

Pedagogic Priorities in English Pronunciation

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Abstract

This article examines a new pronunciation syllabus, the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), which is advocated by Jennifer Jenkins. The LFC is a collection of phonetic features necessary for mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers of English. Jenkins has selected the LFC based on findings from her empirical research in which English pronunciation is examined in its sociolinguistic context. Firstly, the main features of the LFC are stated, followed by a discussion of some of the innovative points of the LFC and problems inherent in it. Lastly, the author of the article proposes her ideas regarding pedagogic priorities in English pronunciation teaching.

Introduction

In a previous article, I reappraised possible models for teaching English pronunciation and compared the ideas of various applied linguists about these models (Iba 2001). Until recently, teachers and learners rarely questioned the idea that learners should get as close as possible in their pronunciation of English to one of the 'prestigious' native-speaker accents, such as Received Pronunciation (RP), the standard British accent, or General American (GA). Since linguists have discussed the expansion of the use of English and a shift in the ownership of the language throughout the past decade, the notion of a native-speaker accent as a model or norm is now highly questionable and under re-examination. Among these linguists, especially Jenkins (2000) claims that since Non-Bilingual English Speakers (NBESs) now outnumber native speakers of English, it is no longer acceptable to establish the structure of English as an International Language (EIL) from the perspective of the traditional native speaker of English. She suggests that we should evaluate which parts of English pronunciation are essential for communication between NBESs and which can be ignored as peripheral. She proposes that we should develop a Lingua Franca Core (LFC) for English, which is a minimum collection of phonetic features necessary for successful communication, and in the future our teaching should be based on the LFC. Since her proposal seems rather radical, there has been a great variety of opinion on the

pros and cons of the matter. However controversial, her idea is surely a thought-provoking one. In this article, I would like to examine her suggestions of pedagogic priorities, namely the LFC, and state different ideas in some areas from the point of view of a non-native instructor of the English language. Firstly, the main features of the LFC will be described. In the second part of the paper I will consider the problems related to the LFC, and then I will propose my ideas for improving the teaching of EFL phonology as a conclusion.

1. Lingua Franca Core

1.1 Consonants

There are 24 consonant sounds common to RP and GA. According to Jenkins (2000), most consonant sounds are essential and should be preserved in the LFC (except for some phonemes) to avoid serious confusion for both NSs and NBESs. The following are the salient features of the LFC.

a) The dental fricative pair /θ/ and /ð/ are omitted

The dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are not only rare in languages around the world, but also rather difficult for NBESs to pronounce. These two phonemes don't even exist in some L1 varieties. Jenkins (*ibid.*: 65) claims that 'Substitutions of these phonemes did not cause phonological unintelligibility on a single occasion in the data.' This certainly seems to be controversial. I would like to consider the problems regarding the elimination of dental fricatives from the LFC in the next section.

b) Pre-consonantal and syllabic /ɫ/ are excluded

Jenkins suggests that the use of dark /ɫ/ syllabically, before a consonant sound (e.g. in 'milk'), or before a pause, can be eliminated from the LFC. She explains that the production of dark /ɫ/ is problematic for most learners of English and many never acquire it. From my teaching experience, this doesn't sound true, yet it is certain that the regular substitution of dark /ɫ/ with clear /l/ or /ʊ/ is unproblematic for EIL intelligibility. Adding to that, the majority of RP speakers already pronounce /ʊ/ for pre-consonant dark /ɫ/ and there is no dark /ɫ/ in Welsh English. For these reasons, dark /ɫ/ can be excluded from the LFC.

c) GA /r/ is adopted

Jenkins has opted for the GA rhotic variant rather than the RP postalveolar approximant. This is because GA /r/ is always indicated in production while it does not occur in RP /r/ when a word is pronounced alone (e.g. 'Who's there? /ðeə or ðə/) or

when followed by another consonant (e.g. ‘star light’ /stɑ: laɪt/) rather than a vowel (e.g. ‘butter and . . .’ /bʌtərən(d)/). As the GA variant is simpler, Jenkins has chosen GA /r/ for the LFC.

