

The Criteria for Determining “The Native Russian Speaker’s Level” in the Language Testing System for Migrants

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Abstract

The term “native speaker” is now widely used in the world testing practice. It is declared as a particular starting point in the evaluation of language proficiency level in the most widely spread testing systems (TRFL, OPI, SOLOM, STAMP, etc). At the same time, researchers mention ambiguity, vagueness and uncertainty of this concept. There is neither a generally accepted definition, nor reliable methodically grounded criteria for determining this level. It is not clear whether the status of a native speaker is a person’s “biographical” or “competence-based” characteristic. There are no studies devoted to the identification, research and systemization of criteria for determining a “native speaker’s” level of the Russian language proficiency. At the same time, the solution of these problems in the Russian testing practice is both scientifically and practically important. The state system of standards for Russian as a foreign language remains incomplete due to the lack of linguo-didactic description of mastering the Russian language at level 4, which is equivalent to a native speaker of Russian, the bearer of the Russian language culture. There is no reliable basis for assigning the status of a native speaker to people who are entitled to a fast track procedure for obtaining the Russian citizenship according to the Russian legislation. The study of the real discursive activity of native and non-native speakers of Russian and the comparative analysis of their communicative competence, demonstrated by the groups of test takers who were involved in the experiment, allowed the authors to identify the distinctive features of the highest level of the Russian language proficiency and to propose a system of criteria for determining it.

Keywords: A Native Russian Speaker, Criteria for Determining the Language Proficiency Level, Levels of Russian as a Foreign Language, Russian as a Foreign Language Test

1. Introduction

Defining the linguo-didactic assessment criteria of the highest level of the Russian language proficiency – the native speaker’s level – is a question which has provoked numerous discussions among testing specialists, methodologists and teachers of Russian as a foreign language. The concept of “a native speaker” of the Russian language has not been given a generally accepted definition; the reliable and methodologically valid basis for distinguishing the level of a native speaker from the lower levels (A1-C1) has not been developed. For this reason, the linguo-didactic

requirements have not been created and, as a result, the system of state educational standards for Russian as a foreign language remains incomplete. There is still no highest level, i.e. the standard of certification level 3, which is equivalent to the native Russian speaker’s level (official site of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation www.russia.edu.ru)¹.

It should also be noted that today these questions no longer represent a purely scientific interest, having moved to the level of national and international socio-political and economic practices. In the Russian Federation a number of legal instruments have been released, which

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significantly facilitates the process of receiving citizenship for those who have received the status of “a native speaker of the Russian language”²⁻⁵. These promising innovations in the sphere of migration policy contribute to the solution of the most important strategic tasks of a nationwide scale⁵: the creation of conditions and incentives to encourage the compatriots living abroad to return to the Russian Federation for permanent residence; the creation of conditions and mechanisms to attract to Russia the migrants with highly demanded professional qualifications, educational, economic, social and cultural characteristics, the ability to successfully adapt and integrate into the Russian society which has a positive effect on the economic growth and prosperity of Russia as the host country; the increase of migration attractiveness of the Russian Federation at the international level; the growth of the number of working population, which in turn contributes to the solution of demographic problems; the reduction of socio-cultural and political risks associated with the inflow of migrants at the expense of developing the measures intended to facilitate their adaptation and integration. Work in this area also has a great humanistic value: the provision of effective and comfortable integration into the life of the Russian society will help to prevent the social and cultural isolation of migrants from the host society and ensure their full and equal participation in the social, political and economic life of the country⁵⁻⁷. In the light of the abovementioned, we should consider developing the criteria for determining language proficiency level of the native Russian speaker to be a scientifically and practically significant task. A possible solution to this problem is proposed in this article.

