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Native Language Influence in Learners' Assessment of English Focus

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ABSTRACT

Accentual focus is a frequent linguistic device in English which rnay also be used in Spanish but less widely and less frequently. Given this disparity, it was expected that native language influence would rnanifest itself in FL leamers' focus assessrnents as cornpared to native English speakers. Other factors were also expected to account of listener perceptions, such as task type and linguistic cornpetence. Two focus dornains were used to test hypotheses: utterance initial and utterance rnedial focus. Focus identification was tested using two tasks which differed in their cognitive dernands: rnultiple choice and open questions. Acceptability was estirnated by asking listeners to rate utterances on a five point scale. English NL listeners displayed better focus identification rates as cornpared to FL learners. This result rnay be understood both as an effect of native cornpetence advantage and also as a reflection of native language influence. Both listener groups found utterance initial focus easier to identify and considered it to be more acceptable than medial focus. Both groups showed worse results in the open test, which is interpreted as a consequence ofthis task being more dernanding on listeners' explicit knowledge. These trends were rnuch more pronounced arnongst FL leamers. It is suggested that the potential ambiguity of English rnedial focus is partly responsible for the bias against it. Additionally, Spanish listeners results show the their NL influence in this bias as well as in the good results for initial focus and acceptability estirnations.

KEYWORDS: accent, focus, native language influence, foreign leamers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The present study is intended to contribute to the knowledge of intonation acquisition, which has received less attention than segmental acquisition within second language research, by examining foreign language perception of accentual focus. The term focus is used in a broad sense, referring to that which the speaker draws attention to (Maidment 1990). This study will concentrate on intonation as a device to highlight new information; more specifically on pitch accents as focus signallers.

Accentual prominences are often employed to signal focus domains, particularly in languages such as English, which have fixed word order (Cruttenden 1997). This accentual function has been the object of a considerable body of research for English so that its characteristics are quite satisfactorily described (Gussenhoven 1984, Bolinger 1989, Taglicht 1982, Tench 1996 to mention but a few). One of these characteristics is that English accentual focus may sometimes be ambiguous as to its scope (Halliday 1976). For instance, accent placement on the last lexical item[1] of an intonation unit may signal "all-new" information (Cruttenden 1997), that is to say, all the material in the intonation unit is presented as new information, but it may also be interpreted as narrow focus on the accented item itself or on its immediate constituent. There are other syntactic and morphological mechanisms by which information may be highlighted such as elision, use of pro-forms, cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences, etc.

Traditionally, Spanish was thought to signal information focus by these other mechanisms since it is a language with free word order whereas the nucleus or main accent of the sentence was considered to be unmovable (for example, Navarro Tomás 1948). Sosa (1991, 1999) on the other hand, though agreeing with this view of the nucleus ("tonema" in traditional Spanish intonational studies), presents some additional intonational focusing devices for the varieties of Hispano-American Spanish he analyzes. According to Sosa, focus may be achieved by introducing an intonation group break (i.e., "tonality" in Halliday's terms) following a rise, as in the following example (Sosa 1991:134), or by means of a rise without group breaks (H*+H)

Se	le van ta ron	a	me dia **no**	che
	I		I	
	H* H%		L+H* L%	

These two possibilities would amount to different degrees of focusing strength. In both cases, the focused element would be that where the rise is implemented. In the above example, the verb "levantaron".

In our opinion there is sufficient evidence to believe that accentual focus realized with falling prominences (i.e., quite similar to the realization in English) is also a possibility in

Spanish (Ortiz Lira 1994, García Lecumberri 1995, García Lecumberri et al. 1997)[2]. Whether this focal pitch accent is considered to be the nucleus of the group depends on (i) the definition of nucleus and (ii) the analysis of post-foca1 material[3].

Accordingly, we cannot consider accentual focus to be an unknown mechanism for Spanish language leamers, although it may be less frequently used and in fewer structures than it is in English. For instance, it was found (García Lecumberri 1995) that sentence initial focus in Spanish is easily produced and identified by native speakers whereas sentence medial focus is far less common[4].

