Accent, accommodation and intelligibility in ELF

Robin Walker looks at aspects of pronunciation in English as a lingua franca.

In an earlier article on English as a lingua franca we saw how the accents ELF users encounter as they communicate globally vary enormously. Learners need to know how to deal with this variation, and in this article we will look at the two main ways of making these adjustments, and at one way of keeping communication channels open when these fail.

The first way of making adjustments is through receptive phonological accommodation. This is the term used to describe what happens when a listener shifts their expectations as to what individual sounds, syllables, words or whole phrases sound like. If these adjustments are successful, the listener will be able to understand a speaker whose accent is different to their own.

Productive phonological accommodation, in contrast, is what we do as speakers in order to make ourselves more easily understood by. The most obvious example of this is simply speaking more slowly. Another example is when people deliberately articulate their words more clearly. The aim with these and other strategies is to be understood more easily, but with productive accommodation it is the speaker who makes the adjustment, not the listener.

Sometimes neither receptive nor productive accommodation is successful. However, rather than sitting in silence or hoping things will become clearer later, skilled interlocutors often embark upon a process of negotiation of meaning. This involves speaker and listener working together and applying a range of strategies in order to understand each other.

Activities for improving receptive phonological accommodation

Unlike online dictionaries, listeners do not store a precise set of pronunciations of sounds, syllables or word in their memories. Instead, as John Field explains (2003), they build up an ever-increasing number of examples of different versions of the same sound, syllable or word. By accumulating these different, real-life examples of a given pronunciation item, language learners acquire ever-increasing levels of tolerance towards the variations in pronunciation that they encounter as they use their English around the world.

What Field is telling us here is that if we want our learners to improve their receptive accommodation, that is to improve their ability to understand English spoken with different non-standard accents, we need to expose them to these accents. Julia Scales and her colleagues came to a similar conclusion through their research into international intelligibility. They suggest that ‘English language learners could hear, analyze 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, 2006: 735)

Learners using their English in an accent-rich environment such as a major city are exposed to a significant range of accents on a daily basis. Many students, however, predominantly speak English in class with friends and colleagues who have similar accents because of sharing the same mother tongue. In this situation technology allows us to access different accents without leaving the classroom. Various websites are useful in this respect:

- The Speech Accent Archive (http://accent.gmu.edu) offers us speech samples from a wide variety of language backgrounds. Native and non-native speakers of English read the same paragraph. Each sample is carefully transcribed and notes are provided on non-standard pronunciations.

- The English Listening Library Online (www.elllo.org) contains over 1,000 recordings made by learners and teachers around the world. The recordings can be filtered by country, level or topic, and the orthographic transcriptions can be hidden from the listener or made available as needed.

- My English Voice (http://myenglishvoice.com) offers us the chance to join an online school for users of English as a lingua franca, with a focus on speaking and listening skills. Subscribers are able to listen to speakers with different accents and get tips on how to communicate more clearly.

- YouGlish (http://youglish.com) uses
sophisticated algorithms to identify a given word or phrase in over 20M YouTube videos. The site allows us to hear the same word pronounced in different accents and contexts. However, unlike an online dictionary, where users hear words in isolation, YouGlish lets you hear the word pronounced as part of a piece of authentic speech.

Whatever the source of our recordings, it is important to differentiate between scripted speech, as with the Speech Accent Archive, and spontaneous speech, as with the other sites. For scripted speech a useful classroom procedure could be to ask your students to:

- read the scripted text for familiarity and comprehension (it’s only when familiar with a content that learners can focus properly on pronunciation)
- listen to three or four versions of text with markedly different accents (clear differences help learners to ‘spot’ accents)
- match each accent to countries on a world map (this gives a focus to the initial listening, although it’s harder to do than might at first appear)
- listen to each accent in isolation focussing either on what individual learners find ‘odd’ / ‘unexpected’ / ‘unintelligible’, or on a pronunciation feature that is problematic for them as an group.

