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Theory and Other Dangerous Things

The Implications of the Lingua Franca Core for Pronunciation in the Japanese ELT Context

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Abstract: Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers by a margin of about 3:1 (Crystal, 2003), and English is increasingly used for communication between two non-native speakers of different L1 backgrounds. Jenkins (2000) proposes the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) for standardizing pronunciation of English in an international context and reducing communication breakdowns. The LFC includes guidelines for pronunciation of segmental sounds, rules regarding consonant clusters, and use of suprasegmental features such as nuclear (sentence) stress. Previous work in the field has discussed the implications of the LFC for teaching English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), but the specifics of its implementation in the English Language Teaching (ELT) context in Japan have not yet been examined in detail. This paper discusses potential implications of applying the LFC in the teaching of English pronunciation in Japan and how it interacts with the phonology of Japanese-L1 learners. Anticipated problems and solutions are discussed, and practical classroom activities are suggested.

Kachru (1985) describes three circles of English users. The Inner Circle consists of countries where the inhabitants learn English as a native language (ENL); the Outer Circle contains countries where English is spoken as one of two or more common languages and holds some sort of special status, whether in education or administration or as an official language (often a holdover from periods of colonization); and the Expanding Circle consists of countries where English is used neither as a first or second language nor in any official capacity, but where English is often used for communication in international affairs. Crystal (2003) estimates the number of English speakers with moderate or better conversational competence in the Outer and Expanding Circle countries at around 1.2 billion, and the number of ENL speakers in Inner Circle countries at only around 400 million. This leads to a unique situation where non-native speakers (NNS) outnumber native speakers (NS) by a ratio of 3:1, and this ratio is expected to grow as more emphasis is placed on English in Outer and Expanding Circle countries.

Traditional goals of foreign language education place an emphasis on communicating with native speakers, but learners are increasingly using English to communicate in an international setting where there may be no native English speakers present. When, for example, a Chinese businessman uses English to communicate with his partner from Italy, English is no longer being used as a foreign language (EFL) but rather as a lingua franca (ELF).

In an ELF context, mutual intelligibility is paramount. Jenkins (2000) reports on some data involving interactions between six NNS of intermediate proficiency in pairs with different first languages, and finds that "a remarkable 27 of the [40] breakdowns were the result of pronunciation" (p. 87). Despite numerous grammatical errors, the partner was almost always able to retrieve the meaning, and only 1 of the 40 breakdowns could be attributed to grammar. To address this problem, Jenkins (2000, 2002) proposes the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), a set of standards for pronunciation that emphasizes mutual intelligibility between speakers of non-shared L1 backgrounds. Adoption of the LFC's standards when teaching pronunciation would allow for a more efficient allocation of class time, as teachers can focus on the most damaging elements first and quickly bring the learners up to basic communicative competence in an international setting. Additionally, the LFC allows speakers to express their cultural identities through

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variance in items that do not damage intelligibility, instead of being asked to completely assume NS accents that may be irrelevant for NNS-NNS international communication. If we return to the previous example of a Chinese and an Italian national using English as a medium of communication, there does not appear to be any obvious reason why they should be asked to adopt traditional NS accents such as General American (GA) or the British Received Pronunciation (RP)—the situation does not involve the USA or the UK in any way.

The components of the LFC (Jenkins, 2000, 2002) are based on research examining the pronunciation features that lead to breakdowns in communication for NNS-NNS interactions. As the desired goal with the LFC is mutual intelligibility, the core items in the LFC represent the areas with the largest potential for unrecoverable phonological errors in an international setting.

The Lingua Franca Core

There are several key components that make up the Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2000, p. 159), as detailed below. Importantly, the full NS consonantal inventory must be learned with the ability to differentiate between any two sounds. Exceptions are with the /θ/ sound, as in ***Th**ursday*, and the /ð/ sound, as in ***th**erefore*, where substitutions do not interfere with intelligibility. Japanese learners tend to substitute /s/ and /z/, respectively, and this is acceptable by LFC standards. Additionally, the intervocalic flap sound [ɾ] heard in General American (GA)-accented speech in words such as *ma**tt**er* can be misinterpreted as /d/, so the LFC prescribes the British Received Pronunciation (RP) approach where [t] is pronounced in all environments.

The voiceless stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ should be aspirated when occurring in a stressed syllable in word-initial position. Failure to produce proper aspiration can lead to the sounds being misinterpreted as their voiced counterparts /b/, /d/, and /g/. As for further consonant sounds, close approximations to NS consonant sounds are generally acceptable unless they are unrecognizable or are perceived as closer to a different phoneme than intended.

Vowel quality can differ from traditional NS norms as long as they are consistent and the long-short distinction is maintained. One exception is the vowel /ɜ/ as in bird, which can cause problems with intelligibility if altered, and so should be produced according to NS norms. However, vowels should be shortened when occurring before a word-final voiceless consonant (e.g., *pick*) but kept at full length before a word-final voiced consonant (e.g., *pig*). This is both articulatorily easier to produce and aids listeners in recovering the correct interpretation of a word.

