

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE LINGUA FRANCA CORE IN EAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, English language teaching has seen a trend away from continued dependence on native-speaker norms in favour of teaching based on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In particular, this involves the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) of those features of English pronunciation that are claimed to ensure intelligibility but at the same time permit substantial local variation. The suggestion is that there is no need to teach features of pronunciation that are outside the LFC.

This paper provides an overview of the implications of these LFC proposals for teaching English in East Asia, in particular by considering which features of pronunciation cause breakdowns in communication.

Keywords: English teaching, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Lingua Franca Core (LFC), Chinese English, intelligibility

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, English language pronunciation teaching was generally based on native-speaker norms, usually RP British English or General American (GA). However, in recent years, there has been a trend away from use of native-speaker norms. Indeed, Jenkins [7] argues that native speakers are now irrelevant for most international communication in English, which often involves interactions between speakers from places such as Germany, Brazil, Japan, Singapore and China with no native-speaker participation. And Kirkpatrick [8] argues that nativized norms are more practical for teaching global English in the modern world, and they can be liberating for both teachers and students. Indeed, there is little need for learners to mimic speakers from the UK or USA so long as they ensure that they can easily be understood in an international setting.

For teaching of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Jenkins [6] proposes a Lingua Franca Core (LFC) of just those features of pronunciation that are essential for international intelligibility.

Crucially, the LFC includes most of the consonant distinctions with the exception of the dental fricatives, but it excludes the quality of most vowels, final consonant clusters, rhythm, and the intonational tones. Jenkins argues that these simply do not matter in ELF interactions, so there is no point in teaching them.

In this paper, the pronunciation of students in East Asia, particularly China, will be discussed, to determine which features of their pronunciation should receive attention in an ELF-based curriculum, and which features can be left alone, to constitute part of the style of speech idiosyncratic for China, to contribute to the emergent Chinese English [12]. But first, we need to consider the LFC in more detail.

In this paper, the suggestions of Wells [11] will be adopted, so vowel phonemes will be represented by means of keywords such as FLEECE and NURSE, and TH will be used to represent the sounds at the start of words such as *thing* and *this*. In this way, we can talk about voiceless TH being realized as [θ], [t], [s] or [f] without implying that any of these realizations is 'correct' or 'better' than the others.

2. THE LINGUA FRANCA CORE (LFC)

Based on research into intelligibility between students from various international backgrounds, Jenkins [6] proposed that the following features of pronunciation are important, so they should be included in the LFC that is essential for all students of English:

- all the consonants, except /θ/ and /ð/
- initial consonant clusters
- vowel length distinctions
- the mid-central NURSE vowel
- nuclear stress

However, the following features of pronunciation should be left for individual variation, as they do not cause loss of intelligibility, so they can be omitted from the LFC:

- /θ/ and /ð/

- final consonant clusters
- vocalized L
- individual vowel quality
- reduced vowels
- lexical stress
- intonational tones
- rhythm

The exact identity of the features that are important for international intelligibility is controversial, as many teachers for example will insist that lexical stress and vowel quality are important, so they should be included in what is taught in the classroom. Nevertheless, few would dispute the claim that some sounds are more important than others, and many teachers would agree that if their students can achieve comfortable intelligibility in an international setting, then there is no need from them to pretend to come from the UK or USA.

Here, we will consider the implications of the LFC proposals for the pronunciation of English found in China and Hong Kong, and then we will consider evidence for the features of pronunciation that have been shown to cause misunderstandings in East Asia.