It is well known that the NL can have considerable influence on the acquisition of a FL or L2. However, after a period when pure transfer was seen as the only or the most relevant factor, in recent years its relative weight in second language acquisition has been strongly contended. Nevertheless, pronunciation is often seen as a case apart: most authors believe that phonetic/phonological mistakes are frequently due to first language (L1) influences, even more so than errors at other levels (Altemberg & Vago 1983; Bohn 1995; Cenoz & García 1999; Eckman 1981; Ellis 1994; Flege 1992; Flege & Bohn 1989; García & Cenoz 1997; Ioup 1984; Major 1994; Scholes 1986; Wode 1980). In this sense, sound system differences between the NL and the target language pose various degrees of difficulty to leamers which may be manifested as errors. This is not to say that language differences lead to errors, but that they may do so. Since the NL may cause the use of other strategies instead of or besides straightforward sound transfer, such as borrowing or avoidance (Ellis 1994) I prefer the term ***influence*** rather than ***transfer*** as Kellerman & Sharwood-Smith (1986) propose.

Given that English and Spanish differ in the frequency and acceptability of accentual focus as has been mentioned, it was our aim in the study described here to examine the presence and/or extent of NL influence on learners' perception and assessment of English focus. More specifically, we wanted to investigate whether native language (NL) responses for Spanish were replicated by Spanish speakers when confronted with English accentual focus, that is to say, whether their NL bias in favour of sentence initial focus over sentence medial focus would be carried over to their assessment of English focus and how this FL discrimination would compare to that by native English speakers[5].

Additionally, since accentual focus is more common a mechanism in English than it is in Spanish, we were interested in finding out if NL influence would also be manifest in acceptability judgments. For this, English accentual focus acceptability ratings by Foreign Language (FL) leamers would be compared to those by native English speakers.

There are undoubtedly many other factors which can account for learners' pronunciation errors, such as those related to an individual's characteristics, for instance aural/oral abilities (Cummins 1983, Leather & James 1991), age of acquisition/learning (Singleton 1995), motivation (Guiora & Schonberger 1990), leaming strategies (Lengyel 1995), level of FL attained (Bongaerst et al. 1995), as well as developmental errors (Major 1987, 1999) and degree of NL maintenance/use (Major 1990). However, some of these factors fall outside the scope of

the present study since, as shall be seen below, our FL listeners were a homogeneous group as to FL level and age, and we had limited access to data about their individual personal abilities/skills.

In sum, the questions that this research meant to address were:

i) Do Spanish FL leamers of English show the *influence* of their native identification pattems in discriminating English accentual focus?

ii) Is *native competence* evident as a favouring factor for the discrimination of English accentual focus?

iii) Does a task's degree of difficulty have different consequences for native speakers vs. FL leamers' perceptions?

iv) Does the acceptability of a NL structure influence the perceived acceptability of a similar stnicture in a FL?

v) Are there evidences of any other factors at work in FL leamers' results?

II. MATERIALS

Two different perception tests were designed with the aim of extracting listeners' assessments of accentual focus in English. These tests were given to all listeners (English native and FL listeners): Test 1 was an information structure test. Test 2 was a acceptability test (see sections 3 and 4 below).

II.1. Stimuli

The input consisted of the utterances of an R.P.[6] English speaker (for more details see Garcia Lecumberri 1995). The number of utterances set for listeners to evaluate consisted of twelve target sentences (see appendix) with eighteen distractors interspersed. Six ofthe target sentences had been realized by the speaker with utterance initial accentual focus (on the sentence subject) and six with utterance medial accentual focus (on the verb). All sentences were simple declaratives to avoid syntactic focus markings. Focused constituents only contained one potential accent to prevent arnbiguities of scope within a constituent.

Listeners were presented with 30 sentences within which the two types that were the object of study, utterance initial or medial focus, were randomly distributed. They were allowed to listen to utterances more than once.

11.2. Listeners

Forty subjects took part in the tests: twenty native speakers o English and twenty native speakers of Spanish. There were twenty native English listeners who were all speakers of a fairly standard

variety of southern British English. None of them were linguists and they had no phonetic training. None of them were fluent in any language other than English. They had at least a secondary school education or its equivalent.