Word-initial consonant clusters should not be simplified through elision (e.g., *promise* as [pɒmɪs]). If necessary, addition through epenthesis (e.g., *promise* as [pərɒmɪs]) is less damaging to intelligibility. Consonant clusters in medial or final position can only be simplified according to NS norms, as other simplifications lead to intelligibility problems.

Finally, although syllable stress within a word is not vital to ELF intelligibility, nuclear stress (i.e., the stressed word in a sentence) is important. Rules for unmarked and contrastive nuclear stress should be acquired.

The Japanese ELT Context

The English Language Teaching (ELT) context in Japan presents various implications when applying the LFC. The Japanese government has been increasingly promoting English education as a tool for international communication, and has recently been placing more focus on the development of spoken English skills (Sakamoto, 2012). This suggests that the teaching of pronunciation according to the LFC would be very relevant and perhaps superior to the current practice of assuming NS (often the native accent of the particular instructor) norms. However, Japanese-L1-speaking students bring their own specific difficulties in acquiring the LFC items.

The Japanese language consists of, with the notable exception of /n/, entirely open syllables, with consonants always followed by vowels (Walker, 2010). This leads to Japanese L1 students adding extra vowels to

break up consonant clusters when speaking English, which, although superior to consonant deletion with regards to intelligibility, can still have deleterious effects in ELF communication as the resulting word may sometimes be much longer than the original.

Most of the consonants in English have a near-equivalent in Japanese, although weak aspiration of /t/, /p/, and /k/ in word-initial contexts can lead to intelligibility problems (Walker, 2010). Correct aspiration in these contexts should be emphasized with Japanese learners.

The most obvious difficulty for Japanese learners is acquisition of the /l/ and /r/ English phonemes. The Japanese language uses only a single liquid, /ɾ/, which is phonetically similar to the intervocalic flap heard in GA-accented speech (as in the previous example, matter), and is usually transcribed into the Roman alphabet as r (Riney, Takada, & Ota, 2000). The flap often produced by Japanese L1 learners for both /l/ and /r/ has been found to be variously categorized as /t/, /d/, /l/, /r/, /gr/, and /dl/ by listeners, so correct production of the English /l/ and /r/ are vital to intelligibility (summarized in Riney & Flege, 1998).

Other areas of concern with segmentals are in the dropping of /w/ sounds before any vowel other than /a/, the Japanese substitution of the voiceless bilabial fricative [Φ] for /f/ or /h/ before the vowel /u/, and the Japanese substitution of the uvular nasal [ɴ] for /n/ in word-final context, leading to the impression that the sound has been dropped (Walker, 2010).

Practical Suggestions

An ESL classroom with students from different L1 backgrounds provides an excellent avenue to practice producing and receiving ELF at an intelligible level through group work. However, in a monolingual EFL environment such as is common in Japan, group work can lead to convergence on non-LFC targets and fossilization of forms that may not be intelligible in an ELF context (Jenkins, 2002).

Walker (2010) suggests using recordings of ELF speakers with different accents to improve students' receptive capacities in a monolingual classroom. Unfortunately, there are few such materials widely available at this time, but Internet sources such as YouTube can provide excellent examples of ELF speakers. ELF learners require exposure to a wide range of accents beyond just the teacher's native accent.

Student-made recordings can be an effective teaching tool in monolingual classrooms (Chernen, 2011; Walker, 2005). The teacher should suggest a specific LFC area to focus on (e.g., nuclear stress), and students can record and re-record their pronunciation attempts until they are satisfied with their production. Extensive use of minimal pair practice (e.g., *pat/bat*, *red/led*, *bird/bard*), both productively and receptively, is another excellent method for acquiring these difficult LFC features (Walker, 2010).

The /l/ and /r/ phonemes can be further illustrated through examples of tongue placement. The English /r/ is produced with the tongue tip not in contact with any part of the mouth, and demonstrating this explicitly can help students to differentiate between /l/ and /r/ (Walker, 2010).

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Although the NS-NNS teacher paradigm is complicated (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999), ELF pronunciation teaching is one area where a NNS teacher is clearly at an advantage. A teacher who shares the same L1 background as the students can provide a realistically-attainable model for production as well as relevant insight into his or her own ELF use in international settings, including which areas provided the most difficulty.

If learners are enrolled in a class with the intent to learn English for international communication, traditional NS norms for pronunciation may be less relevant, as the goal is to quickly reach communicative competence rather than to mimic a NS accent. In such a class, the teacher should be prepared to alter his or her standards on acceptable pronunciation and allow for variation in non-

core items while being strict about items with the potential to cause intelligibility breakdowns. Of course, students who wish to obtain a NS-like accent for personal reasons can be encouraged and instructed further, but it may be unfair to subject the entire class to NS norms. Although individual teaching situations vary greatly, all English teachers in Japan, whether NS or NNS, should at least be aware of the concept of ELF and of the LFC so that it may be correctly applied where necessary.

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