The term “a native speaker” has been widely used for several decades in the world linguo-didactic practice as well as in testing. The teachers consider a native speaker’s level of language proficiency to be the goal for mastering a foreign language, the ideal to which one should aspire in learning a language. Language testers treat it as a certain reference point for describing the requirements for the highest levels of mastering a foreign language. Unfortunately, the term remains deprived of a methodically correct, scientifically based and practically proved content despite the long history of its use. As pointed out by M. Chalhoub-Deville and G. Fulcher⁸, the term “native speaker” is used “as the criterion or norm against which the test-takers’ performances are compared”, at the same time, “the concept of the native speaker is employed differentially at different proficiency levels. At the top

of the scale, the NS (Native Speaker) concept is used to describe the ideal against which the test candidate’s performance is to be judged. In the ILR scale, the NS concept appears as a description of the type of communicative ability expected. It would still be important to empirically define and validate this “anchor point”. These “common sense” definitions have yet to be empirically validated⁸. The fluctuation of meaning boundaries, blurred essential features of the concept and the need for its definition were covered in the studies of many researchers⁹⁻¹³. This problem was also dealt with in¹⁴⁻¹⁸, etc.

A person’s ability to match the system of language and socio-cultural expectations of a particular speech community is highlighted in a number of studies as a distinctive feature (native–non-native–nearly native speaker). Despite the fact that this feature, indeed, possesses a substantial differentiating power, unfortunately, it cannot be used in the testing practice. First, these studies do not clarify the types and volume of the community expectations, which must be met by the person claiming to receive the status of a native speaker. In addition, the achievement of the second language level (and to a certain degree the first one) is simply impossible without taking into account at least the minimum of the sociocultural and absolutely all the linguistic “expectations” of the community which speaks this language. The second most common feature according to the number of followers is the need for language acquisition in the childhood¹⁸⁻²¹, etc. Many researchers point out that language which is learned later remains the second, non-native one, regardless of the speech community to which the person nominally belongs²². It is possible to come across a less categorical definition in other literature: “a language can be mastered by a foreigner like a mother tongue”, but such cases are extremely rare, and it happens with great difficulty²³. We believe that it is reasonable to single out this feature and as our observations show, it is revealed to the greatest extent in the level of phonological competence. Long-term experience of teaching Russian as a foreign language shows that “a native speaker’s pronunciation” can be formed only in childhood, when the human cortex has the ductility and the imitative mechanisms necessary for mastering “a mother tongue” are active. Similar data is found in²²⁻²⁴, etc.

Another feature singled out by the specialists deserves special consideration: we can recognize as a native speaker a person who “on a daily basis uses this language in the family household and cultural spheres”^{22,25}. In our view, this topic should be included in the definition of “a

native speaker's" concept with one small provision. There are common life circumstances when a native speaker does not use language in everyday communication for a certain period of time, of course, still remaining a speaker of that language. Finding himself in a "familiar" linguo-cultural community, a native speaker easily gets involved in communication with other members. Therefore, from our point of view, it is more appropriate to single out an indicator of ability and willingness to use a language actively. We consider it to be correct to specify two communicational spheres: a social sphere and a socio-cultural one. The ability to communicate in professional, educational and scientific spheres depends on the level of a person's education and other social variables, but all the members of a particular linguo-cultural community are united by the ability and willingness to communicate in this language in social and socio-cultural spheres.

Generalizing the existing approaches, based on our own long-term experience in teaching and testing Russian as a foreign language, we propose the following definition of the concept being analyzed: a native speaker of Russian is a person who has mastered the language in childhood in the Russian language culture environment (macro environment - the speech community, or micro environment - the family), with the ability and willingness to make active use of the Russian language at least in two areas: social and socio-cultural ones.

2. The System of Criteria for a Native Speaker's Communicative Competence

The criteria for determining the level of a native speaker possess considerable specificity compared to the basis for assessing lower levels of proficiency in Russian as a foreign language: the speech of a native speaker is subjective and original. The message produced by a native speaker is sometimes a unique sample of verbal creativity. A native speaker uses individual vocabulary (lexical system) and grammar (system of grammar units), the content of which is based upon their life experience, level of education, literary and general cultural preferences. Moreover, a native speaker's speech compared to the speech of people at lower levels is more "merged" with the culture of people who speak this language. The speech of native speaker is filled with cultural elements and is based on the cultural context. In this regard, in order to develop unified criteria, we

consider it appropriate to rely on *typical* communicative speech characteristics of a native speaker of an average literary type of the Russian communicative culture. It should also be noted that not all of its features can serve as the criteria for determining the level of a native speaker of Russian. It is methodically significant to select only those indicators that have differentiating power i.e. allow you to distinguish the level of a native speaker from lower proficiency levels of Russian as a foreign language.

