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Article

TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

English has become the language for global communication in this 21st century with non-native speakers outnumbering native speakers. Pronunciation is among the key factors for successful and effective communication in this era of globalization. The learning and teaching of pronunciation, therefore, has been aiming at mutual intelligibility, or international intelligibility, rather than at native-like accents formerly. This paper reviewed the most recent transformations in the practice of pronunciation teaching towards international intelligibility in light of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (with the Lingua Franca Core (LFC)) and Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) in order to help learners be better prepared for global communication. Recommendations were also presented for the instruction and assessment of English pronunciation aiming at an internationally intelligible model.

Key words: teaching pronunciation, international intelligibility, ELF, LFC, GELT

INTRODUCTION

It could be said that recent years has seen a revolutionary change in English language teaching, in particular the teaching of pronunciation. The native-speaker model, traditionally, is what has been adopted in teaching English pronunciation, i.e. learners' main goal has been to obtain native-like competence and communicating with native speakers (Walker, 2010) [1]. However, such entrenched practices in English language teaching are no longer common in today's era of globalization. Native English is hardly considered the norm or the default that all interactions and communications in English must defer to in such an emerging global era. With NSs being outnumbered by non-native English speakers (NNSs) (380-450 million native speakers out of 2.3 million speakers of English (British Council, Crystal (2003) [2], and with the rise of English as a Lingua Franca[a] (ELF) and Global Englishes Language Teaching[b] (GELT), the nature as well as the goal of English language learning has drastically changed. The focus has been switched to flexibility, adaptation, accommodation, and the fact that "communication does not have to reflect 'native' norms" (Galloway, 2017) [3].

Such an alternative to current approaches for teaching the English language has been reflected in materials development and teaching practices. Materials featuring NNSs have been introduced and incorporated into the classroom, and new teaching techniques and activities have been devised for practical use. In the field of pronunciation, theories and techniques in teaching have been developed and implemented with a view to better preparing learners for their real-life communication in lingua franca situations. While the former practice of teaching pronunciation adopted the native speaker model and thus was directed toward learners' achievement of "a native-speaker accent" (Walker, 2010, p. 28) [1], the current teaching of English pronunciation is more focused on mutual or international intelligibility. Different foci and objectives require different perspectives and practices.

This paper aimed at reviewing the latest adjustments in the teaching of English pronunciation from the perspectives of ELF and GELT. Teachers of English Language Teaching (ELT) in general and teachers of pronunciation in particular are required to be aware of and apply such in order to set proper outcomes and employ appropriate pedagogical practices. On such a basis, recommendations were presented in light of and in congruence with ELF and GELT theories.

Intelligibility

The spreads of English as an International Language (EIL), ELF, and GE all highlight the diversity in the

[a] "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 11)

[b] "an inclusive paradigm that embraces a broad spectrum of interrelated research" in World Englishes, ELF, English as an International Language, and translanguaging (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p. 6)

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use of English, and the varieties of the English language rather than rigorously adhering to native or Inner-Circle norms and conventions as previously seen in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Kachru (1985) in World Englishes (WE) advocated the utilization of a "polymodel" approach to language teaching, encouraged learners' exposure to different Englishes, and attempted to help learners improve their confidence as speakers of their own variety of English.

Amongst such an enormous number of varieties of English, however, arises a problem of mutual understanding between speakers using those varieties. Galloway and Rose (2015)[4] also articulated their concern over the possibility that speakers may not understand each other if they speak different varieties of English. That is the reason why *intelligibility* is the primary focus in both pedagogical methodology and real-life communication.

There has been no clear scholarly consensus on the definition of intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010)[1,5]. The notion of intelligibility dates back to the middle twentieth century with Abercrombie (1949)[6], Gimson (1962)[7], and Voegelin and Harris (1951)'s views correlating intelligibility and the ability to understand other people's speech. In addition, efforts in differentiating intelligibility and similar concepts including comprehensibility, communicativity, and interpretability were undertaken by Bamgbose (1998)[8], James (1998)[9], and Smith and Nelson (1985)[10]. A broad definition of intelligibility was proposed by Derwing and Munro (1995)[11] – "the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by a listener" (p. 289). This paper did not aim at reviewing the concept of intelligibility and therefore adopted this definition for later references. The addition of the modifiers *mutual* and *international* hardly alters the meaning of the term, but explicitly specifies the type of communication relevant: lingua franca interactions or those between speakers of different first language backgrounds.