Spanish listeners were selected from the group of second year English Philology at the UPV/EHU. They were asked to complete a questionnaire giving details about themselves (birth place and date, where they lived, languages spoken and what level, stays abroad, English exam results etc.). The answers given to these questions were used to selecta homogeneous group of twenty speakers: They were all native Spanish speakers with a fairly similar level of English (between intermediate and upper intermediate). Most of them had never lived in an English speaking country or had only spent a few weeks there and did not show significantly different results in their English exams from other students[7] and were therefore included in the sample. All listeners had studied English Phonetics but tests were done before they studied English intonation so that their performance in the test would reflect acquisition of intonation from exposure rather than from systematic training.

III. FOCUS IDENTIFICATION TESTS

There were two types of focus identification test. One of them was a multiple choice test, the other was an open test. They will be described in tum.

111.1. Materials

Out of the forty listeners, twenty took the multiple choice test: ten English native speakers and ten Spanish FL English leamers selected at random within their linguistic group.

Listeners were told that an exchange between two people -one asking questions and the other one answering them- had been edited so that they would only hear the answers. They had to find the question which corresponded to each of the answers from amongst the four possibilities that were offered. They were encouraged to pay attention to the "way" sentences were said and not only to their lexical meaning.

The test presented four potential choices for each utterance, of which only one was right. Choices were wh-questions, each refered to a different constituent and focus scope for each utterance: subject, verb, complement, predicate, subject plus verb or an all-new question. For target sentences with sentence initial focus, the right multiple choice question would refer to the subject of the sentence. For target sentences with sentence medial focus the right choice would refer to the verb ofthe sentence. The structure ofthe test can be best appreciated in the following example of an utterance realized with sentence medial focus (option 'c' is the right one):

Stimulus: His friend BORrowed the money

Options:

a-Who borrowed the money?
b-What did his friend borrow?
c-What did his friend do about the money?
d-What happened with the money?

Twenty other listeners (ten English speakers and ten Spanish FL English leamers) were asked to do an open test. Instead of being given four choices, listeners were asked to make up a plausible question for each stimulus. For this, a written version of all sentences was presented with a gap provided for the listeners to write their question undemeath each utterance.

It was thought that the two tests would make unequal demands on the participants linguistic knowledge: the multiple choice test would be more apt to provoke intuitive answers whereas the open test required a more detailed analysis of the stimulus utterance and therefore required for a more explicit manifestation of participants' knowledge.

111.2. Analysis and Results

The number of right and wrong judgements was calculated. Questions provided in the open test were considered to be right as long as they referred to the focus signalled in each case. If an answer involved elements outside the focus domain, it was classified as wrong even if focused material was also included.

Percentages of right and wrong listeners' identifications were calculated. Comparative statistics between the two listener groups were done applying paired two tailed t-tests.'

Tables 1 and 2 show intra-group perception comparisons for the two types of focus in the two different types of test. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show comparison between the two listener groups.

***Table 1*: English listeners' English focus perceptions in different conditions.**
(NLE= Native Language English)

Condition	NLE Initial	NLE Medial	M.C. NLE Initial	Open NLE Initial	M.C. NLE Medial	Open NLE Medial
Number of responses	120	120	60	60	60	60
Number of correct responses	114	93	60	54	49	44
Percentage of correct responses	95.00%	77.50%	100.00%	90.00%	81.67%	73.33%
t	4.16		2.56		1.22	
probability	0.0001		0.013		0.23	

Table 2: Spanish listeners' English focus perceptions in different conditions. *(FLE= Foreign Language English)*						
Condition	**FLE Initial**	**FLE Medial**	**M.C. FLE Initial**	**Open FLE Initial**	**M.C. FLE Medial**	**Open FLE Medial**
Number of responses	120	120	60	60	60	60
Number of correct responses	84	43	47	37	34	9
Percentage of correct responses	70.00%	35.83%	78.33%	61.67%	56.67%	15.00%
t	6.23		1.93		5.46	
probability	0.0001		0.058		0.0001	

Table 3: English versus Spanish listeners' perceptions for English initial and medial focus. *(NLE= Native Language English; FLE= Foreign Language English)*				
Condition	**NLE Initial**	**FLE Initial**	**NLE Medial**	**FLE Medial**
Number of responses	120	120	120	120
Number of correct responses	114	84	93	43
Percentage of correct responses	95.00%	70.00%	77.50%	35.83%
t	5.41		7.76	
probability	0.0001		0.0001	