While developing the system of criteria another important fact should be taken into account. The level system of Russian as a foreign language adopted in the Russian testing system is largely focused on the test taker's educational and professional activities. This is evidenced by the description of "higher" levels of Russian as a foreign language introduced in the State educational standards: Certification level 2 "allows the candidate to conduct professional activities in Russian as a specialist in humanities, technical and scientific spheres"²⁶; Mastering the Russian language at level 3 allows the candidate to carry out professional work in this language as a philologist, translator, editor, journalist, diplomat, manager working in a Russian-speaking team"²⁷. Certification level 4 of Russian as a foreign language is characterized as "essential for receiving a Master's Degree in philology for a graduate of a Russian higher education establishment"¹. At the same time, as we mentioned above, a lingo-didactic description of a native speaker's level of language proficiency is currently in high demand not only in the sphere of higher education and professional activity. People of different levels of education who can be unqualified such as housewives, young people who have recently left school, etc. lay claim to receive the status of a native speaker of the Russian language. In this respect, we believe it rational to abandon strict professional and educational guidance and to create a universal system of assessment that will give a chance to people of different ages, social and professional categories who consider Russian their mother tongue to become citizens of the Russian Federation. It should also be mentioned that in order to establish the correspondence of such test takers' communicative competence to a native speaker's level of Russian we believe it necessary and sufficient to assess the knowledge of language, skills, abilities, as well as readiness for oral communication. These constituents of the discursive activity are the focus of this article.

Critical analysis of the sources mentioned above, many years of experience in teaching Russian as a foreign language and testing enabled the authors to propose

the following system of criteria for determining a native speaker’s level of the Russian language.

2.1 Speaking

2.1.1 Criteria for Assessing Phonetic Competence

- Clarity and correctness of pronouncing Russian sounds.
- The presence in speech of the specific Russian phonetic phenomena: vowel reduction, assimilation, accommodation, dissimilation and diaeresis. We should not regard as mistakes a person’s individual style, specific features of their pronunciation due, for example, dialect influences (pronouncing the sound “o” in an unstressed position as [o] instead of pronouncing it as [a]) or for nosological reasons: lisping (mispronunciation of sibilants), lambdacizm (incorrect pronunciation of the sound “l”), rhotacism (incorrect pronunciation of the sound “r”), etc.
- Knowledge of the Russian accentual word models and the ability to produce them We consider this indicator to be important: mastering Russian stress causes great difficulties for foreigners, because the stress in the Russian language is free, mobile, and it can fall on different syllables. In addition to this, some Russian words have fluctuating stress.
- Intonational correctness (intonational framing of utterances according to the Russian language culture models), intonational correspondence of utterances to communication goals and objectives; the ability to use intonation models typical of the Russian spoken language.
- Communicative flexibility is a quick “intonation adjustment” of utterances depending on the changes in the conditions of communication (“a change of the interlocutor’s tone”, changes in their emotional state or the overall tone of communication - interpersonal/formal communication, communication with adults/children, etc.).
- The ability to use the Russian prosodic schemes (pitch, acceleration/deceleration of pace etc.) to convey emotions and to realize the goals of communication, etc.
- Fluency of speech, which is marked by the following indicators: the pace is 220–250 syllables per minute; automaticity; smoothness (“auto run”); the number and duration of hesitation pauses which are caused not by the difficulty of searching for certain language means but by the complexity of the utterance content; the lack of visible effort, ease and “being relaxed” about speaking.

