

# Intelligi... Sorry, what did you say?

**Robin Walker**

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# Intelligi... Sorry, what did you say?



1) Intelligibility and accent today



2) What do we mean by intelligibility?



3) Can intelligibility be measured?



4) Can we teach intelligibility?

# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

## Appendix 6 – ISE II Speaking and listening rating scale

### Appendix 6 – ISE II Speaking and listening rating scale

Score	Communicative effectiveness	Interactive listening	Language control
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Task fulfilment</li> <li>Appropriacy of contributions /turn-taking</li> <li>Repair strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension and relevant response</li> <li>Level of understanding</li> <li>Speech rate of examiner interventions</li> <li>Speed and accuracy of response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Range</li> <li>Accuracy/precision</li> <li>Effects of inaccuracies</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulfils the task very well</li> <li>Initiates and responds with effective turn-taking</li> <li>Effectively maintains and develops the interaction</li> <li>Solves communication problems naturally, if any</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands all interventions on a first hearing</li> <li>Interprets examiner's aims and viewpoints accurately by making links with earlier information</li> <li>Makes immediate and relevant responses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of grammatical structures/lexis flexibly to deal with topics at this level</li> <li>Consistently shows a high level of grammatical accuracy and lexical precision</li> <li>Errors do not impede communication</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulfils the task appropriately</li> <li>Initiates and responds appropriately</li> <li>Maintains and develops the interaction appropriately (eg expanding and developing ideas, and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands most interventions on a first hearing</li> <li>Interprets examiner's aims and viewpoints accurately</li> <li>Makes prompt and relevant response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses an appropriate range of grammatical structures/lexis to deal with topics at this level</li> <li>Shows a relatively high level of grammatical accuracy and lexical precision</li> </ul>

#### Delivery

- Intelligibility
- Lexical stress/intonation
- Fluency
- Effects on the listener

- Clearly intelligible
- Uses focal stress and intonation very effectively
- Effortlessly speaks very promptly and fluently
- Requires no careful listening

Trinity College London – Integrated Skills in English

# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

**Cambridge English**

**Assessing Speaking Performance – Level C1**  
 Reference (CEFR), and the descriptors for band 3 and above generally of at least C1 level.

C1	Grammatical Resource	Lexical Resource	Discourse Management	Pronunciation
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintains control of a wide range of grammatical forms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on familiar and unfamiliar topics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Produces extended stretches of language with ease and with very little hesitation.</li> <li>Contributions are relevant, coherent and varied.</li> <li>Uses a wide range of cohesive devices and discourse markers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is intelligible.</li> <li>Phonological features are used effectively to convey and enhance meaning.</li> </ul>

**Pronunciation**

- Is intelligible.
- Phonological features are used effectively to convey and enhance meaning.



# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

TOEFL iBT® Test

## Independent **SPEAKING** Rubrics

SCORE	GENERAL DESCRIPTION	DELIVERY	LANGUAGE USE	TOPIC
4	<b>SCORE</b>	<b>GENERAL DESCRIPTION</b>		<b>DELIVERY</b>
3	<b>4</b>	The response fulfills the demands of the task, with at most minor lapses in completeness. It is highly intelligible and exhibits sustained, coherent discourse. A response at this level is characterized by all of the following:		Generally well-paced flow (fluid expression). Speech is clear. It may include minor lapses, or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation patterns, which do not affect overall intelligibility.

# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

**IELTS™ SPEAKING: Band Descriptors (public version)**

Band	Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy	Pronunciation
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self-correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar</li> <li>speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features</li> <li>develops topics fully and appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics</li> <li>uses idiomatic language naturally and appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a full range of structures naturally and appropriately</li> <li>produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content-related and only rarely to search for language</li> <li>develops topics coherently and appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide vocabulary to convey precise meanings</li> <li>uses less common vocabulary and occasional idiomatic language</li> <li>uses paraphrasing</li> </ul>		
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence</li> <li>may demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction</li> <li>uses a range of connectives and of discourse markers with some flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses vocabulary to convey precise meanings</li> <li>uses some less common vocabulary and shows some inappropriate language</li> <li>uses paraphrasing</li> </ul>		
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is willing to speak at length, though may lose coherence at times due to occasional repetition, self-correction or hesitation</li> <li>uses a range of connectives and of discourse markers but not always appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has a wide range of vocabulary and makes some errors</li> <li>generally paraphrases</li> </ul>		
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>usually maintains flow of speech but uses repetition, self-correction and/or slow speech to keep going</li> <li>may over-use certain connectives and of discourse markers</li> <li>produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>manages to use a range of vocabulary</li> <li>attempts to use less common vocabulary</li> </ul>		