d) RP /t/ is adopted

The RP /t/ is always pronounced in a word aside from the potential elision of word-final /t/. This contrasts with GA, where intervocalic /t/ becomes the voice flap. Thus the word ‘matter’ is pronounced /mæɾəɹ/ in GA, which sounds rather close to ‘madder’ /mædəɹ/, and the change of the sound may cause a problem with NBESs, whereas it is simply pronounced /mætə/ in RP. In this case, RP /t/ is selected because of its simplicity of pronunciation.

e) Some consonant clusters are simplified

As English syllable simplification is highly rule-bound, breaking the rules causes serious damage to intelligibility. NBESs use two methods to simplify ‘difficult’ syllables, i.e. deletion and addition. Adding some vowels between consonants is less harmful to intelligibility than deleting consonants from a cluster. Jenkins suggests word-initial clusters should not be simplified because it will cause confusion between NBESs. Word-medial and word-final clusters can be simplified because they are pronounced according to English rules of elision.

f) Certain approximations are not permissible

Certain approximations should be excluded from the LFC because they cause intelligibility problems. These approximations generally involve transfer from the L1. The following are the approximations that should be excluded from the LFC:

- Spanish use of [β] for /b/
- Japanese use of [ϕ] for /h/
- Japanese dropping of postvocalic /n/
- Greek and Spanish use of [x] for /h/

1.2 Vowels

Vowel sounds are considered in two dimensions, i.e. quality and quantity. Vocal quality is concerned with tongue and lip position, and vowel quantity with relative length.

g) The length of vowel sounds should be maintained and the change of vocal quality is permissible, except for /ɜ:/

Jenkins claims that vocal length contrasts should be maintained for intelligibility,

but L2 regional qualities are permissible if they are consistent, except /ɜ:/, which is to be preserved because the substitution of the sound might create another known word (e.g. 'curtain' and 'carton').

1.3 Suprasegmentals

h) Weak forms are unteachable

The problem of weak forms is the contradiction of focusing on a feature whose quality is precisely the result of speakers not focusing on it. Jenkins is not at all convinced by the argument that it is necessary to weaken an unimportant item in order to highlight an important one.

i) Stress-timing is not a feature of the LFC

English is said to have a stress-timed — as opposed to a syllable-timed — rhythm. Jenkins, however, claims that the concept of stress-timing appears to have little basis in reality. Her argument is supported by Ladefoged (1982: 224), who describes stress-timing as a 'tendency'; Roach (1991), who considers that it mainly occurs in formal speech; and Cauldwell (1996: 33), who argues that it is a 'myth of speech' because 'the data focused on consists of short stretches of speech (usually nursery rhymes)'.

j) Word stress rules are unteachable

The rules of word stress are so complicated that they are unteachable, but the LFC recommends providing learners with a number of general guidelines.

k) Nuclear stress is crucial

Nuclear stress is the most important key to the speaker's intended meaning. While pitch movements are regarded by Jenkins as unteachable because they relate to the unconscious level of the brain, nuclear stress highlights the most salient part of the message. Contrastive stress is especially important in English because the language does not have the morphological or syntactic resources that may indicate contrasts. As for word groups, or tone units, learners should be familiar with them. The division between one word and the next word is often associated with pauses or a change in pitch level or rhythm.

2. Pros and cons of the LFC

a) Mutual intelligibility between non-native speakers

Jenkins advocates a new approach to English pronunciation teaching in which the

goal is mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers rather than the imitation of native speakers' pronunciation. In former days, English was taught to enable those who spoke other first languages to communicate with native speakers of English and, possibly, to gain membership to a particular L1 English community. Learners were usually supposed to learn RP or GA for membership qualifications. Thus, pronunciation differences were described as phonological errors and attempts were made to delete them. On the other hand, Jenkins suggests that EIL membership is by definition membership in an international rather than an L1 community because English is an international language that carries with it all the sociolinguistic implications for its pronunciation.