Table 4: English versus Spanish listeners' perceptions for English initial and medial focus in multiple choice tests. *(NLE= Native Language English; FLE= Foreign Language English)*				
Condition	**M.C. NLE Initial**	**M.C. FLE Initial**	**M.C. NLE Medial**	**M.C. FLE Medial**
Number of responses	60	60	60	60
Number of correct responses	60	47	49	34
Percentage of correct responses	100.00%	78.33%	81.67%	56.67%
t	4.04		3.08	
probability	0.0002		0.003	

Table 5: English versus Spanish listeners' perceptions for English initial and medial focus in open tests. *(NLE= Native Language English; FLE= Foreign Language English)*				
Condition	**Open NLE Initial**	**Open FLE Initial**	**Open NLE Medial**	**Open FLE Medial**
Number of responses	60	60	60	60
Number of correct responses	54	37	44	9
Percentage of correct responses	90.00%	61.67%	73.33%	15.00%
t	3.75		9.09	
probability	0.0004		0.0001	

According to the data in the above tables, we can see that the difference between English and Spanish listeners is statistically significant for all of the variables and conditions: overall initial focus perception, overall medial focus perception, initial and medial focus perceptions in the multiple choice test and in the open test. The smallest difference between the two groups of listeners corresponds to medial focus in the multiple choice test. On the other hand, the biggest difference that can be observed between the two groups of listeners is that for medial focus perceptions in the open test. As for intra-group identification rates, the results show that utterance initial focus is perceived significantly more accurately than utterance medial focus for both English and Spanish listeners. The two listener groups also display better perception rates in the multiple choice test for both focus types. In the case of Spanish speakers, the difference between the two tests is always statistically significant whereas for English speakers differences are less pronounced and only statistically significant in the case of utterance initial focus.

III.3. Discussion

The results obtained in this study show that for the two listeners groups, medial focus is more difficult to discern than focus in initial position.

At first glance the fact that English native speakers display any difficulty may be puzzling, since accentual focus is a very frequent linguistic device which they must be very familiar with. However, English focus displays some features which may give rise to a certain amount of potential ambiguity in its interpretation. A focal accent may be ambiguous in its leftward scope when it is placed in the unmarked position, that is, on the last lexical word of the intonation group (Halliday 1976). For Cruttenden (1997) deaccenting of the final lexical item with consequent leftward displacement of the accent to a previous word may also render focal interpretations ambiguous as to their leftward scope. Thus, for instance, a sentence such as (4a) with focus on "admires" may be an answer to either (4b) or (4c):

(4a) Diane adMIres his music
(4b) What does Diane think of his music?
(4c) What do his friends think of his music?

On the other hand, an initial focal accent is not ambiguous since there are no constituents to its left.

The group of English listeners did not experience problems identifying utterance initial focus, as the results from our tests indicate: they obtained 100% right identifications in the multiple choice task and 90% in the open test. We believe this latter lower result is due to the higher intrinsic difficulty of the open task as compared to the multiple choice one (see below).

The group of English FL learners, as has been pointed out, displayed significantly worse identification rates than the English NL listener group for all conditions. Their identification of

utterance initial focus is considerably better than that of utterance medial focus, as was also the case with NL listeners, but the difference between the two focus types is more pronounced in the FL group. Leamers show quite good global identifications rates (70%) for utterance initial focus, which, again as in the NL group, are better in the multiple choice test.

We can offer two possible explanations for the superior behaviour of utterance initial focus. On the one hand, as has already been pointed out, the domain of English utterance initial focus is not ambiguous, so that there is less potential for confusions. On the other hand, as was mentioned in the introduction, previous studies (García Lecumberri 1995, et al 1997) show that in Spanish, utterance initial focus is much more frequent than utterance medial focus and more easily perceptible. Therefore, positive influence of the learners NL together with the lack of ambiguity of the Target Language (TL) structure (utterance initial focus) account for the good results obtained by learners in our identification tasks.

As far as utterance medial focus is concemed, it is worth noting the very low correct identification rate (15%) obtained by FL listeners for medial focus in the open test. In this case too, the two former explanations offered for the superior behaviour of utterance initial focus amongst FL leamers still hold: medial focus is more problematic for Spanish leamers of English because of (i) its intrinsic ambiguity potential in the TL and (ii) because in the learners NL medial focus is also more rare and difficult to perceive. It may be mentioned that Spanish medial focus also presents a considerable amount of ambiguity -as in English- but in Spanish ambiguity rests in the rightward scope of the focal accent (García Lecumberri & Cabrera 1999, Estebas 2000). Additionally, the intrinsic difficulty of the open test constitutes a third possible factor in the results obtained.