## Pronunciation

- uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety
- sustains flexible use of features throughout
- is effortless to understand

---

- uses a wide range of pronunciation features
- sustains flexible use of features, with only occasional lapses
- is easy to understand throughout; L1 accent has minimal effect on intelligibility

# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

CEFR 2019 Companion Volume, p47

## Phonology

For *Phonological Control*, an existing CEFR scale, a completely new set of descriptors was developed (see report by Enrica Piccardo). Phonology had been the least successful scale developed in the research behind the original descriptors. The phonology scale was the only CEFR illustrative descriptor scale for which a native speaker norm, albeit implicit, had been adopted. In an update, it appeared more appropriate to focus on intelligibility as the primary construct in phonological control, in line with current research, especially in the context of providing descriptors for building on plurilingual/pluricultural repertoires. The resulting Phonology project followed all three validation phases described below in relation to other new scales, with over 250 informants involved in each phase.



# 1) Intelligibility and accent today

CEFR 2019 Companion Volume, p134

Phonological control

...pronunciation seems to be (not a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation). In fact, the phonology scale was the least successful of those calibrated in the original research.

In language teaching, the phonological control of an idealised native speaker has traditionally been seen as the target, with accent being seen as a marker of poor phonological control. The focus on accent and on accuracy instead of on intelligibility has been detrimental to the development of the teaching of pronunciation. Idealised models that ignore the retention of accent lack consideration for context, sociolinguistic aspects and learners' needs. The current scale seemed to reinforce such views and for this reason, the scale was redeveloped from scratch. A full report on the sub-project is available on [CEFR website](#). From an extensive review of the literature and consultation with experts, the following core areas were identified to inform work on descriptor production:

- ▶ *articulation* including pronunciation of sounds/phonemes;
- ▶ *prosody* including intonation, rhythm and stress – both word stress and sentence stress – and speech rate/chunking;
- ▶ *accentedness* accent and deviation from a 'norm';
- ▶ *intelligibility*: accessibility of meaning for listeners, covering also the listeners' perceived difficulty in understanding (normally referred to as *comprehensibility*).



## 1) Intelligibility and accent today

- *more appropriate to focus on intelligibility*
- *detrimental to the development of pronunciation teaching*
- *Idealised models that ignore the retention of accent lack consideration of ... the learner's needs.*
- disempowering
- ignore 21<sup>st</sup> century reality of accent variation

## 1) Intelligibility and accent today

- research NS accents *not* the most intelligible

➤ Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979; Smith 1992

... there was no evidence of a breakdown in the functioning of English as an international lingua franca but that, interestingly...

... native speakers (from Britain and the US) were *not* found to be the most easily understood ...

... *nor* were they, as subjects, found to be the best able to understand the different varieties of English.

Being a native speaker does not seem to be as important as being fluent in English and familiar with several different national varieties.

## 1) Intelligibility and accent today

- research NS accents *not* the most intelligible
  - Smith 1979 + 1992
  - Graddol 2006

In organisations where English has become the corporate language, meetings sometimes go smoothly when no native speakers are present.



## 1) Intelligibility and accent today

- research NS accents *not* the most intelligible

- Smith 1979 + 1992

- Graddol 2006

- anecdote

there were people from all over . Central Eastern Europe . and elsewhere . and that was how it is . this . English . most wasn't most people's first language . except for the Americans . and the British . and nobody could understand the British

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2) What do we mean by intelligibility?



3) Can intelligibility be measured?



4) Can we teach intelligibility?