3. ENGLISH IN CHINA

The main features of the pronunciation of speakers from north and central China [2] are:

- extra final vowel: *first* [fɜːstə]
- heavy nasalization of a vowel before a final /n/, and omission of the consonant: *sun* [sɤ̃]
- voiceless TH as [s]: *thing* [sɪŋ]
- voiced TH as [d] or [z]: *then* [den]/[zen]
- [ɹ] in *usually* [ju.ɹəli]
- absence of final /z/ in *was*, *because*
- L-vocalization: *small* [smɔː]
- no vowel reduction in function words
- prominent end stress, even on a pronoun: *fold his cloak around HIM*

Which of these matter? According to the LFC proposals, the realization of voiceless and voiced TH is not important. L-vocalization is not problematic (and it is a feature of pronunciation shared by many speakers in the UK, [1] p.79). Lack of reduced vowels is similarly not an issue. However, loss of final /n/, use of [ɹ] in *usually*, absence of final /z/, and nuclear stress on a final pronoun would be more important.

It is not clear if an extra vowel at the end of *first* is problematic or not, given that the LFC tolerates variation in the pronunciation of final clusters. It may result in *fast* sounding like *faster*, but does this cause misunderstandings?

4. ENGLISH IN HONG KONG

The main features of the English of Hong Kong [4], and also the English of speakers in Guangdong Province, are:

- voiceless TH as [f]: *three* [fri:]
- conflation of initial /n/ and /l/: *noisy* [lɔɪzi]
- conflation of /l/ and /r/ in a cluster: *crowded* [klaudɪd]
- L-vocalization: *wall* [wɔː]
- TRAP and DRESS are similar
- fronted GOOSE: *two* [tʉː]
- absence of vowel reduction

Which of these matter? Voiceless TH as [f] is not a problem (and it is shared by many speakers in the UK, especially in London ([11], p.328). L-vocalization is also not an issue. The similarity in TRAP and DRESS, and also the fronting of GOOSE, only affect vowel quality (and the latter is also shared by young speakers in the UK [5]). Similarly, the absence of vowel reduction does not matter. However, the conflation of /n/ and /l/, and also between /l/ and /r/ in consonant clusters, can cause misunderstandings.

5. INTELLIGIBILITY

It is, of course, hard to define intelligibility. Smith [9] identified three basic levels: word recognition, utterance comprehension, and understanding the meaning behind the utterance. Here we will consider instances of word misunderstandings, especially where these resulted in a breakdown in communication.

It is important to obtain real data regarding misunderstandings. We need to build a corpus of data and then analyze why each one occurred. Here a start will be made. Items 1 to 3 are from [3], while items 4 to 9 are from the ACE project currently underway. Items 10 and 11 were recorded while I was a guest at Guangxi University in Nanning.

1. A speaker from Laos said ‘We have big holes in some areas’, pronouncing *holes* as [hounz]. The listeners from Malaysia and the Philippines could not understand him.

2. In talking about cooking, a speaker from Vietnam said ‘We have to make some sauce’, and she used [ʃ] at the start of *sauce*. The listeners from Malaysia and Brunei could not understand her.
3. A speaker from Myanmar said ‘Have you seen any pearl beads at the shopping centre’, and she pronounced the vowel in *pearl* as [ɑ:]. The listener from Indonesia did not understand her.
4. A Cantonese speaker from Guangdong Province was talking about movies, and she said ‘I just saw the Black Swan’, using [ɹ] in *black*. Her listener from Brunei could not understand her, imagining the movie was ‘Rex One’, until the speaker elaborated further, saying that it featured the actress Natalie Porter.
5. The same Cantonese speaker mentioned ‘the president of the international club’, but because she used [ɹ] in *club*, and her Bruneian listener heard it as *crowd*.
6. In describing the places she had recently visited, the Cantonese speaker said ‘Tibet Nepal, India, and Bhutan, it’s nearby’, with [l] at the start of *nearby*. The listener from Brunei could not understand this word.
7. The Cantonese speaker asked if, when sleeping, her listener from Brunei ‘always turn off your light’. She used [n] at the start of *light*, and her Bruneian listener was confused for a moment.
8. A Japanese speaker was talking about catching a bus to go on a trip, and she said that she took it in the ‘early morning’, with *early* pronounced as [ɑ:li]. Her Bruneian listener heard ‘early morning’ as *alimony*.
9. The same Japanese speaker said, ‘my major is literature’ with *major* as [meʒə] and *literature* as [ɹɪtətʃə]. Her Bruneian listener could not understand her.
10. A speaker from Guangxi in South China was describing the business done by her parents, and she said ‘they sell the fruits’ with [l] as the second consonant in *fruits*. Her listener from Britain believed for a while that she was selling flutes as souvenirs to tourists.
11. Another speaker from Guangxi, in describing her naughty brother, said ‘I always punch him when he makes tricks for me’, and she omitted the /k/ in *tricks*. Her British listener found this hard to understand.