As regards intelligibility it should be significant to discuss the entrenched misconception that a NS status absolutely guarantees being intelligible. Walker (2010)[1] made a confident assertion that "native-speaker accents are not, inherently, intelligible" (p. 39), affirming that intelligibility is not considered a feature of the speech by NSs. Levis (2022)[12] advocated this while discussing the Nativeness and Intelligibility Principles, proving the superiority of the latter in the present context of pronunciation instruction and research. In addition, a few features in native-like pronunciation such as elision and weak forms, indeed, are deemed a hindrance to mutual intelligibility, for they could lead to incomprehensibility and misunderstanding in ELF interactions. Research about intelligibility has been undertaken with judgments rendered by NSs (Walker, 2010)[1] while in real-life ELF encounters NSs are not at all times present. When participating in a communicative activity using ELF, one should not be bothered by their interlocutor's first language background, but the point for consideration is how to achieve intelligibility and communication success.

A Brief Overview of English Pronunciation Instruction

Pronunciation instruction received limited attention both in academic research and pedagogical practice (Baker & Murphy, 2011)[13]. A study by MacDonald (2002)[14] revealed that pronunciation was a neglected area in teachers' practice due to several factors ranging from lack of training and knowledge to "poorly articulated … policies and curriculum objectives" (Baker & Murphy, 2011, p. 34)[13]. A thorough investigation of popular teaching and learning materials would also indicate that pronunciation was not as much of a focus as other aspects and skills of the English language, for most coursebook activities prioritize skills development as well as grammatical and lexical accuracy.

There has been seen, nevertheless, a major change in research- and practice-based literature that highlights the issues of pronunciation teaching, which is a direct outcome of learners' actual need for global communication. Such studies are enlightened by the theories of EIL, ELF, and GELT, which suggests that following the "static native norms" is not helpful in today's global context requiring learners to use English for global/lingua franca communication (Galloway, 2017, p. 15)[3]. This reconceptualization of English and ELT pedagogy is reflected in the way materials have been developed, novel teaching activities and techniques introduced, and academic ELT discussions and platforms generated.

The goal of pronunciation teaching, as endorsed by a variety of ELT practitioners and experts, is to make learners intelligible to a variety of speakers of different language and culture backgrounds (Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 2018; Walker, 2010)[1,5,15]. ELF speakers are encouraged not to reduce their local and/or national accents, and not to bother attaining native-speaker competence (unless when learners insist on doing so) in order to maintain their personal/national identity and communicate with more confidence. As mentioned above, achieving a native-like accent is unrealistic and

inappropriate for the majority of learners, and such a failure could evoke feelings of frustration, insecurity, and inferiority, whereas being able to keep their accents and maintaining intelligible is perceived as not only a source of motivation for language learning but also confidence builder in global communication. Moreover, it is believed that ELF users (and certainly learners), in their interactions, try to make optimum use of their linguistic resources with a view to effective and successful communication.

Unfortunately, however, a shift in focus in pronunciation instruction has not been welcomed by all stakeholders. From a personal experience in teacher-training courses that the writer has undertaken, it could be said that reluctance to accept changes and doubt will arise when ELF and/or intelligibility is introduced. Since the first day of their English learning journey, teachers, student teachers, and learners have been exposed to the two varieties of British English and American English, which are (unjustly) considered 'standard English', and the desire to acquire a native speaker competence is found in mostly every learner regardless of their level of language proficiency. Feelings of uncertainty and possibly failure afterwards are unavoidable if both learners and teachers have to depart from what they have believed is *the norm*. Therefore, ELF and ELF-informed pronunciation instruction with a shifted goal to international intelligibility should be more widely implemented in both language classrooms and teacher-training programs in the context of Vietnam.

Materials for Pronunciation Instruction

Only recently have interests in materials pronunciation been stimulated (Levis & Sonsaat, 2016)[16]. Experts and researchers in the field of materials development have voiced their opinions that both teaching and materials should incorporate the "global diversity of English" (Cogo, 2022, p. 96)[17]. However, publishers – whether global or local/national – have been reluctant in their attitudes and actions. Materials in general and general-skills textbooks in particular have been rather limited in their ELF/GE-oriented methodology. According to Cogo (2022)[17], the majority of commercial materials share the following three issues: orientation towards NS norms – in both language and culture, orientation towards monolingualism (rather than the diversity of English and multilingualism), and detachment from local contexts (rather than intercultural awareness).