## 2) What do we mean by intelligibility?

**Abercrombie 1949** – ‘comfortably intelligible’

### **Smith & Nelson 1985**

- **intelligibility** = the basic recognition of words in the speech flow
- **comprehensibility** = the meaning of these words in context
- **interpretability** = the understanding of the speaker’s intention



It’s hot in here!



## 2) What do we mean by intelligibility?

### Derwing & Munro – 1995, 1997

- **intelligibility** = the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance (i.e. which words were said)
- **comprehensibility** = a listener's *perception* of how difficult it is to understand an utterance

#### Delivery

- ▶ Intelligibility
  - ▶ Lexical stress/intonation
  - ▶ Fluency
  - ▶ Effects on the listener
- 
- ▶ Clearly intelligible
  - ▶ Uses focal stress and intonation very effectively
  - ▶ Effortlessly speaks very promptly and fluently

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- **intelligibility** = the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance (i.e. which words were said)
- **comprehensibility** = a listener's *perception* of how difficult it is to understand an utterance
- **accentedness** = a listener's *perception* of how different a speaker's accent is from that of the L1 community

#### Delivery

- ▶ Intelligibility
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## 2) What do we mean by intelligibility?

### **Rajadurai 2007**

- accent ≠ intelligibility (cf. Derwing & Munro)
- research into intelligibility – invariably NS judges
- intelligibility ≠ one-way street

### **Listener's attitude (accent prejudice)**

- Rubin 1992
- Scales 2006
- Cauldwell 2013



## 2) What do we mean by intelligibility?

### Listener knowledge

- *the new drummer facilities*
- *the new drama facilities*
- *enZYME*



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### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

#### **Smith & Rafiqzad (1979)**

- cloze (fill in gaps)