With sources like ELLLO, My English Voice, or YouGlish, the listening texts are unscripted so a slightly different procedure will apply. One suggestion is to get learners to listen for how different speakers deal with specific pronunciation features (the ‘th’ sounds / problematic consonant clusters / vowel length /, etc.). As part of work on sensitising learners to variation in the vowel length /, etc.). As part of work on problematic consonant clusters / pronunciation features (the ‘th’ sounds

*comment on how the speaker deals with this feature.*

Finally, when a group of learners regularly comes into contact with a single non-standard accent because of work or study circumstances, it can be very effective to focus exclusively on the specific features of that accent. Canadian researchers Tracy Derwing and Murray Munro did this with a group of Canadian-born trainee social workers who were coming into regular contact with Vietnamese immigrants:

‘W]e pointed out regularities in Vietnamese-accented speech, such as consonant cluster reduction and final consonant deletion. Exercises were devised in which the social work students predicted how a Vietnamese speaker might pronounce a given English word. By the end of the study, the students reported a major gain in confidence in interacting with speakers with an L2 accent.’ (Derwing & Munro, 2011: 06)

**Activities for improving productive phonological accommodation**

If receptive accommodation allows us to adjust our expectations as listeners, then productive accommodation allows us to consciously adjust our output in order to make it easier for listeners to understand us.

With groups where learners come from a mixture of different L1 backgrounds, information gap, problem-solving or other similar communication activities offer a natural environment for these deliberate adjustments to occur. Jennifer Jenkins’ (2000: 82) early work in this area reports a Japanese speaker describing a picture to a Swiss-German listener. When the speaker referred to a ‘grey house’ the listener frowned. On seeing this, the speaker adjusted her pronunciation to ‘grey’, and the pair were able to continue with the task.

In communication activities involving learners from mixed-L1 backgrounds, these small adjustments are made more or less deliberately, and in real time, until communication is successful. Gradually, however, successful adjustments ‘fashion’ a speakers’ pronunciation, causing it to converge, in the end, on an internationally intelligible accent. This process is summarised in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, communication activities have exactly the opposite effect with groups of learners who share the same L1. Here, driven by the desire to communicate, speakers tend to adjust their pronunciation towards their shared mother tongue phonology, which invariably leads to increased local intelligibility at the cost of reduced international intelligibility, as we see in Figure 2.

One way of providing learners in a shared-L1 environment with practice in deliberately modifying

**Figure 2. Convergence on shared L1 pronunciation and loss of international intelligibility by shared-L1 interlocutors.**
their pronunciation so as to achieve intelligibility is the use of student recordings (Walker, 2005). Here learners are required to make a recording of a monologue or dialogue that they are already familiar with. Before making the recordings, the teacher focuses the group’s attention on a selection of problematic pronunciation areas that feature in the text to be recorded. These areas can be explored in class under the guidance of the teacher, who would then:

- restate the specific pronunciation focus of the recording to be made
- organise the class into small groups
- invite the groups to rehearse their scripts (both in class time and out of class as part of the task)
- encourage the members of each group to comment on the correctness of each other’s pronunciation of the target features prior to making the final recording.

The final point is central to success with this activity. The feedback that group members give each other on the correctness of target features parallels the spontaneous feedback that characterises communication tasks with mixed-L1 groups. It is this peer feedback that provides students in shared-L1 classes with the motivation to make conscious adjustments to their own pronunciation.

An effective and entertaining way to offer learners the chance to accommodate both receptively and productively, is through games such as Mark Hancock’s Pronunciation Journey (Hancock, 2013). In this variation on standard minimal-pair discrimination exercises, the speaker’s choice of one or other member of a minimal pair leads listeners to one of 16 possible destinations, listeners turning left or right at each of four junctions based on what they hear. Figure 3, for example, was designed for Brazilian learners of English, who often add a slight vowel after a final consonant so that cough can sound like coffee. The sequence cook (1), foggy (2), notice (3) and wind (4), for example, would take listeners to Lagos.