Let us now examine in some more detail the question of task difficulty. It has been pointed out that the type of task used as research instrument may be a source of considerable variability (Ellis 1994, Major 1999). Our results show that for both English NL and FL listeners, the open test was more demanding. In the case of English NL listeners, this higher degree of difficulty constituted no great obstacle given their native competence. On the other hand, students' English knowledge was much more severely tested in the open test since it was a task that involved explicit knowledge much more intensely than the multiple choice test (Bialystock 1990, 1991). As was pointed out above, FL participants in this study had not been instructed on English prosody in general, nor in particular on accentual focusing. The multiple choice test offered ready solutions, so that it made small demands on the learner's explicit knowledge of this structure, but the open test was a more cognitively demanding task, in which the written production of adequate context was required. This made subjects analyze the structure more closely and thus created more difficulties for FL listeners by making stronger explicit knowledge necessary for a structure which the leamers had not leamt through explicit instruction. Native English listeners were able to access their native competence in order to answer the task demands. Leamers of English had to draw on the knowledge of a pattem that they have acquired only implicitly and partially.

IV. FOCUS ACCEPTABILITY TEST

This test was designed to investigate (i) how acceptable English NL and FL listeners considered accentual focus in English, (ii) whether their estimations corresponded to their perceptibility of said structures and (iii) whether FL listeners would show influence from their NL (Spanish) in their acceptability judgements since, as was seen in a previous study (García Lecumberri 1995), Spanish medial focus is considered by native speakers to be significantly less natural than utterance initial focus[9]. The same forty listeners took part in this test.

IV.1. Materials

It was felt that the acceptability of an utterance's intonation could only be properly estimated if seen in context. Therefore a written transcript of the stimuli utterances was provided which included their respective trigger questions so that listeners were fully aware that the utterances they were assessing had a missing context. The same recorded utterances used for the other tests were played again as stimuli for the present one.

Listeners were asked to rate the acceptability of utterances on a scale of 0 to 4[10]. Listeners were strongly encouraged to judge the appropriateness of the *way* each sentence was uttered taking into account the question that had triggered it, without regarding lexical or syntactic considerations.

IV.2. Analysis and Results

Scores given by listeners were tabulated. Mean scores and standard deviations were obtained for each listener group and condition. Comparison between listener groups was done applying paired two tailed *t*-tests. Results are displayed in tables 6 and 7.

***Table 6*: English vs. Spanish listeners' acceptability estimations for initial and medial focus.**
(NLE= Native Language English; FLE= Foreign Language English)

Condition	NLE All	FLE All	NLE Initial	FLE Initial	NLE Medial	FLE Medial
Number of responses	240	240	120	120	120	120
Mean response	3.61	3.34	3.63	3.50	3.58	3.18
Standard Deviation	0.71	0.92	0.72	0.87	0.69	0.94
t	3.46		1.24		3.66	
probability	0.0006		0.22		0.0004	

Table 7*: English and Spanish listeners' intra-group acceptability comparisons for initial vs. medial focus. *(NLE= Native Language English; FLE= Foreign Language English)				
Condition	**NLE Initial**	**NLE Medial**	**FLE Initial**	**FLE Medial**
Number of responses	120	120	120	120
Mean response	3.63	3.58	3.50	3.18
Standard Deviation	0.72	0.69	0.87	0.94
t	0.80		2.73	
probability	0.43		0.007	

As can be seen in table 6, the overall acceptability ratings given by the two listener groups differ significantly. However, this difference rests mainly on ratings for medial focus for which Spanish listeners' estimations are significantly lower than English listeners'. On the other hand, there is no significant difference for initial focus ratings although English listeners still rate it as more acceptable. Table 7 shows that English NL listeners are more homogeneous in their ratings for the two types of focus without significant differences, whereas FL listeners display significantly lower ratings for utterance medial focus than for initial focus.

IV.4. Discussion

As was mentioned above, the two focus domains investigated in this paper are possible in Spanish, therefore it was to be expected that both English NL and FL listeners would assign considerably high acceptability ratings. However, since Spanish often resorts to word order for focusing purposes and thus accentual focus is less frequent than in English, we expected accentual focus to be considered less acceptable by FL listeners.