#### **Derwing & Munro (2014)**

- True/False Qs
- Comprehension Qs
- transcription



### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

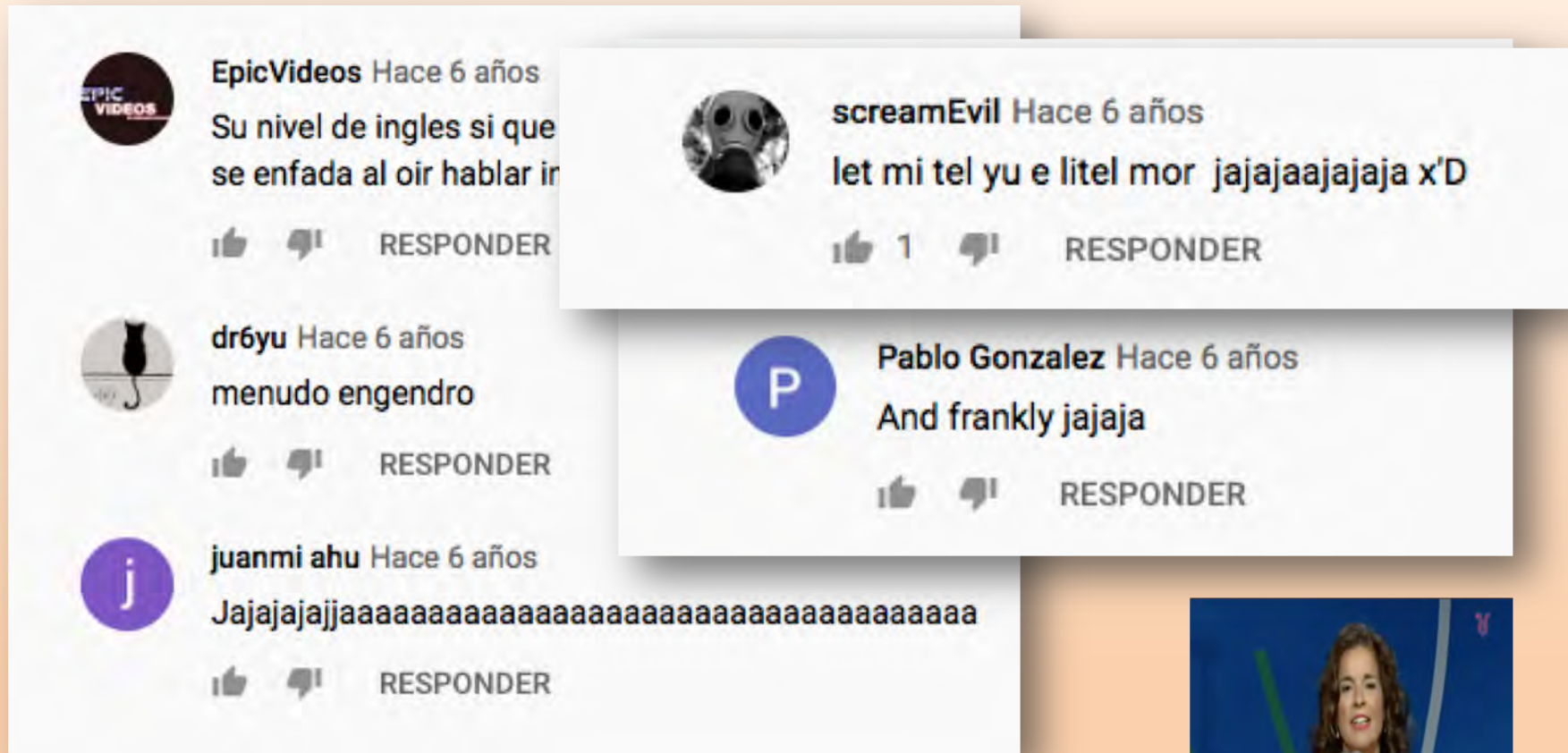


Ana Botella, the Mayor of Madrid, talking to the IOC (International Olympic Committee) Buenos, Aires, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xarUXTTssU>

### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

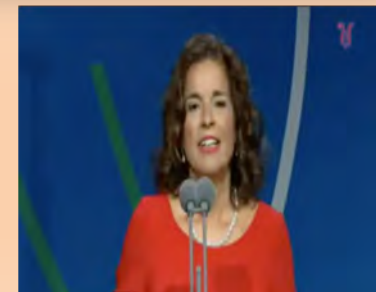
Thank you Ignacio, President *Rogue*, dear IOC members, Ladies and Gentlemen. I had the ...



The image shows a screenshot of a YouTube video player with several comments overlaid. The comments are:

- EpicVideos** Hace 6 años: Su nivel de ingles si que se enfada al oir hablar in...  
[Like] [Dislike] RESPONDER
- screamEvil** Hace 6 años: let mi tel yu e litel mor jajajaajajaja x'D  
[Like] 1 [Dislike] RESPONDER
- dr6yu** Hace 6 años: menudo engendro  
[Like] [Dislike] RESPONDER
- Pablo Gonzalez** Hace 6 años: And frankly jajaja  
[Like] [Dislike] RESPONDER
- juanmi ahu** Hace 6 años: Jajajajajaa  
[Like] [Dislike] RESPONDER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xarUXTTssU>



### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

**Jenkins (2000)**

#### **Lingua Franca Core**

- all consonants (variants ok for /θ, ð, r/)
- aspiration initial /p, t, k/
- initial & medial consonant clusters – no deletion
- vowel length & /ɜ:/ vowel quality
- word stress – “*a grey area*”
- nuclear stress

### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

**Deterding (2011 & 2013 – CMACE)**

**Lingua Franca Core**

- limited importance of word stress
- (deliberate) non-use vowel reduction

***BUT***

- aspiration /p, t, k/ not found important
- vowel length not found important



### 3) Can intelligibility be measured?

#### **Derwing & Munro (2014)**

Intelligibility is determined by:

- general speaking habits
- volume
- lexical stress
- nuclear stress
- rhythm
- syllable structure
- segmentals with a high functional load

Derwing & Munro (ESL)	Jenkins (ELF/EIL)	Deterding (ELF/EIL)
General speaking habits	–	–
Volume	–	–
Lexical stress	Lexical stress ?	Lexical stress ?
Nuclear stress	Nuclear stress	Nuclear stress
Rhythm	Weak forms – receptive competence	NO weak forms or vowel reduction
Syllable structure	Initial + medial clusters	Initial + medial clusters
Consonants with a high functional load	Most consonants & Aspiration /p, t, k/	Most consonants
Vowels with a high functional load	Variable quality Vowel quantity	Variable quality but not vowel quantity

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## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?