Matsuda (2002)[18], in a similar manner, upheld the representation of uses and users of global English in materials, formulating the five questions or criteria that teachers and materials developers need to ask for materials evaluation:

- Which variety of English is the material based on? Is it the variety my students should learn?
- Does it provide adequate exposure to other varieties of English and raise enough awareness about the linguistic diversity of English?
- Does it represent a variety of speakers?
- Whose cultures are represented?
- Is it appropriate for local contexts?

In answering such questions, teachers should "dare to adapt their resources and look for their own answers regarding appropriate practices in their contexts" (Cogo, 2022, p. 99)[17]. Even though these criteria focus on general-skills English materials, they are a supportive indication of pronunciation materials that do not merely adopt native norms or follow a monolingual approach.

Levis and Sonsaat (2016)[16] were vocal in advocating the development and adoption of ELF/GE-aware pronunciation materials, formulating the three principles: emphasis on intelligibility, explicit connection to other language skills, and sufficient and usable support for teachers (p. 111). They highlighted that the first principle – pronunciation materials emphasizing intelligibility – refers to determining priorities in teaching: what features of pronunciation are more important and thus deserve both teachers' and learners' attention. This is in compatibility with Jenkins' (2000)[5] development of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) for pronunciation instruction aiming at intelligibility (which will be discussed in the following section). The second principle is in line with Hinkel's (2006) three principles for pronunciation instruction: teaching pronunciation in context and connected to speaking, serving communicative purposes, and based on realistic language (as cited in Levis & Sonsaat, 2016, p. 111)[16]. Such principles could be said to be in agreement with Rose and Galloway's (2019)[19] assertion that the language learners are exposed to in the classroom should be "truly an authentic depiction" of what they are going to encounter in their real-life communication (p. 135).

The Lingua Franca Core (LFC)

The LFC, developed by Jenkins (2000)[5], addresses four major areas in pronunciation in helping ELF learners and users to be mutually intelligible, and to avoid communication breakdowns: (most) individual consonant sounds, consonant clusters, vowels, and

nuclear stress. The establishment of the LFC was based on the empirical work of "interactional speech data" and on realistic ways of natural interactions (Jenkins, 2000, p. 131)[5]. She also identified the non-core features that may not affect one's intelligibility. Furthermore, Jenkins (2000)[5] suggested that the LFC should not be regarded as a model of pronunciation, but that it "allows … individual freedom … by providing speakers with the scope both to express their own identities and to accommodate to their receivers" (p. 158). Galloway and Rose (2015)[4] remarked that these features specified in the LFC are imperative for intelligible spoken communication but also define "achievable goals" (p. 151) for learners, and certainly, users of ELF/GE.

The LFC together with its non-core features could be succinctly summarized as follows:

Core features

- all consonant sounds, except /
- vowel quality/length contrasts
- initial and medial consonant clusters
- nuclear stress production/placement

Non-core features

- consonant phonemes /
- dark /
- vowel quality (except for /
- addition of vowels to consonant clusters
- features of connected speech, such as elision, assimilation, and weak forms
- word stress placement
- pitch movement/patterns

However, both core and non-core items in the LFC should be reassessed considering learners' needs and level of proficiency before being applied to classroom instruction. Sentence stress, as Jenkins (2000)[5] stated, is a core feature while word stress is not. Intelligibility may not be affected by incorrect placement of word stress, in the case of *inCREASE* as a verb and *INcrease* as a noun, for the sentence context will help ease any possible problem in understanding. There has been found no clear positive or negative relationship between word stress and intelligibility. But it should be noted here that word stress is also the foundation for the appropriate placement of nuclear stress: sentence stress is unteachable and hence unachievable with misplaced word stress. Jenkins (2000)[5] did admit this when discussing the establishment of the LFC but still disregarded the significance of the issue, believing word stress placement could be generalized using rules. But are there as many exceptions as there are rules?

On the other hand, nuclear stress, by its nature of being a suprasegmental feature, is hardly easy for acquisition and production by all learners. This is getting more and more difficult for learners of lower levels of language proficiency because they have to strive for intelligibility in terms of segmental features such as vowel and consonant sounds.

The LFC was not the only thing that Jenkins (2000)[5] propounded for pronunciation instruction, but she also suggested what she called the *five-phase accent addition program*. The *addition* of accent – as opposite to accent reduction – is interpreted as "adding the [second language to one's accent] as far as is necessary for mutual phonological intelligibility" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 209)[5]. What the phrase basically refers to is for ELF learners and users to build on their first language accents with English unifying phonological features – or the LFC.