The shift of membership or ownership of the English language has been discussed among linguists like Smith (1983: 2), Brumfit (1995) and Widdowson (1997). EFL phonology has already attempted to seek a standard or general guideline of teaching English pronunciation, but not on the grounds of this shift. For example, Jenner's (1989: 2) phonological core is based on the need 'to establish what all native speakers of all varieties have in common which enables them to communicate effectively with native speakers of varieties other than their own'. The phonological core of EIL for communication between NBES is expressed most emphatically by Jenkins, and her between 'NBESs' concept is surely a cutting-edge notion in EFL phonology.

b) The role of non-native teachers of English

Jenkins' attitude toward EIL is so progressive that she sometimes seems very critical of or even defiant to NS teachers of English who are trained only at the certificate level of TESL/TEFL because they have received only rudimentary training in teaching techniques in a very limited period. Furthermore, she claims that they need to acquire both teaching skills and knowledge of the language so quickly that it is hard for them to proceed very far in their training. On the other hand, she thinks NNS teachers are better placed than NS teachers to teach English pronunciation to second language learners because intuitions about learners' L1 pronunciation make NNS teachers better instructors by enabling them to deal more effectively and sensitively with learners' difficulties in English pronunciation. They can use articulatory phonetics to demonstrate where and how sounds are produced in the L2 as compared with the L1. As I myself am a NNS teacher of English, her idea is quite encouraging, but her conclusion that NNS teachers are superior to NS teachers is questionable. Whether a person is suitable to be a teacher depends on his or her individual qualities or abilities. Jenkins' strong claim in support of the improvement in the status of NNS pronunciation teachers, however, will have a positive effect on the EFL world where some NNS teachers may have an inferiority complex because they don't provide as much information about

such things as English language culture, idioms, slang, phrasal verbs, and native accents as compared to NS teachers. She admits that NS teachers are generally better equipped as informants in these intuitive respects, but she still thinks that competence as an instructor is more important for teachers, and she believes that this involves not only a solid education in pedagogy but an appreciation of the foreignness and not the nativeness of the language. These sorts of considerations are worthy of note and critical to EIL pronunciation teaching.

2.1 Problems inherent in the LFC

Jenkins' (2000) book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* might be highly unpopular among a large number of teachers throughout the world. As mentioned before, she suggests that NS teachers are largely irrelevant, and NNS teachers should actually provide the new model for EIL. All parts of the book are clearly and confidently written with cogent arguments, but it sometimes sounds dogmatic, so readers might be offended.

My impressions of this book are positive on the whole, yet there seems to be a considerable amount of problems inherent in the LFC she suggests. In this section, I would like to illustrate these problems, moving from the general to the particular.

1) Polymodel confusion: RP and GA

The LFC is grounded on RP and GA because data shows that features of these varieties are crucial to intelligibility among NBESs of English. Thus, Jenkins has chosen the GA rhotic variant for the LFC, while on the other hand choosing the RP /t/ for the core. It would seem that the blend of RP with GA will be confusing to both teachers and learners. For example, a GA based teacher should be careful when pronouncing the /t/ sound not to substitute it for /r/, whereas an RP based teacher should also pronounce /r/ in 'here' or 'there.' This doesn't sound realistic. The mixture of RP and GA will cause unnecessary confusion, so why not keep these two varieties separate? The LFC could have two varieties or more. In a country like Japan, where American English is dominant, institutions or individual learners would choose the GA version of the LFC, while some European countries would choose the RP version.

2) Careful adoption of the LFC is needed

The LFC should be a general guideline for pronunciation teaching. It shouldn't force teachers to obey the rules strictly, because the purpose of learning pronunciation may differ among learners. The LFC must be flexibly adopted in each case.

3) **Contradiction of the concept: Love and hate for RP? How about GA?**

According to Crystal (1995), less than three percent of the British population speak RP. This minority prestige accent, with its origin in the public school system, has been overwhelmingly dominant as the model for pronunciation of English in the UK; however, Jenkins (*ibid*: 14) points out that ‘in recent years, one of the potentially most significant and interesting phonological developments has been the increasing antipathy of a small but growing number of British phonologists, sociolinguists, and EFL teachers towards the perpetuation of RP as the teaching model for L2 learners of English’. She continues to pick up on several problems of RP, but in the end she opts for using RP together with GA for the foundation of the LFC.

The reason why she has chosen RP for the LFC has already been stated: intelligibility. Yet, her decision is not very persuasive. Why not adopt a variety that has fewer negative connotations, like Scottish? There must be other reasons underlying her decision. They might be related to the acceptability of the variety that she doesn’t mention in the book, but she is British, has much expertise regarding RP, and knows its influence. I am not against adopting RP; on the contrary, this variety sounds appealing to me, but her suggestion of RP is still not very convincing.

