



Native Perceptions of Non-native Spanish: Which Features Make Great Speakers?



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INTRODUCTION

It can be challenging for students learning in a classroom setting to reach a high level of proficiency in a second or foreign language, most especially in regard to the development of speaking skills. Consequently, knowing how native speakers evaluate non-native Spanish could provide helpful information for both language teachers and students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do native Spaniards in Spain and native and non-native Spanish teachers in the United States* evaluate non-native spoken Spanish?
- What characteristics of non-native speech do they value most highly: fluency, an accurate accent, a natural sounding rate of speech?

*Teacher data collection is ongoing

DATA COLLECTION

Participants: 75 native Spaniards

Procedure:

- Background questionnaire
- Listen to 6 speech samples of non-native Spanish and rate them according to 4 criteria:
 - Velocity
 - Intonation
 - Fluency
 - Pronunciation
- Explain their ratings

RESULTS

Note: evaluation scores on a scale of 1-5 as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
Sounds non-native				Sounds native

Overall Speaker Rankings			
Rank	Speaker	Overall Ranking Scores	Overall Averages for Criteria
1	A	4.28	4.3
2	D	3.74	3.73
3	E	3.43	3.35
4	C	3.18	3.2
5	F	2.93	2.94
6	B	2.83	2.76

Each speaker had 75 responses (rankings) for each criteria, which were averaged. Then each speaker was ranked amongst each other by criteria in the table below:

Overall Speaker Rankings by Criteria						
Criteria	A	B	C	D	E	F
Velocity	1	6	5	3	2	4
Fluency	1	6	4	2	3	5
Intonation	1	5	3	2	4	6
Pronunciation	1	6	3	2	4	5
Overall	1	6	4	2	3	5

*Highlighted columns denote speakers with most informative results

EXAMPLES

Speaker	Sample Explanations of Ratings
A	“Lleva muchos años hablando español, es casi native, se entiende muy bien”. <i>She’s spent many years speaking Spanish, she’s almost native, can be well understood.</i>
B	“Acento muy extranjero”. “Está en una primera etapa del aprendizaje del español.” <i>A very foreign accent. They are in the first stages of learning Spanish.</i>
C	“La pronunciación es buena pero habla muy despacio y el discurso no suena natural”. <i>The pronunciation is good, but they speak very slow and their speech doesn’t sound natural.</i>
D	“No sabría decir si es un hablante nativo o si ha estudiado español en Argentina o Uruguay.” “Parece demasiado exagerado”. <i>I don’t know if they’re a native speaker or if they’ve studied Spanish in Argentina or Uruguay. It seems too exaggerated.</i>
E	“Se come letras al ir rápido”. “Parece un robot. Falta emoción para expresarse”. <i>They eat their words when speaking fast. They seem like a robot. They lack emotion to express themselves.</i>
F	“Parece que duda en lo que dice” “La entonación es algo monótona y también falla un poco la pronunciación”. <i>It seems like they doubt what they’re saying. The intonation is kind of monotonous and the pronunciation is a little off.</i>

OBSERVATIONS

The data show that for the criteria evaluated:

- Fluency rankings most closely reflect overall speaker rankings, followed by pronunciation rankings.
- The relationship between intonation and velocity rankings and overall rankings are less clear
- Talking too fast is better than talking too slow, unless your speed compromises the other categories.



- “Just keep talking!”: don’t worry so much about grammatical accuracy that you neglect fluency
- Don’t ignore pronunciation: native speakers value a native-like accent
- Watch your speed: talking fast doesn’t make up for poor pronunciation, but talking too slow loses your listener

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