The globalisation of English: teaching the pronunciation of ELF

Robin Walker continues his series on the theme of English as a Lingua Franca.

In my first article on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (*MET* Vol. 24 Issue 2) we saw how the goal for pronunciation teaching is international intelligibility rather than proximity to a native-speaker accent. We also briefly saw that intelligibility in ELF is usually achieved when speakers are competent in the pronunciation features described in the Lingua Franca Core (LFC). In this article I want to look at the LFC in greater detail, and then go on to see how we can put it to work in a classroom environment.

The LFC and error in pronunciation for ELF

The LFC draws our attention to the five areas of pronunciation that research has shown are important for mutual intelligibility when English is used for international communication. Here, however, for reasons of space, I want to concentrate on only two of these. For detailed coverage of the other features, and also for a discussion of non-LFC pronunciation features, you might like to read Chapter 2 of my handbook on ELF pronunciation (Walker, 2010).

1. **Consonant sounds.** In his research into ELF communication in SE Asia, David Deterding found that '… the greatest impact on intelligibility comes from consonants' (Deterding, 2013: 91). Replacing /n/ with /l/, for example, meant that words like *nearby, noisy* or *next* were not understood even in clear contexts.

Similarly, Spanish speakers of English who make *vote* sound like *boat* or Portuguese speakers who make *chair* sound like *share* are going to have problems of intelligibility. A high level of competence in the pronunciation of English consonants, then, is a top priority for ELF.

There are certain exceptions to this, the most notable being the dental fricatives /θ/ (*think, through, three*) and /ð/ (*this, then, father*), which are represented in spelling by the letters 'th'. Certain variations of these two consonants have been shown to be intelligible in ELF, the most widely understood variations being [t̪] for /d̪/ and [d] for /ð/. Another relatively common variation is the use of /θ/ as [s], which is typical of French speakers of English, and /ð/ as [z], which is typical of German, Russian and Japanese speakers of English.

Interestingly, the dental fricatives /θ/ nor /ð/ are absent from the majority of the world's languages. They are also missing from a number of native-speaker varieties of English; speakers with an Irish accent, for example, pronounce *thin* like *tin*, and *dare* like *there*, and the same is true of African American English and Indian English. The key issue for us as teachers, though, is that if your learners find /θ/ and /ð/ very difficult, and as a 'default setting' use one of the substitutions we've just looked at, no action is needed on our behalf because the alternative sounds are intelligible in ELF.

The situation is similar with the sound /r/. Speakers of English from many different language backgrounds use a rolled 'r' (*alveolar trill*) at the beginning of words. This is especially noticeable in words like *run, rabbit* or *ready*, and the use of this trill is a source of constant desperation for English language teachers the world over. However, this needn't be so because quite apart from the fact that a number of important native speaker accents also pronounce the letter 'r' in this way, this trilled 'r' is perfectly intelligible in ELF communication. In fact, it is the commonest pronunciation of 'r' in this setting.

2. **Consonant cluster simplification.** If you speak a language like Polish, which is notorious for its impossible consonant clusters, as in *Gniezno or Bydgoszcz*, then the clusters of English are relatively straightforward. Learners from languages like Japanese, Arabic, Turkish or Spanish, on the other hand, find many English clusters a major challenge. Faced with this difficulty, learners employ two radically different strategies. The first is to simply delete one of the consonants, leaving *product* as *poduk*, for example. The impact of such deletions is often so great that even context fails to clarify the intended meaning, and in Deterding's SE Asia data *phrase* was understood as *phase, flaming* as *fuming, plough* as *power* and *process* as *causes* (Deterding, 2013: 45).