As can be seen in table 6 above, these expectations were confirmed: there is a significant difference between acceptability ratings given by English NL vs. FL speakers for focused sentences as a whole, since English listeners consider accentual focus more acceptable than Spanish listeners do. This might seem an obvious result in that English listeners were rating not only their own language, but a speaker with an accent not too dissimilar to their own. However, it could also be argued that FL listeners could have been expected to be less discriminating in a foreign language and therefore, more likely to consider any native-sounding speech acceptable.

However if we look at the differentiated scores for utterance initial focus and for medial focus we can see that FL speakers are not being undiscriminating. Spanish listeners consider English initial focus more acceptable than medial focus, which corresponds to the bias towards English utterance initial focus in both perception tests above and also to the bias in their native language, as was found in previous studies on Spanish focus (García Lecumberri 1995). Accordingly, Spanish NL acceptability patterns are reflected in our listeners' assessment of English focus.

English NL listeners also rate utterance initial focus slightly more acceptable. This bias is correlated to their focus discrimination one, since as we saw, they were also more likely to identify utterance initial focus correctly. As was mentioned this preference may be due to the

absence of domain arnbiguity for utterance initial focus in English.

Even though lower rated, medial focus was still considered by both native and non native speakers to be within the categories "quite possible" and "totally possible". The difference between the two groups of listeners reaches significance levels in the lower ratings Spanish listeners assign medial focus which, as has been mentioned, may be a reflection of their NL. Nevertheless, Spanish listeners rated utterance medial focus very high if we take into account their focus discrimination results for this structure, particularly in the open test (see 3.3. above). Therefore it is likely that their level of tolerance is quite high to English sounding speech, without this amounting to making them undiscriminating.

V. CONCLUSIONS

English FL leamers were consistently less accurate identifying English focus than English NL listeners, which confirmed our expectations: native competence gave and advantage to English NL listeners.

Native competence proved to be particularly advantageous when listeners had to contend with more demanding tasks. Open identification tests were found to be much more challenging than multiple choice tests, and as was expected, both listener groups showed variability in their focus discrimination results as a function of task intrinsic difficulty. But more interestingly, it was seen that differences between the two listener groups reached the largest proportions in the more demanding open test. It is suggested that the open task exerts more demands on explicit knowledge, which neither of the two listener groups are presumed to possess for the structures investigated here since there had been no training nor familiarization with the structures under study. Consequently, listeners had to resort to their implicit knowledge of accentual focus, which is naturally greater in the case of native speakers than in language learners, thus the greater effect of task variability in the FL listener group.

Previous research has shown that accentual focus in Spanish is less frequent and rated less acceptable than it is in English. Therefore the lower identification rates displayed by FL learners as compared to NL listeners in the present study may be seen to be at least partly due to the influence of their own NL. Nevertheless, NL influence in the present study can also be seen to have had positive effects on FL listener's perceptions: the high levels of utterance initial focus identification and the high acceptability scores may be partly due to the fact that accentual focus is not alien to Spanish listeners.

When comparing the perception results obtained for the two types of focus studied separately, we found that both listener groups showed better discrimination and higher acceptability estimations for focus in utterance initial position than for medial focus. This bias in the case of English NL speakers may be due to the fact that focus in medial position may be ambiguous as to its scope whereas focus in initial position does not show this type of ambiguity.

The Spanish listeners' bias towards focus in utterance initial position was much more marked particularly as far as discrimination was concerned. One of the reasons why FL listeners manifested this great bias may be the same one proposed for English listeners' results, i.e., the different ambiguity potential of the two structures. Additionally, accentual focus in medial position is a mechanism used in Spanish too but less frequently than in initial position and than it is in English. Therefore, as was mentioned, English utterance initial focus is likely to be the object of greater positive influence from the leamers' NL than medial focus.

Focus identification and focus acceptability results followed similar trends in each of the listener groups and for each focus domain. Therefore, there was consistency between listeners' discrimination and acceptability assessments. However FL leamers showed proportionally more tolerance than perceptual accuracy in their results.