### SHORT COURSE FOCUS ON INTELLIGIBILITY: WHAT TYPE OF PROGRESS IS POSSIBLE?

This paper investigates the improvement in intelligibility made during a short spoken-English course for researchers. Analysis is based on recordings of five subjects' English, in which spontaneous speech and prepared speech were compared before and after instruction. Speech rate, pace, and word stress placement were examined for two reasons: these features may be important for intelligibility in the context of international conferences and they seem to be both teachable and learnable. All five subjects were adults at a French university but only two of them were native speakers of French. One was a native speaker of Bulgarian, one of Japanese and one of Greek. They attended a course whose goal was to improve the intelligibility of their spoken English in order to facilitate international communication with both native and non-native speakers.

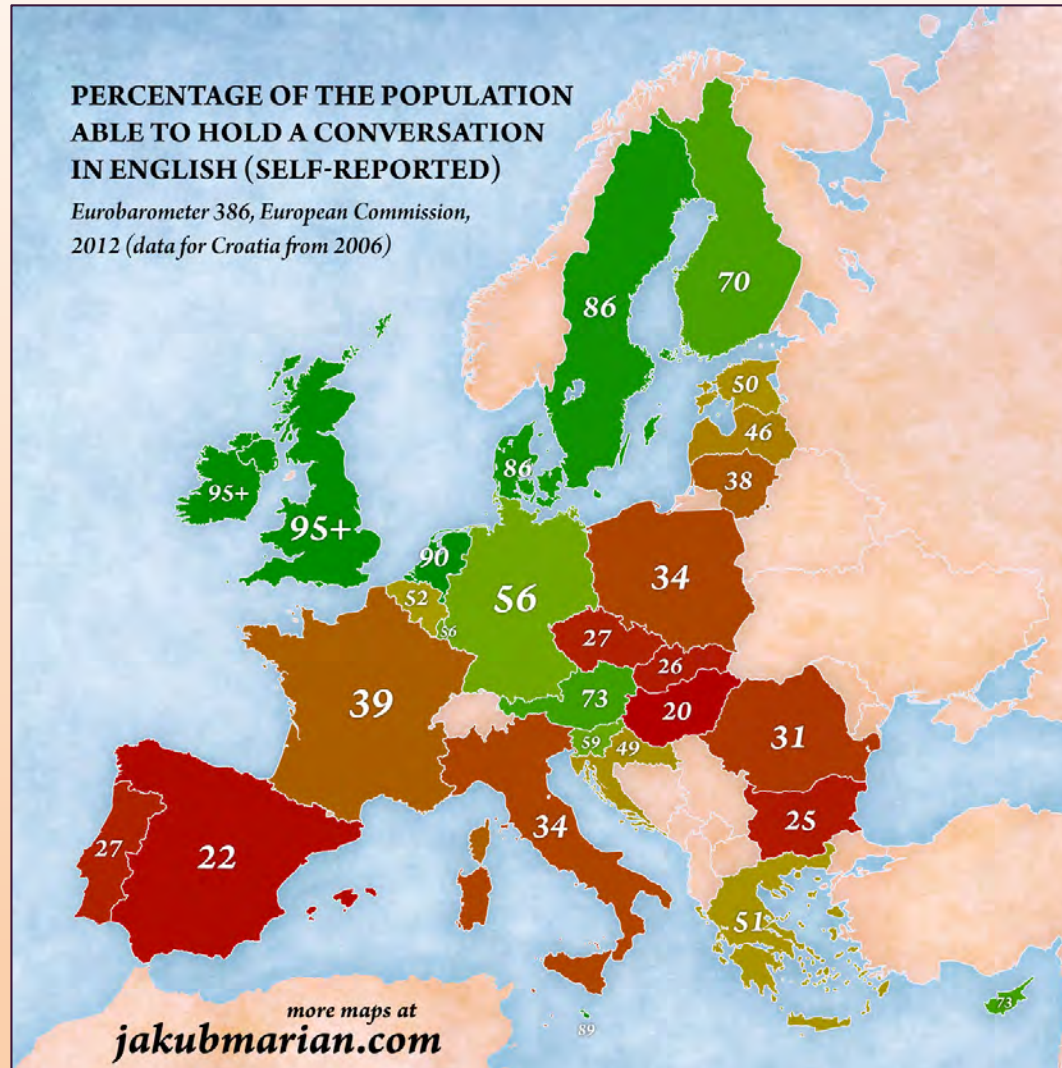
Henderson 2007

## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?