Figure 3. Pronunciation Journey for Brazilian speakers of English (first published in Speak Out!, the newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation SIG)

![Pronunciation Journey](image-url)
Traditionally the speaker in this game is a (near-)native speaker and so it is assumed that any errors are on the part of the listeners. In Accommodation Games 2, however, Hancock re-purposes the activity and leads students to the moment where they work together in the absence of the teacher, who now encourages both speaker and listeners to take equal responsibility for the success of the communication. The key to the activity is an approach to feedback which foregrounds communication rather than being right or wrong. To achieve communication, both speaker and listener have equal responsibility to accommodate to each other, and to keep trying if they do not succeed the first time.” (Hancock, 2013: 30)

Negotiation of meaning

Despite speaker/listener’s best efforts to accommodate to each other, receptively and/or productively, there will be occasions in which communication fails. When this happens it is essential that the speaker and the listener accept that they do not understand each other, and then work together to try to repair the damage that has lead to the breakdown.

When the Swiss-German listener we met earlier frowned upon hearing ‘gley house’, he was initiating a process of negotiation of meaning by overtly signalling his non-understanding. His frown acted as a ‘repair request’. In addition to facial expressions, these requests can be made through direct questions, through attempts to interpret what you heard but have not understood, or through repetition of the word that was not understood.

Yumi Matsumoto (2011) documents all three of these repair request types in informal conversations between non-native speaker dorm mates at a US university. On one occasion, when two female ELF speakers, Yuka and Pham, are discussing a boyfriend that Yuka had 20 years previously, Yuka fails to understand the word ‘present’, and Pham responds by saying [wi βɛ dʒtəbl]. However, with the repetition Agus appears to understand, although to be sure that this is so, Shuji then says ‘[βɛ tɪŋ βɛ tɪŋ] and fruits’, at which point Agus indicates that he now does understand Shuji’s particular pronunciation of ‘vegetables’, and, as with Pham and Yuka, the conversation continues, even despite Shuji’s non-standard pronunciations of ‘vegetable’.

Accents complicate spoken interaction in English and we might be tempted to think that the world would be better with only one or two standard accents in circulation. But this is never going to happen, especially when English acts as a lingua franca. Nor would a monolingual world be desirable, not least because as Richard Cauldwell reminds us ‘our accents give a flavour or a colour to the sound substance of speech’ (Cauldwell, 2013: 159), and provide us with part of our identity. This means that ELF today must turn its attention to pronunciation teaching.

In another conversation Yuka and Pham are talking about how Yuka spent her time during the week and at the weekend. When Pham asks ‘So what did you do [at wɪkɪdɪ]?’ Yuka interprets this as ‘every day’, but is not sure she has heard correctly and so signals her uncertainty by asking ‘Every day?’. Pham responds by saying [wɪkɪdɪz], putting extra stress on the second syllable and pronouncing the /z/ clearly so as to emphasise the plural. Once again, the two have successfully negotiated meaning through deliberate adjustments to pronunciation.

In a third conversation about food, Agus fails to understand the word ‘vegetable’ because of the initial ‘v’ sounding like a ‘b’ to him. To signal this, he repeats the first syllable of the word and says [βɛ dʒ] with a rising tone. His interlocutor, Shuji, fails to make any adjustments to his pronunciation and simply repeats [βɛ tɪŋ βɛ tɪŋ]. However, with the repetition Agus appears to understand, although to be sure that this is so, Shuji then says ‘[βɛ tɪŋ βɛ tɪŋ] and fruits’, at which point Agus indicates that he now does understand Shuji’s particular pronunciation of ‘vegetables’, and, as with Pham and Yuka, the conversation continues, even despite Shuji’s non-standard pronunciations of ‘vegetable’.

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References and further reading


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