English NL listeners rated both types of focus as more acceptable than FL listeners did. Still, FL listeners consider English focus quite acceptable and, in the case of initial focus, they do not differ significantly in their ratings from the NL group. It is open to debate whether FL listeners considered these accentual focus structures quite acceptable because of their knowledge of English or whether their acceptability ratings refered to and/or were caused by the fact that the native English-sounding voice of the stimuli prejudiced them in increasing their tolerance level. Nevertheless, the fact that initial focus obtained higher ratings shows a discriminating assessment which may be explained in terms of NL influence as well as in the above mentioned knowledge of the two English focus domains.

Our results confirm the importance of NL influence on the acquisition of the phonetic/phonological component of a FL. In particular, this study shows that NL influence is also manifest at the suprasegmental level. On the other hand, findings lead us to believe that other factors such as task cognitive demands, inherent linguistic characteristics of the target structure, knowledge of these and a heightened levels of tolerance towards TL speech are also responsible for the perceptions and assessment of FL leamers. There are other factors, including personal characteristics and differing TL levels which probably have influence on FL as well as NL listener perceptions of accentual focus but further research is necessary to ascertain the weight of these and other variables.

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NOTES:

1. Except for some constructions such as intransitive sentences of the type "the kettle is boiling" in which neutral sentence accentuation falls on the subject or final adverbials and vocatives which are deaccented despite being the last lexical items (Cruttenden 1990).

2. Equally, there are other languages withnon-fixed word order which alsoadmit accentual focusing (forexample Italian, French. Portuguese and Catalan, see Estebas 2000 for a discussion).

3. In our opinion, Spanish post-focal material is often deaccented and therefore a classic view of nucleus as the last accent in the group would classify such an early focal accent as nuclear (see Garcia Lecumberri 1995). However, in quite similar Catalan contours, Estebas (2000) proposes an analysis of post-focal material as a reduced underlying accent which may or not surface.

4. Sentence initial focus obtained 91.60% correct identifications and a mean naturalness rating of 3.43 (on a scale of 0 to 4) whereas sentence medial focus got 50.19% correct identifications and its mean naturalness rating was 3.24 (see op. cit. p. 71 and 82). The difference between initial and medial focus was statistically significant both as far as percentage ofcorrect perception and naturalness rates were concerned. As far as production is concerned, in scripted tests, sentence initial focus had 85.75% correct productions versus 57.97% for medial focus, the difference beingstatistically significant too (op. cit. p. 207).

5. This particular point was also analyzed using partly the same data used in Garcia Lecumberri (2000). However, in the present paper the statistical analyses are different as is the discussion presented.

6. R.P. stands for "Received Pronunciation" and it refers to the accent spoken by upper social classes in Britain. It is supposed to be devoid of regional characteristics and therefore often taken as the standard British accent, although it shares many features with south (non western) accents. Other well known terms used for this variety are "BBC English" and "Queen's English" (Trask 1996).

7. Two ofthem had a "B" in their English exam but so had nine other listeners. If second year half-term results are taken into account, none of these three students got one of the three "A" results recorded.

8. The data for English native perceptions were used in García Lecumberri (1995) but statistic results are different since other tests were applied.

9. It was seen that both English and Spanish listeners considered intonational focus quite natural in their respective NLs. However, English speakers always showed significantly higher naturalness scores. Additionally, the ratings given for utterance initial focus were always higher than those for utterance medial focus, but the difference was only significant amongst the Spanish group (Garcia Lecumberri 1995).

10. A description of each of the scores was also provided as follows: zero = "impossible in English", 1 = "hardly possible", 2 = "possible", 3 = "quite possible" and 4 = "totally possible".

APPENDIX : Target utterances and trigger questions

Initial Focus Sentences

1. Isabel paid the waiter / Who paid the waiter?
2. Andy came for a meal / Who carne for a meal?
3. I ordered those dishes / Who ordered those dishes?
4. My neighbour gave a reward / Who gave a reward?
5. Miranda studies languages / Who studies languages?
6. The boy plays the violin / Who plays the violin?

Medial Focus Sentences

7. Gary manages their restaurant / What does Gary do in their restaurant?
8. His friend borrowed the money / What did his friend do about the money?
9. My brother loves animals / How does your brother feel about animals?
10. Diane admires his music / What does Diane think of his music?
11. The war divided the region / What did the war do to the region?
12. David removed his belongings / What did David do with his belongings?

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