What is noticeable about these data is that nearly all the problems are caused by consonant substitutions, and the only issue caused by variation in vowel quality is the use of [ɑ:] for the NURSE vowel in *pearl* in item 3 and *early* in item 8. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the recordings that have been analysed for variant pronunciation of the TH sounds causing problems. It seems that voiceless TH can be pronounced as [t], [s] or [f] without any loss of intelligibility.

Of course, this is a small sample of data, and we need to build a much more substantial corpus of misunderstandings before we can draw any reliable conclusions. However, it does seem that these extracts confirm the LFC proposals, that loss in consonant distinctions apart from the dental fricatives are important, but the exact realization of vowel quality (apart from the NURSE vowel) is less important. Furthermore, we have no evidence from these data of variation in lexical stress causing misunderstandings.

Finally, we might consider vowel reduction. There is little evidence that the use of full vowels rather than reduced vowels in function words causes loss of intelligibility. Indeed, many well-known, excellent orators, such as Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan, tend to use full vowels where others might have reduced vowels. But does anyone suggest that they need to speak more clearly? In fact, it can be argued that avoidance of vowel reduction actually enhances intelligibility internationally, though perhaps not for listeners from the UK and USA.

6. DISCUSSION

This paper has offered an overview of some of the issues involved in the adoption of ELF-based pronunciation teaching East Asia, particularly in enabling students from China to be understood by listeners from elsewhere, and it has further considered what features of pronunciation cause breakdowns in communication for speakers from East Asia.

One must acknowledge that there are substantial barriers to be overcome before teaching based on the LFC can be adopted. First, there is a severe lack of materials, including suitable textbooks, recordings, dictionaries and curriculum materials. Some writers (e.g. [10]) have begun to address these issues, but it must be acknowledged that such materials are currently few and far between. Moreover, teachers are likely to question

how they might evaluate speakers in the absence of fixed norms. How can one determine what is right and wrong if there are no norms to refer to?

In addition, a belief in native-speaker norms is thoroughly entrenched in China and indeed throughout much of East Asia, and teachers and students tend to be horrified by the suggestion that they do not need to aspire to native-speaker norms, hearing such proposals as condescending. If both teachers and students are so strongly opposed to the ELF proposals, is there any point in people from elsewhere recommending them? And if teachers insist they want to continue to use materials from the UK and USA, while learners are adamant that they want to imitate the accents they hear in those materials, who is to say that they should change?

Nevertheless, attitudes towards the status and teaching of English around the world are evolving, even if many teachers are inevitably rather conservative; so it is important to consider what implications the changed priorities have for teachers. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly important for learners of English to be able to understand and be understood by speakers from a range of backgrounds, not just people from the UK or USA, and the emphasis of the ELF proposals on developing accommodation skills, to enable learners to be able to adapt to the needs of their listeners, is exceptionally constructive and valuable for English language teaching. Certainly most people will agree that not all features of pronunciation are equally important, so it is important for teachers to try and prioritize what aspects of pronunciation they should focus on.

Finally, it is essential for teachers always to reflect on their teaching, to evaluate what they teach and how they teach it. In this respect, consideration of the LFC proposals is valuable, even if, in the end, many teachers are likely to reject them.

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