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very few grammatical errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Can use colloquial expressions easily and naturally</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can use colloquial expressions easily and naturally</td>
<td>3</td>
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tion in responses, the characteristics listed in table 2 occurred most frequently.

The picture of near-native proficiency that emerges from the graduate students’ responses includes elements of process and product. Selected as models of NNP were those fellow graduate students who had immersed themselves deeply in the culture through residence abroad, choice of friends, and even spouses. The respondents expressed the belief that departments would be interested in their lived cultural and personal experiences and would see that they, as nonnatives who had worked long and hard to become near-natives both culturally and linguistically, could serve as living models of what their students might also accomplish.

Some respondents added comments that reflected confusion and uncertainty about what departments were looking for, as well as awareness of the inconsistencies and contradictions between what they believed or had been told and what they observed around them. The issue of pronunciation was perhaps most salient in this regard. Even though they listed “excellent pronunciation” as a feature they thought departments were seeking, several respondents commented that the pronunciation of their professors and, indeed, even of new junior faculty members, did not come close to near-native levels.

I think what they’re looking for is someone who can teach without their language being distracting to students, especially native speakers. I know I’ve had professors that I have to spend time getting over their accent before I can really pay attention to the subject matter.

I think it is reasonable to require near-native or native proficiency, but judging by the two most recently hired faculty here, most will settle for less than near-native if the candidate fits in other ways.

Table 3 shows responses to specific questions about graduate students’ understanding of hiring departments’ expectations for near-native proficiency. Almost all the respondents said that NNP was a reasonable requirement for entry-level assistant professors, but many qualified their answers by stating that good teaching should weigh as heavily, that departments should strive to have both native and nonnative faculty members, and that NNP was an important component of providing good and fairly authentic models for students in their classes and of getting the material across.

By a nine-to-seven margin, respondents thought that NNP was essential for teaching undergraduates, compared with a fourteen-to-two margin for teaching graduate students. This opinion differs markedly from the response of the search committee chairs and may indicate the graduate students’ lack of familiarity with the linguistic demands of undergraduate teaching, particularly for advanced courses at institutions where most language majors come to college with a strong language background and spend a semester or a year abroad.

Table 2
What Hiring Departments Mean by NNP: Characteristics Most Frequently Mentioned by Graduate Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>No. of responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable discussing any topic in Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent pronunciation (minimal accent)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Few grammatical errors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluidity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to teach Spanish at all levels (role model and inspiration for students)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses idiomatic language spontaneously</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine interest in language, people, culture (e.g., extended residence abroad, demonstrates cultural knowledge)</td>
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In the last section of the questionnaire, we asked respondents to outline briefly the history of their Spanish learning. Perhaps not surprisingly, almost all of them reported that their most intensive linguistic experiences, exposure, and practice with high-level skills occurred in the post-BA years. Aside from taking classes at the graduate level, entailing much reading and writing in Spanish and participating in oral discussions on abstract topics, students mentioned their daily Spanish teaching duties and close friendships with native speakers in the department as greatly influencing their language development. Most students reported extensive travel or work in Hispanic countries during this time. Ironically, some reported that writing the dissertation, a solitary process, seemed to be detrimental to their language skill maintenance. Isolated from friends, no longer teaching in the lower-division program, concentrating fully on their work, they found that their Spanish-speaking skills declined, just at the crucial time when they were about to enter the job market.

The linguistic histories indicated that the truly meaningful learning experiences are taking place mainly after the undergraduate years or, depending on study-abroad experiences, from the last two years of undergraduate studies to the present. So, in truth, students are working perhaps sporadically in Spanish at the advanced levels for...
about eight years before they are asked to demonstrate, in connection with their first job search, whether they are near-native speakers.

**Questionnaire to Search Committees**

To explore the construct of near-native speaker of Spanish from the perspective of foreign language and literature faculty members, we surveyed by e-mail heads of search committees who had placed announcements for Spanish positions that included NNP as a criterion in the October 1997 issue of the *Job Information List*. We received twenty-eight responses. The institutions ranged from major research universities to small liberal arts colleges, spread relatively evenly over those offering doctoral, master's, and baccalaureate degree programs.