As for GA, there is much less discussion about the reasons why she has chosen this variety for the LFC. Of course the safeguarding of mutual intelligibility is the apparent reason, but if she were an American scholar, she would no doubt state many negative connotations of GA.

If RP and GA are to be viewed as the most suitable for the LFC, we need more convincing evidence.

4) **The paradox of intelligibility between NBESs**

As phonological errors for the EIL context differ with a NBES’s L1, if we adopted the LFC and didn’t teach dental fricatives, some NBESs would substitute /s/ for /θ/, and others might say /t/ for /θ/. Communication between these two groups would be less intelligible. I would say from my teaching experience that some learners can produce dental fricatives without much effort, but if they aren’t explicitly taught how to pronounce them, they can’t produce them. The LFC is carefully chosen for better intelligibility, and it would be paradoxical if intelligibility is hindered by it.

Adding to that, since there is huge variation in NBESs’ interactions, communication between different NBES groups will be much more difficult if we permit phonological errors transferred from each L1.

5) **Identity crisis and learning languages**

We should recognize that learning another language is closely related to our identi-

ty. The more seriously you learn one, the more conflicts you will come across. People are especially sensitive to their accent. Jenkins cites the words of Anne Pakir, the Singaporean scholar, in her plenary speech at the 1998 TESOL Convention in Seattle. As I also attended her speech, I clearly remember her words. Pakir said ‘meddle with my accent and you meddle with my identity.’ I was upset to hear that, because I felt she mixed up her pride with her accent, and I originally felt that she should have known that English was just a means of communication, i.e. a tool for her. If you make yourself understood, you can sharpen your tool.

It is natural, however, to feel meddled with or insulted if your pronunciation is corrected, so teachers should explain to learners that speech correction has nothing to do with their identity. It is possible for learners to keep their cultural identity even if their pronunciation is corrected. Jenkins sympathizes with Pakir, yet we should not confuse our identity crisis with speech correction. If teachers are not aware of this difference, how can they teach pronunciation?

6) Accent addition and accent reduction

Accent addition and accent reduction in L2 speech correction are substantially the same. You should change your sounds to a greater or lesser extent when you learn another language, so we don’t have time to split hairs and argue about terms. The point is that speech correction has nothing to do with one’s social identity, as I have mentioned above.

7) Teachable versus unteachable: Suprasegmentals

As for features of connected speech, such as weak form, rhythm, word stress and intonation (including pitch movements, nuclear stress and word groups), the rules tend to be far more complex and to operate largely at the subconscious level. Thus, most of them, except for nuclear stress and word groups, are excluded from the LFC because they are unteachable. Is it that straightforward, however? Indeed, the attitudinal function of intonation is extremely dependent on individual circumstances, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that it is impossible to teach in the classroom. Now that we can use audio-visual materials, it is not very difficult to show learners some examples of the attitudinal function of intonation.

Jenkins claims suprasegmentals can be acquired outside the classroom through exposure to the language, and it is true for her students learning English in London. In other countries where English is a foreign language, however, teacher intervention is needed because learners are not exposed to English outside the classroom. I sometimes use videos to show students how intonation works in conversation. For example, I use one scene from the film “Fall in Love” which shows a serious quarrel between a

married couple in which the wife says, "I can hardly wait," and then slaps her husband. Judging from the atmosphere, students can easily guess what her words mean.

Teaching segmentals is, of course, important, but suprasegmentals are equally valuable for intelligibility. Real communication and interactions are performed in connected speech. The training of prosodic features is essential for producing natural speech. I used to teach the pronunciation of Japanese to hearing-impaired Japanese children and adults at a research institute at Sophia University in Tokyo. The children were taught pronunciation at their own schools with a traditional method in which segmentals were taught sound by sound. The adults had already graduated from school and had the same learning background. At first, their speech sounded robotic because they pronounced every single sound with a little pause in a flat intonation. We used the Verbo-tonal method, which focuses on teaching suprasegmentals first and then deals with segmentals using body movements, Japanese nursery rhymes, and a special amplifier that can control the frequencies of speech sound. Usually in three months the students' pronunciation became dramatically more natural. This is the case of hearing-impaired people and it might be different in the ELT context, but I believe suprasegmentals can be taught. Even hearing impaired people made great improvements, so why wouldn't learners with normal hearing ability?