2.1.2 Criteria for Assessing Dialogical Speaking Skills

- Dialogic communication which is unbounded by the topic, including the ability to communicate on issues related to the history of Russia, current events, national politics, culture, etc.
- Having the ability to communicate in the full range of interaction patterns (types of dialogic interaction) adopted in the Russian language culture - Russian verbal-behavioral cultures (in E. Oksaar’s terminology²⁸): ranging from strictly formal patterns to everyday ones. This ability is reflected in the free reproduction of the universal scenarios of Russian verbal interaction, including such components as storylines of verbal behavior, tactics and strategies for implementing communicative goals within a specific scenario.
- Having communication skills of the strategic potential: strategies and tactics of persuasion, motivation, explanation, instruction, approval, disapproval, etc. which are accepted in Russian language culture; having the ability to use the means of their linguistic representation in speech (including the ones which are not frequently used).
- Having the ability to use the ways and means of organizing communication which are accepted in the Russian language culture: the ability to keep communicative distance in line with the Russian culture; interpreting the Russian culture-specific signals of the interlocutor’s willingness to start communication or, on the contrary, their unwillingness to communicate; determining the degree of involvement in communication; adjusting the ratio between speaking and listening depending on the situation and the cultural norms of the Russian-speaking communication environment; sending and interpreting the signals of changing the communicative roles, topics, as well as the signals of communication coming to an end.
- The speed of adequate verbal response to the interlocutor’s utterance (a delay in the response is caused primarily not by the formal linguistic aspect of the response but by the difficulty in generating the response content which is typical of any native speaker).
- Communicative adaptability is the ability to communicate in full compliance with the format (formal/informal, public/interpersonal, etc.),

subject, purpose, tone, style of communication; the ability to measure out the degree of “being colloquial”, formality/informality; “communicative adjustment” to the interlocutor’s age-related, social, etc. characteristics. Communicative adaptability is based on the amount of cultural literacy of the tested person, understanding presupposition, background knowledge, values, psychological and social identity, typical of communication in the Russian-speaking environment.

- Communicative flexibility: this criterion is quantitatively expressed in the speed of verbal reaction after changing the topic, goals, interlocutor’s emotions, tone and style of dialogic communication.
- The richness, variety, relevance and accuracy of using the non-verbal means of communication peculiar to the Russian language culture: communicatively meaningful facial expressions, pantomime, gestures, etc.
- Compliance with the norms and rules of the Russian speech etiquette.
- Having the ability (the knowledge and skill of using in communication) to use the standards of the Russian spoken language, which include: incomplete response, socially stratified names (*Petrovka*, *Shabolovka*, etc.), using pronouns, predicate adverbial modifiers, objects, two verbs (*Go fetch*), relative forms, etc.
- Literacy, linguistic accuracy of speech (in the speech of the person tested we do not record errors but pay attention to slips which do not affect the understanding of the meaning of their utterance).

2.1.3 Criteria for Assessing Communication Skills in the Form of “A Monologue within a Dialogue”

- The length of the monologue (at least 30 sentences).
- Being unbounded by the topic, including the ability to build utterances on the issues related to the history of Russia, current events, national politics, culture, etc.
- Continuity (the utterance represents the superphrasal unity or their combination).
- Consistency (cohesion and coherence): using sophisticated means of communication, including the ones which are not expressed explicitly.
- Logic.
- The ability to use styles, registers, modes of a monologue.

2.1.4 Criteria for Assessing Listening Skills (Perception and Understanding of the Russian Speech)

- The ability to simultaneously perceive - understand - transform - use the information of the message. In the process of communication a native speaker does not only extract (recreate, reconstruct) information from the perceived text, but he also modifies it (summarizes, concludes evaluates, selects the primary and secondary information, determines the degree of relevance and reliability, etc.) and uses it for producing a response (formulates questions, comments, observations, etc.), delivering information in other (their own) words. This aspect is demonstrated through the speed and adequacy of the response.
- The ability to “read between the lines”: restore implicit and omitted elements of meaning (ellipsis, enthymeme), “understatement”; reconstruct the elements which are not explicitly expressed: ideas, emotions and the interlocutor’s subjective (often unique) attitude to the subject of speech. This ability is based on the long experience of communicating with native speakers of the Russian language culture, background knowledge, ability to not only efficiently and correctly use the information of the message, but also to take into account the conditions (circumstances) of the communication act, to adequately “read” the non-verbal means of communication which are accepted in the Russian communication culture, to recognize and understand the intonation, tone, in which the message is pronounced, the author’s “tone”. It should be mentioned that the intonation and tone of the message are very informative in this case. Thus, the factual data represents a neutral tone, but there exists a rich repertoire of “tonal registers”, which in the Russian language culture serve to persuade, surprise or impress the interlocutor, to encourage or make them do something, etc. Defining the interlocutor’s “tone” is a very difficult task, often excessively complicated for people who speak the Russian language at lower levels.
- The ability to “go into macro context”: to understand the allusions (reference to any literary, historical, political, mythological concepts enshrined in the text culture or speaking).
- The ability to recognize the irony and humor contained in the message being perceived.