A second strategy for dealing with consonant clusters is to insert a short, weak vowel between the consonants to make the cluster more manageable. Turkish speakers of English, for example, will often insert a short /ē/ before or after an 's', so stone will sound like *ᶦstone* or *sᶦtone*, whilst Spanish speakers add a short /e/ before any combination of /s/+consonant, which leaves them living in *ᵉSpain*, much to the dismay of their English teachers. However, although *sᶦtone* and *ᵉSpain* may sound foreign to a native speaker, the addition of the vowel is much less damaging to intelligibility than the deletion of one of the consonants, which would leave *stone* as *tone,* and *Spain* as *pain*.

Of the two strategies, then, deleting one of the consonants to simplify a cluster can affect intelligibility considerably, especially with word-initial consonants, whilst the insertion of a weak vowel seldom causes problems in ELF. For us as teachers, the relative impact of the two strategies has clear implications:

1. It is *not* necessary to spend classroom time correcting learners who use the vowel insertion strategy.
2. It *is* necessary to correct learners who use the strategy of deletion.
3. A useful technique to overcome the problem of deletion is to train learners to deliberately insert a short vowel.

From what I have just said about clusters, but also from what I said earlier about consonants, it should be apparent that what constitutes an error in ESL/EFL settings is not necessarily an error in ELF. In practice one of the biggest problems facing teachers new to an ELF pronunciation is the difficulty they have in redefining learner error in their own minds. The following are classic errors for Farsi speakers of English as foreign language (adapted from Swan and Smith, 2001):

- /θ/ nor /ð/ tend to be confused or pronounced as /t/
- /ŋ/ may be pronounced as /n/ and /g/
- /w/ and /v/ tend to be confused
- /r/ is a weak trill or tap

- speakers add a short vowel either before or in the middle of various English clusters.

Many of these ESL/EFL errors are characteristic of speakers from other L1 backgrounds, too, but which of them is an error in ELF?

Teaching techniques for ELF pronunciation

Despite the radically different conceptualisation of error in ELF pronunciation, the majority of the techniques and activities that we use when teaching for ESL or EFL, are applicable to ELF, too, just as they are to the teaching of the pronunciation of any additional language. Of course, the techniques and activities that focus on consonants and clusters, together with those that practise vowel length and sentence stress, are of particular use to ELF pronunciation given their core importance for international intelligibility. However, certain other techniques are also needed in the ELF teacher's armory in order to prepare learners for the vast array of accents they will meet when using their English. This is especially true of classrooms where the learners all share the same first language, the commonest teaching situation at a world level.

In classrooms where the students come from mixed-L1 backgrounds, learners are constantly exposed to different L1-influenced accents and so can quickly become skilled both at understanding English whatever the speakers' accents, or at adjusting their own pronunciation to make themselves more intelligible. These processes of *receptive* and *productive phonological accommodation* occur almost naturally in mixed-L1 groups, particularly while students carry out the sort of communication tasks that make up so much of oral work in ELT today.

In contrast, in shared-L1 classes, when English is taught in the learner's country of birth, exposure to different accents of English can be very limited. Worse still, any adjustments to output during communication tasks tend to be in the direction of the learners'

mother-tongue pronunciation. While this strategy usually makes speakers more intelligible to each other at the immediate local level, it frequently makes them much less intelligible internationally. The 'collateral damage' from communication tasks in shared-L1 classrooms means that teachers need to deliberately introduce activities to train learners in the vital ELF skills of receptive and productive accommodation.

1. **Receptive accommodation.** What learners need most in order to deal with different accents of English is exposure to these very accents. John Field's (2008) research into listening confirms that through repeated, guided exposure, we normally become better at understanding not just the target accents, but also other accents, even ones we have never heard before. Julia Scales and her colleagues reached a similar conclusion through their work, and suggested that 'English language learners could hear, analyse and compare key features among a variety of accents. Such an approach would address both intelligibility and listening comprehension, increasing communication flexibility and respect for accent diversity' (Scales *et al*, 2006: 735).