The aforementioned five-phase accent addition program, according to Jenkins (2000)[5], should be handled by teachers in the classroom, among which the first is compulsory and the remaining four are optional. The five phases could be summarized as follows (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 209-210)[5]:

1. Addition of core items to the learners' productive and receptive repertoire
2. Addition of a range of L2 English accents to the learner's receptive repertoire
3. Addition of accommodation skills
4. Addition of non-core items to the learner's receptive repertoire
5. Addition of a range of L1 English accents to the learner's receptive repertoire

Jenkins (2000)[5] stated that these five phases have been put in order of importance: the first phase is what teachers are required to focus on and implement in classroom techniques. She also stressed the importance for teachers to undergo training of at the minimum the first four phases.

It could be said that the application of the LFC in the teaching of pronunciation is beneficial in assisting with learners' achievement of intelligibility in their English pronunciation – the main goal of teaching and learning English pronunciation in today's context of globalization rather than the wish to attain native-like pronunciation. The development and implementation of the LFC – which consists of both segmental and suprasegmental features, nonetheless, does not completely exclude other features of pronunciation from learners' receptive and productive resources: they are exposed to such features receptively,

"with their take-up depending on the sociolinguistic profile of the individual learner" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 209)[5]. ELF learners and users – regardless of their first language and culture background – make themselves internationally intelligible in their communication.

ELF Pronunciation Instruction – Classroom Models

It has been clear from the prior review of literature and discussion that ELF/GE-based pronunciation instruction focuses more on intelligibility than on NS competence, an aim that has been echoed among ELT experts in materials development. However, there arises an issue of *model* selection for classroom use. NS (standard) accents, as previously stated, are not well situated, whilst the selection of a single accent/variety (or two) is deemed even more complicated among such a wide range of GE varieties available nowadays. Such a "dilemma" may become barriers in inducing changes in the practical pronunciation pedagogy in specific situations.

Walker and Zoghbor (2015)[20] summarized the three models that could be utilized as models for classroom instruction of pronunciation: existing native-speaker materials, competent ELF users, and the teacher. Due to the absence of materials that feature competent ELF users (at the time of their publication), the first and third options seem to be more applicable in Walker and Zoghbor's (2015)[20] viewpoint.

At a later time, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2018)[21] reviewed the four models of pronunciation models: native, nativized, non-native, and multiple models. He examined the major strengths and weaknesses of each model, and then went on to discuss how each has been applied in particular places based on their sociocultural backgrounds and features. He further concluded that such a varied implementation of models in different contexts is "a pedagogic reality" and so not likely to change (p. 244).

There seems to have been changes in the way materials are developed and models are selected for classroom use, however, at the time of writing this paper. Textbooks published over the past decade (for instance, the *Voices* series by National Geographic Learning) have incorporated different accents and varieties of GE as audio input. Whether or not those materials have covered ELF users as the input for pronunciation is another point for future discussion, but at least they have attempted to raise learners' awareness of the fact that English is now globally diverse with vast varieties. That is not to say that pronunciation teachers of all practical situations are urged to follow ELF/GE proponents in choosing which models for classroom use – despite scholars' call for shifts in pronunciation research and teaching (Jenkins, 2000; Kachru, 1992)[5,22]. Notwithstanding, learners' needs and preferences should be set as priorities for pedagogical practices.

ELF Pronunciation Instruction – Suggested Classroom Techniques

This section generally was not written to recommend radically new activities and techniques for pronunciation instruction in the classroom, but rather to review what scholars have put forward in teaching pronunciation with an ELF/GE standpoint. These are based on a modification of goals and priorities in pronunciation and pronunciation instruction. Such traditional activities in pronunciation teaching as dictation, minimal pairs, drills should still be maintained for classroom use, as echoed by Walker (2010)[1], and Walker and Zoghbor (2015)[20]. Walker (2010)[1] devoted an entire chapter in his book to a detailed explanation on techniques to teach pronunciation from an ELF perspective. His suggestions were compatible with the LFC and Jenkins' (2000)[5] five-phase accent addition program. In addition, the most recent and detailed description of classroom techniques for pronunciation instruction is offered in the book *Teaching English Pronunciation for a Global World* by Walker and Archer (2024)[23].

What differentiates ELF-based approach from traditional ELT lies in the encouragement of awareness-raising activities and accommodation skills. Such activities were suggested by Jenkins (2000)[5] in the aforementioned five-phase accent addition program. Walker (2010)[1] also supported the use of those activities in his discussion and detailed explanation.