- The ability to understand the meaning of the interlocutor’s utterance, despite his slips, speech defects and individual features of their pronunciation, etc.
- The ability to define the interlocutor’s social status, emotional state, mood and other relevant characteristics based on their speech characteristics.
- The ability to identify, interpret and predict the interlocutor’s verbal behavior in terms of certain scenarios.

At this level of the Russian language proficiency the spoken utterances/texts are specified by the following characteristics:

- The speed, fluency of speaking: 220–250 syllables per minute (the average fluency of speech for a native speaker of the Russian language).
- Density, concentration of information units - meaningful density, characterised by a significant reduction in the amount of redundant information or complete absence of it.
- Linguistic (lexical and grammatical) complexity.
- Implicitness of ideas, opinions, the author’s positions, etc.
- Cultural “content”.

2.1.5 Criteria for Assessing Language Proficiency Criteria for Assessing Lexical Competence

- The tested person’s volume of vocabulary (lexicon). As stated in the regulations, the tested person should know 20–30,000 Russian words (of which 8,000 constitute their active vocabulary). Under the examination conditions, undoubtedly, it is impossible to determine the number of Russian words that the tested person knows. In this regard, we consider it appropriate that the testing materials should include the words, which are less frequent, less often used in speech, and are on the periphery of the lexico-semantic and lexico-grammatical fields. At lower levels core vocabulary is acquired; native speakers however, can freely handle peripheral lexical units.
- The richness and diversity of the tested person’s vocabulary: knowledge of the infrequently used means of expressing the word system connections, comprising contextual (speech) means, partial (relative) means, semantico-stylistic and stylistic *synonyms*; contextual (speech) *antonyms*, *enantiosemes*, *antonyms-euphemisms*; *paronyms*; complete and

incomplete *homonyms*, homophones and homographs; *hyponyms* and *hyperonyms*;

- knowledge of polysemantic words, of not only direct, but also figurative meanings of lexical units, collocations, idioms, etc.;
- Knowledge of language expression means (metaphor, metonymy, simile, personification, hyperbole, etc.). The tested person is not required to have special skills to determine the types of linguistic expression or to know about their classification, etc. The object of the test is the level of using these units: the ability to understand their meaning correctly and use them appropriately in speech;
- Knowledge of stylistically marked words and the ability to differentiate between them (literary, colloquial, etc.);
- Knowledge of culturally marked lexical units: non-high frequency words indicating the realia, whose meanings reflect various aspects of the Russian people’s life:
 1. Words indicating geographical realia – names of objects of physical geography, animals, plants, etc;
 2. Socio-political names of authorities, organizations and agencies, officials, etc;
 3. Ethnographic – names of dishes and products, clothing, footwear, furniture, public organizations and institutions, types of transport means and objects in the sphere of culture and art, units of measurement, etc., as well as background vocabulary; Phraseological units, precedent vocabulary, proverbs, sayings, etc.
- The ability to use words. A native speaker’s level of language proficiency presupposes not only the knowledge of lexical units of various kinds and types, but also a high level of accuracy of understanding the subtleties, shades of their meaning, connotations which are typical of the Russian language culture as well as communicative adequacy, accuracy, the nuances of using them in speech.

2.1.6 Criteria for Assessing Grammatical Competence

- The volume of grammar (“grammatical vocabulary” – grammatical units and phenomena, known by the tested person): understanding and the ability to use in speech the infrequently used grammar units, indirect means of expressing meaning (for example, Russian etiquette-related idiomatic questions – *Would you like ... / Why don’t you take ...*, questions, containing a request for permission, etc.).

- The complexity of grammatical constructions.
- The richness and variety of grammar structures:
- Knowledge of the syntactic means of language expression, including inversion, ellipsis, rhetorical questions, rhetorical exclamations, rhetorical appeal, grading, etc.;
- Knowledge of the syntactico-stylistic means of synonymy (for example, *taking medicine - taking pills*);
- Knowledge of the syntactic means of colloquial speech, including topics, clarifications, additions, qualitative/quantitative descriptions of an object, etc.;
- Knowledge of the Russian speech etiquette formulas.
- Accuracy and appropriacy of using grammatical units in speech.
- The ability to make stylistic transformations of syntactical units.
- The ability to build utterances in all the tense - aspect forms of the verb.
- The ability to choose the necessary language form, way of expression, depending on the conditions of the communication act: situation, communicative aim, social and functional role of the communicators, their relationship.
- The knowledge and skills which are necessary for using the language efficiently in a social context. These are expressed in the norms of politeness, communication registers and linguistic markers of social relationships.