**Results**

We asked the overall question of what the search committees or the departments meant by the designation near-native speaker in the context of their job search. We included three subquestions: what language abilities the committee hoped applicants would have, how and why the committee decided to use the term near-native speaker in its printed job announcement, and how the committee determined whether candidates were near-native speakers.

**Understanding of the Term Near-Native Speaker**

The characteristics of near-native speaker most often mentioned by the respondents, which are presented in table 4, included both linguistic components of proficiency (e.g., grammatical correctness) and global indicators of skill, such as the ability to teach (i.e., lecture and lead discussions) exclusively in Spanish.

There was considerable variation in the definitions respondents gave to describe the type of speaker they sought. With respect to pronunciation, for example, one respondent characterized a near-native speaker as one who “could be confused with a native speaker because of his/her natural accent,” whereas five other respondents referred to a “decent accent” or Spanish that was “not strongly accented,” that was “without a pronounced accent,” or that had “no American accent.” There was less variability in the desired level of grammatical accuracy: the three respondents who provided explanations made reference to “no errors,” “few errors,” or “only an occasional, non-patterned mistake.” Fluency was operationalized by three respondents as “virtually no hesitation,” “speaks at a comfortable speed,” and “speaks Spanish easily.”

References to global definitions of NNP also varied. Two respondents cited credibility in students’ eyes as a test of NNP; for one of these respondents it was the sole measure:

In an American college course in Spanish literature there are likely to be some students who are native speakers and have at least family Spanish. If those students say to themselves: “Hey, the teacher doesn’t know Spanish well enough to be in this classroom,” then the teacher doesn’t have “near-native” command.

Five respondents defined NNP as equivalent to Superior proficiency on the ACTFL scale. For three respondents, the measure of NNP was the impression that the candidate gave to interviewers of “feeling comfortable speaking Spanish” or of being able to “switch to Spanish without losing composure, and answer questions with the same ease as in English.”

While some respondents either cited equivalence between the abilities of near-native and native speakers (e.g., “has to be able to sustain a ‘native-like ability’ in the domain of literary studies”) or did not include comparisons between the two, others acknowledged that candidates could satisfy the near-native-speaker qualification even though their speech differed from that of natives. One respondent said that “the person does not have to speak with idiomatic insouciance, just correctly,” while another said that to be a near-native speaker means that the person can “speak with a wide-ranging command of vocabulary[; . . .] the speaker’s accent is not native but (s)he pronounces words accurately.”

**Use of the Phrase in Job Announcements**

Of the twenty-one search committee chairs who responded to the question of how their committees came up with the term, eighteen said that it was not discussed. Several respondents explicitly stated that, because the term is used in virtually all job announcements, they assumed that there was consensus within the foreign language profession on its meaning. In any case, they had been using the phrase in every job search for as long as anyone could remember, and any discussion of it would have taken place in the distant past.

**Assessing the Language Proficiency of Job Candidates**

The respondents reported similar assessment methods—conducting part of both the MLA and on-campus
interviews in Spanish—as well as satisfaction with the approach. Only one respondent ventured that “we have made some mistakes.” A small number of respondents indicated that for additional assessment of candidates’ language skills they rely on letters of recommendation or a sample of academic writing or both. Before selecting the group who will be interviewed at the MLA convention, some departments routinely include a telephone interview in Spanish and eliminate applicants who may appear strong on paper but who have unsatisfactory language skills. In all cases, even for those respondents who said they looked for oral proficiency at the Superior level on the ACTFL scale, the assessment was covertly embedded in the interview process.

