

Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca: Reducing Skepticism and Increasing Practicality

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Abstract

The status of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has become an increasingly popular topic in Applied Linguistics and there is a lively discussion around which pronunciation model to use in classrooms (Dauer, 2005). Jenkins (1998, 2000, and 2002) proposed the Lingua Franca Core (LFC): a list of features which are presumably the minimum required to result in intelligible communication among non-native speakers of English (NNSs) and should form the basis upon which the pronunciation syllabus of learners of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) should be designed. While very few teachers of English today would (theoretically) argue that aiming at native-like pronunciation is necessary or even desirable, many teachers, nevertheless, remain skeptical about the teachability of the LFC (Jenkins, 2007). This paper addresses this doubt introducing the construct of the 'LFC', its potential implication in classroom, and its scope and function beyond classroom setting.

Key words: Intelligibility, Phonology, ELF, LFC, NS/NNS speakers.

Introduction: What is the LFC?

The models adopted in teaching the pronunciation of English are generally derived from older varieties of English (OVEs), these being for the most part from British and American English varieties (Setter and Jenkins 2005). Table 1 below lists in column B the generally agreed pronunciation targets for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL):

#	A	B	C	D
	Aspects of pronunciation	EFL targets	Influence on intelligibility	ELF targets
1	The consonantal inventory	All sounds	√ but not all	All sounds except /θ/ and /ð/
		RP non-rhotic /r/ GA rhotic /r/	√ but not all	Rhotic /r/ only
		RP intervocalic [t] GA intervocalic [t]	√ but not all	Intervocalic [t] only
2	Phonetic requirements	Rarely specified	√ but not all	Aspiration after /p/, /t/, and /k/. Appropriate vowel length before fortis/lenis consonants.
3	Consonant cluster	All word positions	√ but not all	Word initially, word medially
4	Vowel quantity	Long-short contrast	√	Long-short contrast
5	Vowel quality	Close to RP or GA	X	L2 (consistent) regional qualities.
6	Weak forms	Essential	X	Unhelpful to intelligibility
7	Features of connected speech	All	X	Inconsequential or unhelpful
8	Stress-timed rhythm	Important	X	Does not exist
9	Word stress	Critical	X	Unnecessary / can reduce flexibility
10	Nuclear (tonic) stress	Important	√	Critical

Table 1: Pronunciation targets for teaching EFL and ELF - Modified from Jenkins 2005:147

Jenkins (2000) identified empirically which phonological features are implicated in the breakdown in NNS-NNS communication. The contents of the traditional ELF pronunciation syllabus above were then revised in light of the empirical findings. Those features which were more likely to cause breakdown in communication were considered and recommended to be introduced in classrooms while other features were excluded. Column C in Table 1 indicates which of the phonological feature of the traditional EFL syllabus should/should not cause breakdown in communication and, accordingly, column D details the features of the LFC.

The LFC has been unsatisfactorily presented as an unrecognizable construct that is inapplicable in English classrooms. While it is basically the inventory of phonological features which are the minimum required to result in intelligible speech, Sobkowiak (2005) described it as a 'standard', Lurda (2004) described it as a 'variety', while others called it a 'model', for example Trudgill (2005), Dauer (2005), and Smit (2005), next the paper introduces the major controversies surrounding the teachability of the LFC.

Heterogeneity of Learners' First Language Phonology

Brown (1992) suggested the use of contrastive analysis (CA) which describes the phonological system of two languages, with the assumption that significant differences between systems will constitute a major focus of attention for the language teacher and syllabus writer. CA has been done between learners' L1 and the content of the traditional pronunciation syllabus (which is listed in column B in Table 1). In implementing the LFC, the CA should occur between learners L1 and the LFC inventory (column D). Diversity in learner's L1 might evoke the issue of which phonology to implement in CA with the LFC inventory. Arab learners of English are presented as an example here. For Arab learners, implementing the LFC starts from deciding what the Arab speakers' first language is and accordingly from where they are more likely to transfer when learning English. The Arabic language is used in almost 23 countries and in each country there are two main varieties: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Non-Standard Arabic (NSA) (Mahmoud, 2000). NSA in these countries differs significantly in pronunciation, common lexical items and structure to the extent that Yorkey (1974) considered the differences among NSA more marked than difference between UK, US, and Australian English.

One possible solution to resolve the complexity of this situation is to implement the phonology of a variety which acts as a 'middle ground' among learners and can be recognized by (possibly the majority of) them. In the case of Arab learners, MSA can be used. MSA (which is a simplified version of Classical Standard Arabic, the language of the Koran - the holy book of Islam) is taught in schools throughout general education in the Arab-speaking world, and is used in mass media in all Arab countries and for all communications of any official nature (Mahmoud, 2000; Swan and Smith 2001). In this way, Arab learners possibly share recognition of the phonology of MSA since they have presumably received (intensive) instructions on MSA throughout their education.

A teacher of Arab learners might question the legitimacy of MSA in CA with the LFC based on the differences between individual learners' NSA and MSA. It is important to consider that what matters is not how different learners' NSA from MSA is but whether these differences are core or non-core features in the LFC. For example, in Egyptian dialect, which to my knowledge is widely used to reveal how significant the difference is between its phonology and the phonology of MSA, the sounds which exist in MSA but not in Egyptian dialect are:

1. The voiced dental alveolar (emphatic)¹ fricative [ðˤ] (presented in Arabic by the letter: ط)
2. The voiceless uvular stop consonant /q/ (i.e. /qæləm/ or 'pen').
3. The voiceless inter-dental fricative /θ/ (i.e. 'three' in English and /θæləθæ/ in Arabic which also means 'three').
4. The voiced inter-dental fricative /ð/ (i.e. 'the' in English and 'ðækɪ' in Arabic which means 'clever').
5. The voiced post-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ (i.e. 'television' in English and /ʒəmeɪl/ in Arabic which means 'beautiful').