In order to verify the validity of the criteria for determining the native speaker's level of the Russian language proficiency, we have conducted a series of experiments, the results of which we will discuss in the next section of this article.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted by means of comparative assessment of communicative competences demonstrated by native and non-native speakers of the Russian language. The study involved 40 people who were divided into 4 groups of 10 people. Each group contained an equal number of males and females. Group 1 contained undergraduates and postgraduates of People's Friendship University of Russia, citizens of foreign countries, having a Level 3 certificate of the Russian language proficiency (50% of them were representatives of humanities, 50% were those of non-humanities). The three groups

contained Russian citizens who were born and have lived in Russia all their lives: group 2 included people who did not have higher education; group 3 contained people with higher education who were the representatives of "linguoactive" professions (lawyers, sociologists and philosophers); group 4 contained people with a degree in non-humanities (engineers, physicists, mathematicians).

The study was conducted in three stages. During the first stage, the test takers were asked to complete a written test, the purpose of which was to determine their language competence. In the second stage, the test takers participated in a conversation, where the testers could quantitatively measure the indicators of their discursive activity, as well as their oral communication skills. The assessment was carried out on the basis of the system of criteria proposed in this article. The interview was conducted by two assessors: one led the conversation; the other one recorded the results.

At the first stage of the test the test takers were offered a matrix test, which included 30 tasks: multiple-choice tasks, matching tasks and close tests. They had 30 minutes to do the tasks. The focus of assessment was the language competence indicators (lexical and grammatical) as specified in the previous section of this article. The oral part of the experiment included 3 blocks of assignments. The first block of tasks was presented in the form of a thematic conversation of linguistic and cultural character (10 questions: alternative, general and special questions, etc.); at the same time one of the questions presupposed a detailed answer (in the format of "a monologue within a dialogue"). Emphasis was placed on checking the skills of perception and understanding of the Russian speech. During this group of tasks, the quantitative indicators were measured: the test taker's length of the monologue, fluency of their speech, the speed of generating a response, etc. The second part of the oral test was carried out in the form of a guided discussion, including 5 problem-solving questions. Its purpose was to assess the topical range, the level of handling the strategic potential of communication, the means and ways of organizing it, the degree of communicative adaptability and flexibility, the correspondence of the test taker's speech behavior to the standards and rules of etiquette, etc. The test takers had 15 minutes to complete this section. The third block was represented by five communicative tasks, where the focus of assessment was the ability to reproduce Russian verbal interaction scenarios, taking into account the interlocutor's age related, social, emotional, etc. characteristics, the

ability to correspond to the norms of the Russian spoken language, etc. This took 15 minutes.

The assessors were provided with a detailed scenario of the experiment as well as with mark sheets for expert assessment (for each part of the oral test). The scenario had detailed guidelines for leading a conversation and a discussion, taking into account the following indicators: the speed of the assessor giving prompts was 220–250 syllables per minute; information density of the utterances, their language complexity, the amount of culturally marked vocabulary, the presence of implicit meanings, references to socio-cultural concepts; 2 utterances in the first set of tasks were formulated in accordance with the rules of spoken language.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are represented in the form of Tables indicating pronunciation correctness, dialogical speaking skills, communication skills in the form of “a monologue within a dialogue”, listening skills, lexical and grammatical competence.

As can be seen from the Tables, in terms of most indicators, the results of native and non-native speakers of the Russian language differ considerably. Thus, in the assessment of the test takers’ pronunciation correctness, we can observe the greatest differences in the following indicators - “the presence in speech of the Russian phonetic phenomena” and “the use of prosodic schemes” At the same time, the assessment of the indicator “knowledge of the Russian accentual word models and the ability to produce them” showed interesting results: the number of mistakes recorded in the native speakers’ speech was not smaller than that of the non-native speakers who were foreigners having studied this aspect in terms of a language course (the native speakers who have no formal education made even more mistakes in their speech). In all likelihood, this is due to the complexity of the Russian stress and a large number of variations. We consider it necessary to exclude this indicator from the system of criteria for determining the native speaker’s level of the Russian language.