Discussion

The history of Spanish learning for graduate students about to face the job market is relatively short, if we consider that almost all of them work with higher-level spoken language only from the time they begin graduate school until they finish their doctoral course work. Unless they live abroad for an extended period or have intimate relationships with native speakers, they are hard-pressed to find regular opportunities to hear and speak the kind of language, with the necessary intensity, to continue progressing toward near-native proficiency. It is unlikely that teaching first- and second-year Spanish classes as a graduate teaching assistant will provide this practice. Given the options available to graduate students, can we justify arguing that the cumulative exposure to the Spanish language in graduate classes, lower-division language teaching, and spotty experiences abroad are sufficient for nonnatives to achieve NNP? We suggest, and the questionnaire responses indicate, that NNP as it has been described by our two groups of respondents may well be an impossible dream but an attainable goal. What is being communicated here contrasts directly with the “in spite of your linguistic deficiencies” implication of the search committees’ responses. The graduate students appear to be saying that nonnative speakers bring something unique to the professoriat, particularly to undergraduate teaching, that the native speaker cannot.

The finding from our surveys of a lack of consensus about what NNP means, along with some cavalier approaches to operationalization on the part of search committee respondents (reflected in such comments as “you know it when you hear it” and “since it is so widely used, we assumed that the profession probably agrees on what it means”), is disturbing, to say the least. Perhaps equally disturbing were students’ spirited and emotionally negative reactions to questions about the attention paid to their language proficiency development during their graduate studies. Nearly half of the respondents moaned the lack of time, money, and opportunity for travel abroad; complained that professors might correct grammar or spelling errors on their papers but left them to sink or swim when it came to their oral proficiency; and confessed to fear of ridicule. One respondent reported that some students in her program experienced harassment in class because of limitations in their proficiency.

Both Kramsch and Guadalupe Valdés have written about the privileging in United States foreign language departments of native speakers over nonnatives and the assumption of the superiority of one variety of native speech over others. We should perhaps not be surprised that our students are learning from us to be active combatants in these language wars.

Coupling these findings with graduate students’ insecurity about the sufficiency of their skills and the divergence...
of opinion about what hiring departments expect, it seems we are operating with a mythical objective, a sort of sliding scale that can be adjusted to consider other qualifications (such as teaching ability and personality) when desired. Valdés suggests as much in her fictional case study of job applicant Paul Fletcher (4).

Another issue this study hints at but could not address directly is the degree to which faculty members in Spanish departments and graduate students about to enter those ranks are in fact near-native speakers of Spanish. We conducted extended interviews with three of our sixteen graduate student respondents. Two of the three declined to be interviewed in Spanish and also declined an offer of an official oral proficiency rating for their dossiers. In the linguistic autobiography section of the student questionnaires and in the extended interviews, however, we detected instances where the respondents' self-assessments seemed unrealistic. For example, two of the participants spoke warmly and enthusiastically of their undergraduate experiences. One characterized herself as "completely fluent" after studying in Latin America for a semester as a college sophomore, and the other, who spent her junior year in Spain, declared, "I was fluent, definitely ACTFL Superior at that point." From our experiences working with other highly motivated undergraduates, we know it is unlikely that they were as proficient as they imagined themselves to be.

A last issue worthy of mention is the mismatch between students' ideas of the level of proficiency needed for undergraduate teaching (nine thought NNP was necessary, seven did not; see table 3) and the responses from representatives of undergraduate institutions. We could not detect any differences in the linguistic expectations of job applicants by type of institution. It appears that students whose educational experience has been solely or mostly at large research universities may not be familiar with the ethos of small, private undergraduate institutions, particularly the selective ones that attract well-prepared and academically talented students. This unfamiliarity also speaks a significant mentoring problem, since the great majority of PhDs will find employment in small colleges.

Who is qualified to make accurate and objective judgments of NNP? The literature on perceptions of nonnative speech (see Freed for an overview) shows that natives and nonnatives, particularly those who are untrained in language proficiency assessment, are influenced by markedly different elements of language performance. The fuzziness of both our criteria and our methods of assessment of language proficiency contributes to our graduate students' sense of insecurity over whether they are "near-native enough." Perhaps we should cease pretending that any of us can determine how a job applicant will fare as a teacher of undergraduate and graduate students.