Specifically, classroom activities should be saved for raising learners' awareness of ELF, of the roles of English in this global context, and of the existence of a vast range of accents and varieties of English (Walker, 2010)[1]. To develop an ELF mindset, learners need to be aware of the differences in the numbers of NSs and NNSs, as well as the type of interactions (with NSs or with NNSs) they are more likely to be engaged in. Learners, additionally, should appreciate the significance of English (and certainly ELF) in national and global transactions in all fields such as business and tourism. Last but not least, learners should start to recognize that accent variation, amid globalization, is an obvious and normal phenomenon, and that attitudes towards accents "are more often based on feelings than on rational arguments" (Walker, 2010, p. 75)[1].

Just as people may not enthusiastically take to the new goal of pronunciation teaching, learners may not either accept the idea of studying pronunciation to be intelligible. Intelligibility should be aimed at in the classroom, and learning activities should be centered around raising learners' awareness of international intelligibility in pronunciation. Only among older learners could such be appropriate and helpful: very young and young learners should not be exposed to the afore-mentioned activities and techniques. An improper understanding and realization of the goal could reduce their learning incentive (Walker & Archer, 2024)[23].

The implementation of accommodation skills – or phonological accommodation – is another focus of ELF-oriented classroom instructions. According to Giles and Coupland (1991)[24], Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) believes that humans' verbal (and non-verbal) behavior can change in accordance with the situation, the topic, and the interlocutor through the application of three strategies: convergence, divergence, and maintenance. Jenkins (2000)[5] explored the relation between such strategies in CAT and her ideas of phonological accommodation through the three motivations: solidarity amongst speakers, communicative efficiency, and identity maintenance. In simpler words, teachers of English need to introduce the skills of receptive phonological accommodation so that learners can deal with English in different accents (Walker & Archer, 2024)[23]. Learners of a higher level of proficiency, additionally, should have the ability to adjust their pronunciation to ease their communication with those unfamiliar to their own accents, which is regarded as productive accommodation[c]. All such contributed to the necessity of introducing phonological accommodation skills to students so that they in their real-life interactions can employ such skills for mutually/internationally intelligible spoken communication.

ELF-Oriented Assessment of Pronunciation

It should be worth again mentioning at this point that the aforesaid discussion of ELF-oriented classroom techniques does not suggest a dismissal of previous and/or current ways in pronunciation instruction. The assessment practice of pronunciation, for that reason, should not be substantially altered. The focus and goal of pronunciation instruction has been changed, requiring a subsequent modification of assessment – echoed by Walker (2010)[1] confirmation of "reappraisal and evolution than with dismissal and revolution" (p. 146).

According to Walker (2010)[1], English pronunciation assessment should be conducted in different dimensions: its components, its construct, and its purpose. Pronunciation, firstly, should be assessed in both learners' knowledge and skills: what they understand about sounds and how they produce such. Secondly, assessment should be performed in both perception and production: whether learners recognize sounds and speech (through listening) and whether they can make sounds recognizable (in speaking). The third dimension of assessment is the incorporation of pronunciation using discrete testing (focusing on pronunciation only – vowel sounds for instance) or integrative testing (integrating pronunciation in speaking and listening – in communication). Finally, both diagnostic tests and achievement tests can focus on pronunciation depending on which type of data tests aim at: understanding learners' level of language proficiency or deciding whether learners have achieved pre-set learning outcomes.

It is important to note that whichever of the four dimensions to focus on, assessment of pronunciation should be undertaken embracing the principles of assessment. Moreover, the goal and priority of pronunciation – mutual/international intelligibility – should still be set as priority. That is to say that native speaker competence should not be seen as assessment criteria, or that having an accent should not be deemed an interference or a lack of competence. The LFC, again, should be applied during the process.

CONCLUSION

Language changes together with society. The English language changes and develops throughout history: from a language of a small European island to *the* global lingua franca nowadays (Galloway & Rose, 2015)[4]. The changes in language in general and English in particular reflects not only social transformation but also actual and practical needs and aspects of communication. The teaching and learning of such a dynamic language, therefore, need to change to demonstrate the way language is used in real-life communication.

This paper reviewed the changes in priorities of pronunciation instruction and materials, classroom techniques to teach pronunciation, as well as assessment practices from the perspectives of ELF and GE. The purpose of each selection and application is not for

[c] A thorough explanation for ideas and how to implement such classroom activities could be found in the book by Walker and Archer (2024).

dismissal and revolution of whatever has been in practice, but for reappraisal, modification, and evolution – with a view to assisting learners to become competent ELF users in global communication. What has hitherto remained prominent is the priority and goal of the teaching of pronunciation: not developing a native speaker competence but achieving international intelligibility.

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