The results of comparative assessment of the test takers’ level of dialogical speaking skills suggest that

Table 1. The average indicators (results) of the test takers’ pronunciation correctness (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 (A degree in humanities)
Clarity and correctness of pronouncing sounds	5	9	10	10
The presence in speech of the specific Russian phonetic phenomena (vowel reduction, etc.)	2	10	10	10
Knowledge of the Russian accentual word models and the ability to produce them	7	6	7	9
Correctness of speech intonation	6	9	10	10
Correspondence of the utterance intonation to the communicative task	5	10	10	10
Intonation flexibility	7	9	9	10
The use of prosodic schemes	4	9	9	10
Fluency (pace of speech / number of pauses in 1 utterance / length of pauses)	5 (220/4/5)	9 (250/2/2)	9 (250/2/1)	10 (250/2/1)

Explanations: Certification Level 3 is a group of test takers who have a certificate of the Russian language proficiency at level 3; native speakers are native speakers of the Russian language; (without a degree) means a group of test takers without higher education; (with a degree in non-humanities) is a group of test takers who have a degree in a subject other than humanities; (a degree in humanities) means a group of test takers who have a degree in humanities.

Table 2. The average indicators of the test takers' level of dialogical speaking skills (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 (A degree in humanities)
Topic range	5	7	8	10
The knowledge of typical interaction patterns and the ability to reproduce them	4	8	10	10
Having the ability to use the strategies of verbal behavior	5	8	9	10
Having the ability to use the means of organizing communication	6	9	10	10
Communicative adaptability	4	7	9	10
Communicative flexibility (the speed of verbal reaction at the change of communication conditions)	4	8	9	10
Using non-verbal means of communication	6	9	10	10
Correspondence to the norms of etiquette	7	8	10	10
Having the ability to use the norms of spoken language	4	10	10	10

For explanations: see Table 1

Table 3. The average indicators of the test takers' level of communication skills in the form of “a monologue within a dialogue” (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 (A degree in humanities)
Topic range	5	8	10	10
The length of the monologue.	8	5	6	9
Continuity	6	8	8	9
Consistency (cohesion and coherence)	6	8	8	9
Appropriacy of the style, register and mode of the utterance to the conditions of communication	4	8	9	10

For explanations: see Table 1

all the indicators included in the system of assessing dialogical speaking skills and abilities possess a differentiating power. The results demonstrated by native speakers differ significantly from those of non-native speakers. The greatest differences were recorded within the following indicators: ‘the knowledge of typical interaction patterns and the ability to reproduce them’, ‘having the ability to use the norms of spoken language’. As can be seen from the Tables above, almost all indicators proposed for assessing the level of speaking skills in the form of “a monologue within a dialogue” can

be included in the system of criteria since native and non-native speakers demonstrated different results. At the same time it is unreasonable to include the parameter “length of the monologue” into the system of criteria, because foreigners produced more extended monologues than native speakers without higher education did, and almost the same as the native speakers with a degree in non-humanities. The results of comparative assessment of the level of listening skills demonstrated by native and non-native speakers of the Russian language make it possible to include the indicators proposed by the authors of

Table 4. The average indicators of the test takers’ level of listening skills (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 Native speakers (with a degree in humanities)
The ability to simultaneously perceive - understand information.	6	9	10	10
The ability to simultaneously perceive - understand - use information	5	9	10	10
The ability to restore implicit elements of meaning	4	7	10	10
The ability to go into macro context	5	7	10	10
The ability to recognize and understand humor and irony	9	8	9	9
The ability to understand the interlocutor’s speech despite their slips and speech defects	4	9	9	10
The ability to define the interlocutor’s social status and other communicative characteristics based on their verbal reactions.	5	9	10	10