Among the above sounds, the first and second phonemes (/ðˤ/ and /q/) exist neither in the LFC nor in Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). The third and fourth phonemes (/θ/ and /ð/) are non-core features and substituting them with other phonemes (for example /s/ and /z/) is acceptable as it has been proved empirically that this substitution does not cause breakdown in communication (Jenkins 2000). So it is only the last phoneme, /ʒ/, which Egyptian learners are expected to find difficult and will need more instructions in order to produce.

Teachers should also extend learners' knowledge beyond MSA rather than disregarding their NSA phonology as this might assist learning the phonemes we are aiming at. Some NSA includes phonemes which do not exist in MSA but do exist in the LFC. For example, the Arabic of Iraq and the Gulf includes the post-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ which does not exist in MSA but is available in the LFC. Similarly, Egyptian and Yemeni Arabic have the velar plosive /g/. In this way Iraqi, Gulf countries, Egyptian, and Yemeni learners will at some point not need to work on certain phonemes (such as /tʃ/ and /g/) due to their existence in their NSA variety.

Integrating the LFC with Classroom Practice

Shortage of ELF textbooks might be a major obstacle against implementing the LFC syllabus. Jenkins (2000), Brown (1992) and Walker (2001) have suggested the same NS-based textbook can be used with necessary modifications on its pronunciation exercises according to their relevance to the LFC. Those features which are classified as non-core are dealt with at receptive level only in the sense that they are introduced to learners through listening exercises. Nevertheless, learners are not encouraged to produce them. In contrast, learners will be encouraged to produce the core features, and work on these will be reinforced and involve error correction.

Implementing a syllabus based on the LFC does not simply include the inventory of phonemes mentioned above, but involves the 'methodology' and overall practice in the classroom (Lee and Ridley, 1999; Tomlinson, 2006; Walker, 2001). This involves the following:

- Widening learners' recognition of the landscape of ELF and improving their positive attitude towards their own and other NNS varieties.
- Exposing learners to several NNS varieties (not only to OVEs) particularly those in which learners are likely to communicate (Setter and Jenkins, 2005).
- Improving learners' accommodation skills: i.e. 'convergence' has long been referred to as making the speech resemble more to that of an interlocutor, while teaching that the LFC requires training learners to 'converge' to the contents of the LFC inventory rather than the interlocutor's production.
- Rethinking learners' errors in reference to the LFC: i.e. a learner should be corrected in cases where 'live' is pronounced as /li:v/ instead of /li:v/ but it is accepted when the vowel in 'go' is pronounced with a different quality (as a shorter /ɔ:/).

ELF beyond the Classroom Setting

Beyond classroom boundaries, the LFC is supposed to be better able to promote intelligibility among ELF interlocutors than many NS varieties. Some empirical studies have revealed that NNSs might be more intelligible to their NNS counterparts than NSs (for example Smith and Rafiqzad (1979); Tauroza and Luk (1997); and Smith and Nelson (2006)). A further advantage of the LFC is allowing NNSs the same sociolinguistic rights as those enjoyed by L1 speakers by validating (or legitimating) NNS accents (Jenkins, 2005, 2007). Accented English, which has long been received negatively by NSs and NNSs, has proved not to impede intelligibility and communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong (Munro and Derwing, 1999). Furthermore, retaining L1 accents might have a more positive influence while communicating with NSs than NNSs modeling themselves on their interlocutors. Copying the NSs too precisely, or in other words encouraging a greater convergence towards the interlocutors' linguistic identity, might be perceived negatively as this might be attributed to the NNS's projection of himself/herself (Giles and Smith, 1979; Preston, 2005).

A further issue is the argument that the LFC might lead to diversification in language use which is likely to jeopardize international intelligibility. However, Smith and Nelson (2006), Smith (1992), Widdowson (1994) and Jenkins (2000) argued that this is less likely to occur. The theory of language universals (Anderson, 1987) suggests one reason behind this is the universality of substitution of sounds used by interlocutors in cases where L2 features do not exist in L1. For example, dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are commonly substituted in L2 by a limited set of alternatives - /t/ and /d/, /s/ and /z/ or, less commonly, /f/ and /v/ - and, thus, L1 transfer does not impair intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000). This demonstrates again the importance of exposing learners' to several NNS varieties in the classroom setting to avoid unintelligibility that might occur when /θ/ and /ð/ are substituted by other phonemes by interlocutors.

Conclusion

A description of the LFC can be structured around three main dimensions: the first is the inventory of phonemes which are more likely to influence intelligibility. Diversity in learners' L1 is suggested to be invested in teaching the core phonemes. The second is the overall practice in the classroom setting which involves rethinking learners' errors and filtering the contents of the teaching material in reference to the LFC. The third dimension steps back to give a wider comprehensive picture of the LFC beyond classroom settings. It considers sociolinguistic, intelligibility and second language acquisition studies to provide further evidence that the non-classroom setting contributes successfully to the possibility of adopting the LFC in classroom teaching.

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