Finally, even if an appropriate assessment measure were widely available, we question whether a portion of an MLA job interview is the appropriate forum for measuring the language proficiency of job candidates. The setting itself determines a narrow selection of topics and an anxiety level that may well lead to a language sample not typical of the candidates' overall, or even academic, language proficiency.

Notes

1 As originally conceived, the ACTFL guidelines included levels Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior, which corresponded to the ILR levels 0, 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The ILR scale allows for rating very proficient speakers 3+, 4, 4+, and 5, while the ACTFL scale labels all such speakers "Superior."

2 Because we relied on these administrators and professors to distribute the questionnaire, we do not know how many questionnaires actually reached the students, nor do we know the exact number of students contacted.

3 The graduate student respondents in our study have come to an insight similar to that of participants in research by Peter Medgyes on the language proficiency and self-image of nonnative teachers of English as a foreign language. Medgyes found that while nonnative teachers reported deep-seated feelings of insecurity about their linguistic deficiencies, the fact that they too were learners of English gave them an equally deep-seated understanding of learning strategies and learner difficulties, knowledge of differences between English and their students' L1, and empathy with their students.

4 Interestingly, the respondents taking a more upbeat tone on this topic were largely those who came from institutions in the West and Southwest and who acknowledged the positive influence of living close to Mexico and the presence of a local Hispanic community. Surely the experience of graduate students in languages other than Spanish is more similar to that of the group of respondents who wished for more support of their linguistic development.

Works Cited


Appendix:

Questionnaire for Graduate Students

Part I: Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions as completely as you can. Use additional sheets as necessary.

A. Background Information

1. What percentage of time do you spend speaking Spanish during a typical weekday? _____%  
   Explain (where, when, with whom, about what):

2. What percentage of time do you spend speaking Spanish during a typical weekend? _____%  
   Explain (where, when, with whom, about what):

3. How proficient do you perceive yourself to be in Spanish overall? (Choose one)  
   a. Native-like  
   b. Near-native  
   c. Fluent  
   d. Can communicate pretty well but I need improvement.  
   e. Don’t have much confidence in my ability to communicate orally in Spanish.

   Use the space below to explain why you selected the descriptor you did, giving illustrative examples if possible:

4. What do you do to maintain your proficiency in spoken Spanish outside the academic environment (if you feel you should do so)? Circle all that are appropriate to your situation.
   a. Listen to TV/radio in Spanish  
   b. Talk with friends in Spanish  
   c. Read aloud in Spanish  
   d. Travel to a Spanish-speaking country at least once a year  
   e. Other ________________

   Use the space below to discuss briefly how the activity/activities you circled help(s) you maintain your oral skills.

B. Opinions

5. Which features of the language are most important for a non-native speaker of Spanish to be considered “near-native” in the language? Please rank these, with 1 being of highest importance:
   a. Excellent pronunciation  
   b. Very few grammatical errors  
   c. No trouble communicating any ideas in the language  
   d. Fluidity in the language (rate, pace, smoothness of speaking)  
   e. Can use colloquial expressions easily and naturally when conversing with native speakers  
   f. Always knows how to express things appropriately the way a native speaker would  
   g. Other ________________

   Use the space below to comment on why the items you numbered 1–3 are the most important.

6. Do you think one needs to be a “near-native speaker of Spanish,” according to the features you have listed as most important in #5, to teach at the undergraduate level?
   Yes No

   At the graduate level?
   Yes No

   Please explain/comment on your response:

7. Describe any kinds of unofficial policies of Spanish language use in your department. For example, are native speakers always addressed in Spanish? In what language are graduate courses conducted? What language do you use to speak with your professors outside of class? Do non-native speakers speak Spanish or English with each other? Does this change according to topic or the context for the conversation? Does this change when a native speaker is part of the conversation group? Please write about the situation in your department; do not restrict your comments to the topics listed here.

8. What attention is given to the language proficiency of the graduate students in your program? Please describe and
comment on how, in your opinion, your own linguistic skills have changed since you began your doctoral program (or other graduate work).