For explanations: see Table 1

Table 5. The average indicators of the test takers’ level of lexical competence (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 Native speakers (with a degree in humanities)
The knowledge of the infrequently used means of expressing the word system connections (synonyms, antonyms, etc.)	5	8	9	10
Having the ability to use polysemy (words with multiple meanings, words used in a figurative meaning)	5	8	9	10
The knowledge of language expression means (metaphor, metonymy, simile, personification, hyperbole, etc.).	4	7	8	9
Knowledge of culturally marked lexical units (words indicating realia, etc.)	5	7	9	9
Having a good command of infrequently used lexical units	4	7	8	9

For explanations: see Table 1

this article into the system of criteria. The indicator “the ability to recognize and understand humor and irony” is an exception. Although many studies point out that this indicator is a differentiating one, the results of our experiment suggest that this is an individual, rather an intellectual characteristic of a person, not directly related to the level of language proficiency.

According to the results of comparative assessment of the lexical competence demonstrated by native and non-native speakers of the Russian language, the test takers demonstrated quite different results in terms of all indicators proposed by the authors of this article, which suggests that these indicators should be included into the system of criteria of determining the level of a native speaker of the

Table 6. The average indicators of the test takers' level of grammatical competence (from 1 to 10 points)

Test takers	Group 1 Certification Level 3	Group 2 Native speakers (without a degree)	Group 3 Native speakers (with a degree in non-humanities)	Group 4 Native speakers (with a degree in humanities)
The complexity of grammatical constructions.	6	8	8	10
The range of grammatical constructions (syntactic means of expression/means of syntactico-stylistic synonymy/morphology and syntax of the spoken language)	5	7	8	10
Having the ability to produce stylistic transformations of grammatical structures	5	7	8	9
Appropriacy of the grammatical structures to the conditions of communication and the interlocutor's characteristics	9	9	9	10
Appropriacy of the grammatical structures to the social context	5	7	9	10
Having a good command of infrequently used grammar structures	4	7	8	9

For explanations: see Table 1

Russian language. The results of comparative assessment of native and non-native speakers' grammatical competence suggest the invalidity of the indicator "appropriacy of the grammatical structures to the conditions of communication and the interlocutor's characteristics". As shown by the results of the experiment, in terms of this indicator, non-native speakers made as many mistakes in their speech as the native speakers without higher education and those who have a degree in non-humanities. According to the results of the studies, other indicators can be incorporated into the system of criteria for determining the level of "a native speaker of the Russian language".

5. Conclusion

- Studying the research papers on the subject of the article, many years of experience in teaching Russian as a foreign language and testing allow the authors to define a native speaker of the Russian language as a person, who acquired the language during their childhood in the Russian linguistic and cultural environment (macro-environment - in the language community, or micro-environment in the family), having the ability and willingness to make active use of the Russian language in at least two areas: social and socio-cultural.

Apparently, it is impossible to develop universal criteria for determining the level of a native speaker which is valid "for all languages in the world". Each specific language has units and phenomena which must be taken into account in the process of developing the system of criteria.

- In the Russian system of testing migrants, the exam for obtaining the status of a native speaker of the Russian language is taken by people with different educational levels and training; some test takers does not have higher professional education. In this regard, the system of criteria for determining the level of a native speaker of the Russian language should not be strictly focused on checking communication skills in professional and scientific spheres. Control of the language proficiency and readiness for oral communication in social and socio-cultural spheres should be considered sufficient for determining the status of a native speaker of the Russian language in the system of testing migrants.
- The authors of the study found that most of the criteria proposed in this article can serve as the basis for determining the level of a native speaker. At the same time, the experiment showed that a number of indicators do not possess sufficient "differentiating power", so it is unreasonable to include them into the system of criteria. Here belong:

- Knowledge of the Russian accentual word models and the ability to produce them - the assessors identified a considerable number of violations of the accent norms not only in the speech of foreigners, but also in that of native speakers. Moreover, as the study showed, the foreigners who studied accent models made fewer errors than the native speakers without higher education;
- The length of the monologue;
- The ability to recognize and understand humor and irony;
- Appropriacy of the grammatical structures to the conditions of communication and the interlocutor’s characteristics;
- The system of criteria for determining a native speaker’s level of the Russian language which is proposed in this article can be used in organizing and conducting the test of communicative competence of migrants seeking to receive fast track citizenship of the Russian Federation, as well as in the development of the state educational standards for Russian as a foreign language at Level 4.

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