I would like to add one more thing regarding rhythm. Jenkins criticizes the use of rhymes and limericks in the classroom as being artificial and unnatural. Stress-timing might be a tendency, as she claims, and rhymes and limericks might not reflect the rhythm of actual speech, but we shouldn't forget that they are the essence of language. If teachers provide some other materials that reflect real speech together with rhymes and limericks, there will be no problem for learners. They will have a chance to compare the real speech and rhymes and find something in common or something different.

However complicated suprasegmentals may be, we should teach them, or even if they are 'unteachable' in a strict sense, we should cover them in the classroom to make them more intelligible to learners.

3. Teaching the pronunciation of English for better EFL phonology

a) The place of pronunciation

In the preceding sections, the main features of the LFC and problems related to this new pronunciation syllabus have been set out in some detail. I would like to make a few proposals for better EFL oriented phonology as a conclusion.

First of all, we should recognize clearly that speech, like writing, constitutes no more than the transmission phase of language. It provides a signaling system for the language's more essential store of items that is defined in the lexicon and syntactic

rules. The teaching of pronunciation, however, presents particular difficulties. Grammatical structures can be taught in sequence and vocabulary can also be systematically presented from the very basic level to the more technical level. Pronunciation, on the other hand, cannot proceed step by step since all phonetic/phonological features are present from the very first lesson. What is worse, as we have seen before, pronunciation teaching is closely related to a learner's psychology, social status, prejudices, preferences and other complicated sociolinguistic factors. Jenkins' approach derives from a concern for these factors, especially in the case of English as an international lingua franca. Sociolinguistic factors should be carefully taken into consideration when establishing the LFC, but excessive response to them will create some serious confusion in the ELT world. It seems to me that there is sometimes a logical leap in the claims of LFC supporters. Teaching pronunciation itself should be banned if it were thought to be a driving force of linguistic imperialism. Why don't we keep calm and consider a better solution for teaching the pronunciation of English? The concept of the LFC is marvelous in theory, but in reality much more discussion and research are needed.

b) The role of teachers

The role of the teacher in pronunciation teaching is indispensable for the success of the LFC. They should encourage students to realize that speech correction will not hurt their identity but promote intelligibility when communicating in English.

In addition, in teaching pronunciation we are concerned especially with giving motor and auditory skills to learners rather than with teaching a kind of logical new syntax. Thus, learners should assimilate rules for allophones or intonation patterns in discourse. The acquisition of such new auditory skills can be achieved by using extensive discrimination drills by teachers or with audio materials. Then learners can start to practice producing sounds by themselves. At this stage, teachers should assist in correcting production with specific instruction. Learners with different linguistic backgrounds will, of course, experience different difficulties in oral production. It is for this reason that teachers should be aware of the phonetic and phonological characteristics of a learner's L1. By contrasting the features of two languages, teachers can predict the learners' problems and give them proper drills. Jenkins insists on NNS teachers' superiority to NS teachers, but regardless of whether one is a NNS or NS, teachers are required to have a great deal of knowledge about phonetics and phonology.

c) Learner-centered application

Pronunciation teaching should prioritize learners' aims. If they need to master English for a business transaction with a US company, the GA version, as suggested in

the former section, should be adopted; if they are trained as waiters in a restaurant in London and have to explain a complex menu to customers in English, the RP model should be applied. As for interactions between NBESs, since the features of the interactions are different according to the languages of speakers and interlocutors, the LFC will be adopted according to each case. The treatment of the LFC should be flexible so that it can be adjusted to any case.

d) Constant renewal of the LFC

In this fast changing world, languages change rapidly as well. For example, the sixth edition of 'Gimson's Pronunciation of English' (2000) was substantially revised only five years after the last edition, with particular emphasis placed on the changes in attitudes to language standards. As this suggests, the LFC should be renewed constantly to reflect current trends in English.

In this article, I take a critical attitude toward the LFC. To avoid misinterpretation, I would like to state clearly that I support the concept of the LFC, even though I do not find it acceptable in all its details.

None of us can predict the future of EIL precisely, but judging from the spread of English in the last century, the trend towards EIL is likely to continue in the 21st century. I will keep watching how the English language changes and consider better ways of teaching pronunciation that stay apace with those changes.

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