Feature of Intelligibility	EFL / ESL	ELF ≈ EIL
Consonants	✓	✓
Clusters	?	✓
Vowel quality	✓	?
Vowel length	✓	✓
Lexical stress	✓	✓
Schwa + weak forms	✓	X
Rhythm	✓	X
Nuclear stress	✓	✓



## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?



NS vs NNS populations

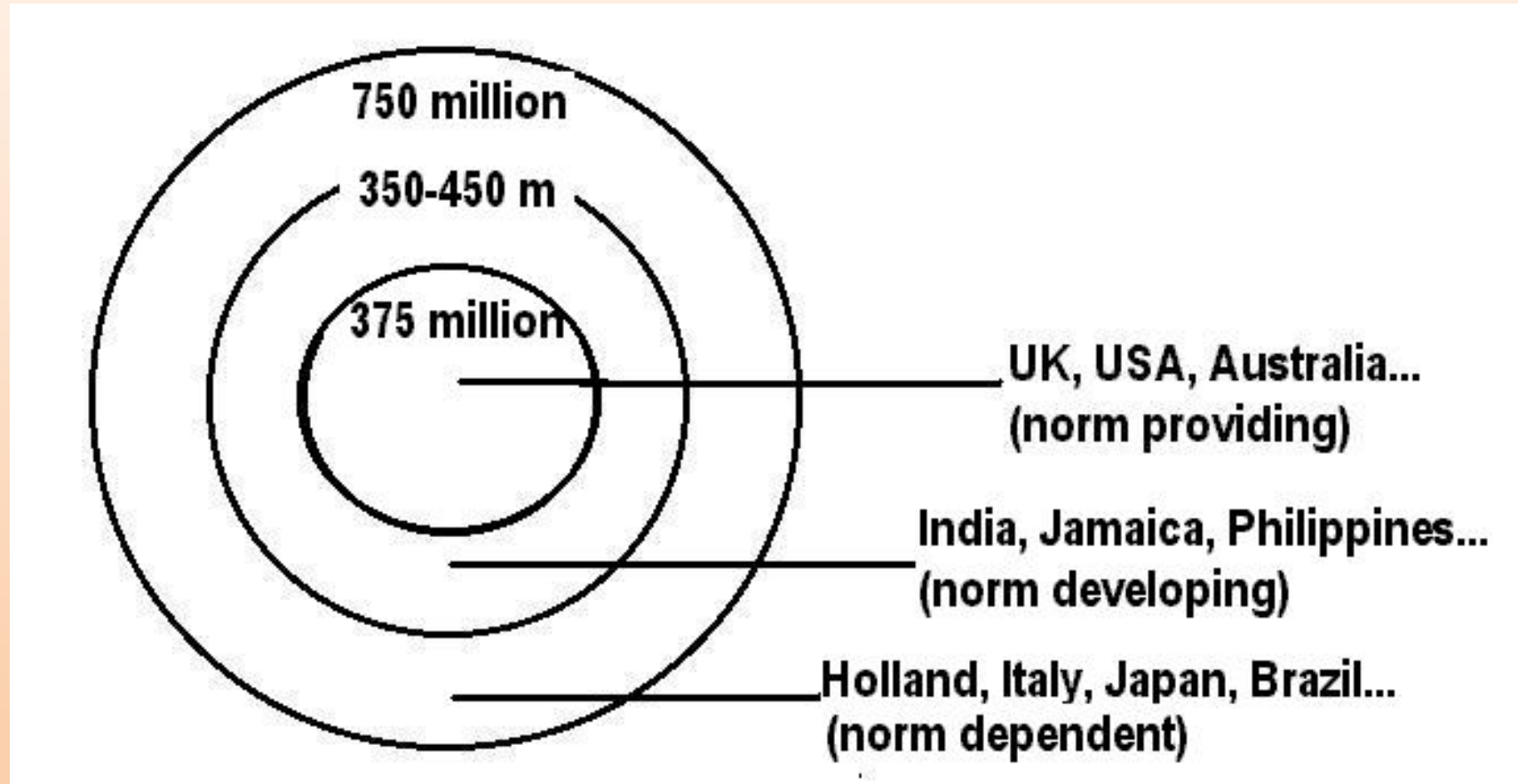
NSs – 380m

NNSs – 1.5 billion

<https://jakubmarian.com/map-of-the-percentage-of-people-speaking-english-in-the-eu-by-country/>

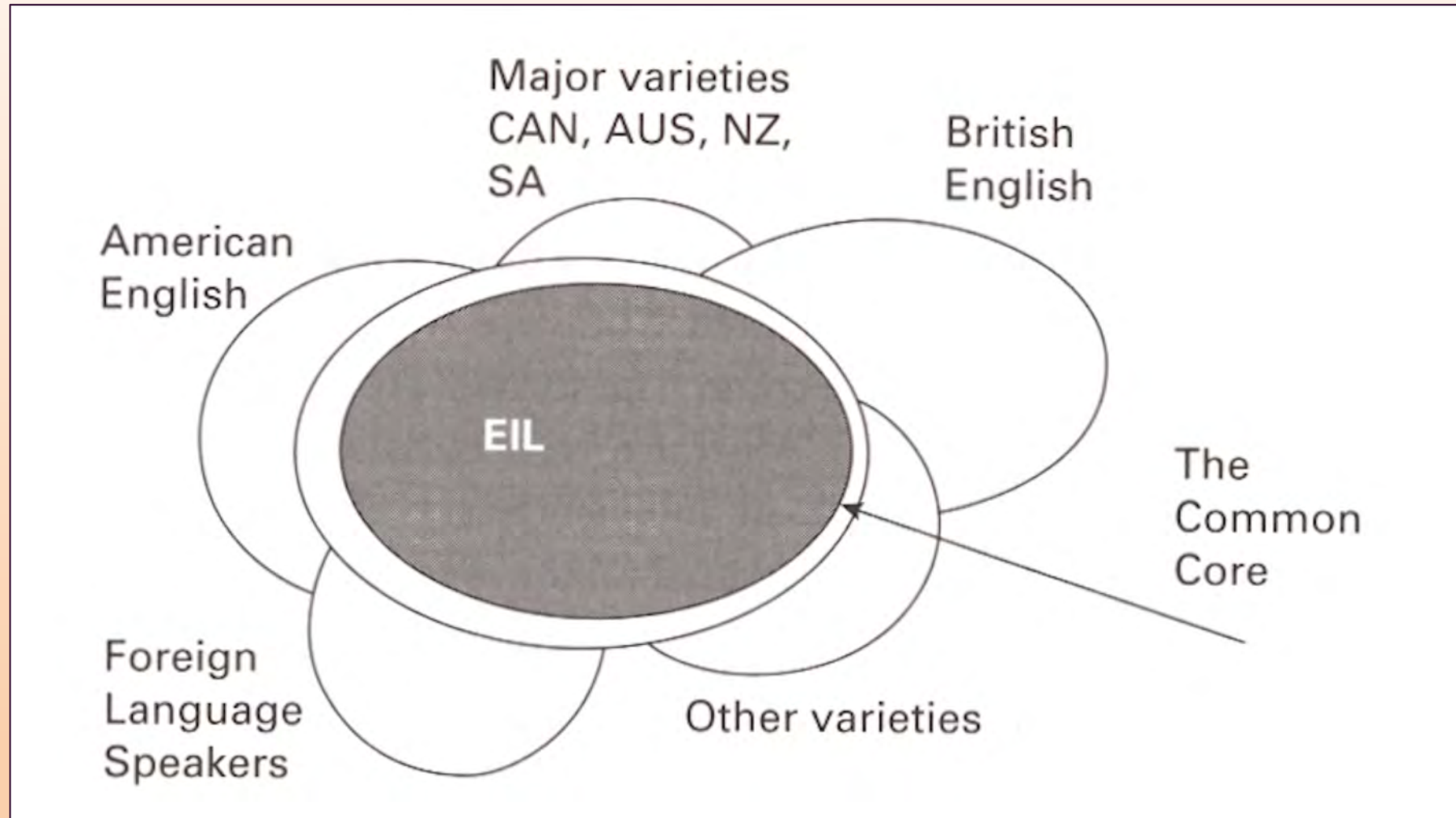
## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?