9. Looking around at your fellow graduate students of Spanish in your department, think of three nonnative speakers who you believe can be characterized as having near-native proficiency. Describe these individuals briefly, including such factors as Hispanic/non-Hispanic heritage, approximate years spent studying or working abroad, marriage to a native Spanish speaker, characteristics of the person's language, etc.
   Person 1: 
   Person 2: 
   Person 3: 

10. Many colleges and universities that advertise openings in Spanish ask for a “native or near-native speaker.” Describe the language skills of the kind of person you think they are advertising for (i.e., give your definition of a “near-native speaker”).

11. Assuming that your description matches what the departments want, is this a reasonable job requirement, in your opinion? Please explain your response.

12. Is “near-native proficiency” as you have described it in #10 a requirement that a nonnative graduate student can achieve before entering the job market?
   Yes No
   Please explain your response:

13. [Respond to #13 only if your responded NO to #12.] Is “near-native proficiency” a level of competence that an Assistant Professor of Spanish should attain after a period of time (e.g., five years) on the job?
   Yes No
   Please explain your response:

14. What was your history of learning Spanish in the US and abroad? Of special interest to us are factors such as (a) any and all specific language-learning experiences, (b) the people from whom you learned and the context in which the learning took place (e.g., study-abroad experience, living with a Spanish-speaking family, having an intimate relationship with a native Spanish speaker, work), and (c) any notable increases in Spanish language skills.
   Period 1: Early childhood to high school
   Period 2: High school years
   Period 3: Undergraduate college years
   Period 4: Postundergraduate (from college graduation to the present)

Demographic information
Your age: 
Your gender: 

Please supply the following information if you check one of the items below, so that we can be in touch with you.
   I would be willing to supply clarification, if needed, on details of my questionnaire and/or autobiography.
   I would like to volunteer for an extended personal interview.
   I would like to receive a copy of your study.

Name: ____________________________
Postal address: ________________________
Phone (daytime: what days and times?): ___________
E-mail address: ________________________

Part II. Linguistic Autobiography

Personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience. In this sense, narrative and self are inseparable. Self is here broadly understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of “being-in-the-world,” including a sense of one’s past and future. We come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others (Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capps. “Narrating the Self.” Annual Review of Anthropology 25 [1996]: 19–43).

Please tell us the story of your “relationship” to the Spanish language in the form of an autobiography. Please write freely (no need to edit, spell-check, etc.), referring to your questionnaire responses when necessary (rather than repeat factual information), and reflect on the significance of linguistic events in your life rather than simply record them.

¡Mil gracias por su colaboración! Please mail the questionnaire and autobiography to [identifying information]. Please let her know if you would like to be reimbursed for postage.
As a non-native speaker who got a job and her COE for the Humanities visa approved, here's some background information about myself. I was born in Malaysia, spent 17 years of my school life in a bilingual medium school. English is my first language because I grew up speaking it since I knew how to speak, but people wouldn't consider me a native speaker because of my citizenship. It sucks, but it's true. I went to Australia after high school to do my diploma and then degree in education there. If you have spent time studying in a native English speaking country, have teaching experience and/or is a qualified teacher, you'll be fine. I even had a Skype interview with the schools and I obviously don't look "Caucasian or European" because of my Chinese lineage. Search & apply for English speaking jobs with Multilingual Vacancies. We specialise in a large variety of English language jobs across Europe. Whether you are looking for the latest English speaking vacancy for or have a job requiring English to fill, Multilingual Vacancies is here for you. Job Summary Here is a German speaking Customer Service job for a fresh and vibrant German speaker who also has a good level of English in Lisbon, Por Careertrotter. 14 hours ago View more. Save job. Share. Near-native and outgoing German speakers wanted for a fast growing and exciting customer support team here in Cork. Your enthusiasm and customer focused attitude is what we're looking for here along with excellent communication skills. Careertrotter. 16 hours ago View more.