Today the internet provides access to an almost infinite number of non-native speaker English accents, via multiple websites such as YouTube, but also including:

- English Language Learning Library Online: http://www.elllo.org
- International Dialects of English Archive: http://www.dialectsarchive.com/
- Accent Archive: http://accent.gmu.edu
- Three Minute Thesis: http://threeminutethesis.org/index.html

When working on accent variation, learners should initially be exposed to scripted texts such as those found on the Speech Accent Archive and the IDEA websites, or on the CD that accompanies *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as*

a Lingua Franca (Walker, 2010). In the classroom, we should work on a chosen recording first as part of a standard listening session. This is important – familiarity with the content frees learners to focus their attention on the ELF pronunciation point(s).

Returning to the same recording on another day, then:

- invite your learners to read the script of the recording to ensure complete familiarity with the content

- listen to two or three differently-accented versions of the same script

- try to match each accent to the right country from a short list of options

- play each version again, stopping as appropriate to comment on features of the speaker's accent

- compare the accents on the recording with the learners' own.

The *ELF Pronunciation* website run by Katy Simpson and Laura Patsko (https://elfpron.wordpress.com) shows teachers how to use videos to help learners to focus on an unfamiliar accent. The key point, though, is that learners who will be using English as a Lingua Franca, especially those who study in shared-L1 settings, need guided exposure to different accents if they are to survive outside the classroom.

2. Productive accommodation.
In addition to being able to accommodate their listening to the different accents, ELF speakers also need to be able to consciously adjust their speech to facilitate the listening task for their interlocutors. The simplest, most wide-reaching strategy for accommodating to your listener is to slow down. If your listener can't follow you, it doesn't matter how fluent you are, but often, on slowing down, speakers automatically articulate more clearly, and listeners have more time to 'decode' what they are hearing.

Another very effective way of accommodating to your listener(s) is to regularly 'punctuate' your speech with pauses in appropriate places. This not only gives the listener time to decode

the speech stream, but also creates meaningful 'packets' of information, making it easier for them to grasp the intended meaning.

In addition to these two straightforward techniques for helping the listener, it is essential that speakers be made aware of their own particular pronunciation problems. Once this awareness has been achieved, speakers will usually be much quicker at correcting themselves if they make a pronunciation mistake. In her early research Jennifer Jenkins (2000) recorded a Japanese speaker doing just this. The speaker was describing a set of six pictures. Based on what he heard, the Swiss-German listener had to decide which of the pictures coincided best with what the speaker was describing. Because of the /r – l/ confusion that is typical of Japanese speakers, the listener frowned on hearing a [gleē] house being mentioned. When she saw this, the speaker quickly adjusted her pronunciation to grey (Jenkins, 2000: 82). This small, but deliberate adjustment was enough to allow the listener to understand, and the pair were able to continue.

The idea of work on productive accommodation is new to most teachers, so activities such as those described by Mark Hancock are especially valuable. In *Accommodation Games 2* (2013), Mark uses his now classic 'Pronunciation journey' activity to work on the problem that Brazilian Portuguese speakers have with unstressed final syllables: a problem that means that *coffee* can sound like *cough*, and *cough* like *coffee*. The same activity could be used for the /b –v/ confusion of Spanish speakers, or the /w – v/ confusion of German speakers. The point of this and similar activities is that learners become aware, on the one hand, of which aspects of their own English accent could prove problematical to a less competent ELF speaker, and on the other, of how to accommodate their speech to make themselves more intelligible to their listener, whether by slowing down, by using pauses strategically, or by monitoring for a potentially problematic feature of their accent.

Intelligibility in ELF pronunciation is an accessible goal in terms of the

relatively small number of pronunciation areas in which speakers have to be competent. Competence in the LFC is seldom as onerous as attaining an equal level of competence for ESL or EFL pronunciation. On the other hand, ELF speakers will operate in a world populated by multiple accents, and the ability to accommodate to these, both as listeners (receptively) and as speakers (productively) is a core ELF skill. Here we have seen how this skill plays out in terms of pronunciation. In my next article we'll look at how ELF users can also accommodate their vocabulary to the challenges of English as a Lingua Franca.

References and further reading

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