<http://host.uniroma3.it/docenti/boylan/text/white01.htm>



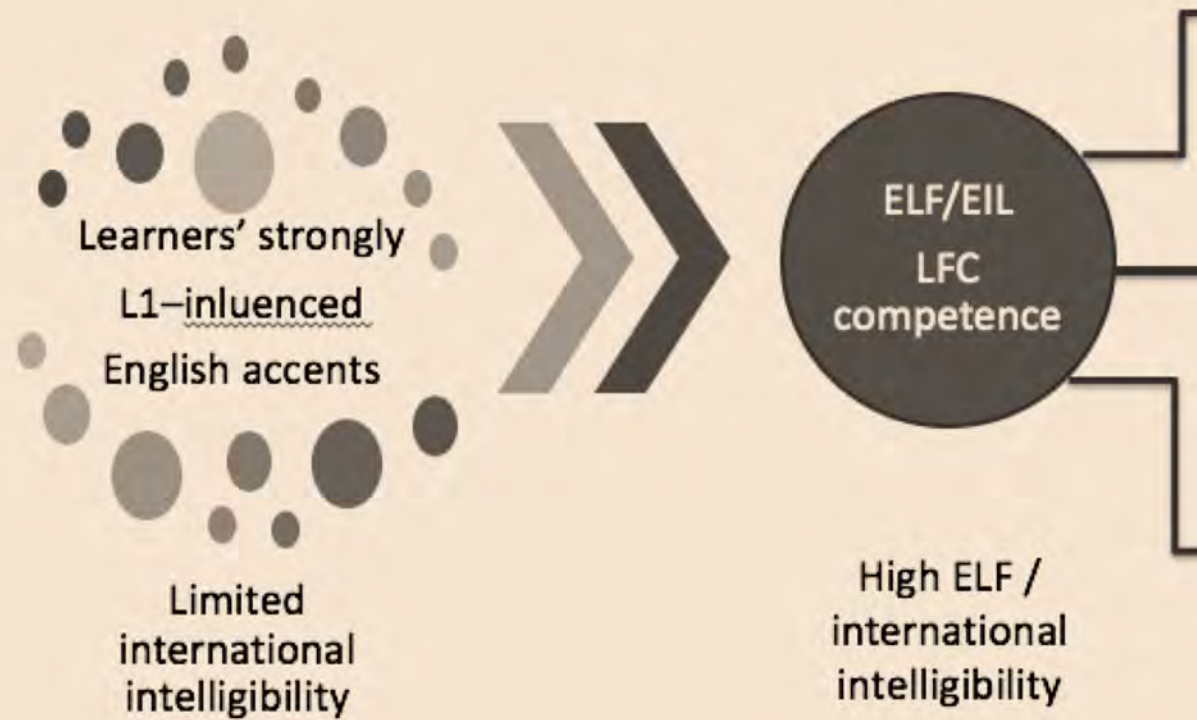
Kachru (1992)

## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?




Modiano (1999)

## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?





## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?

  
Hancock McDonald

ELF: Beyond Dogma and Denial hancockmcdonald.com

### ELF: Beyond Dogma and Denial

Mark Hancock

*This article was first published in Speak Out issue 60. Speak Out is the journal of the IATEFL Pronunciation special interest group. In this article, I will suggest that following the recognition of English's role as a global Lingua Franca, there has been an impasse created by two conflicting reactions: dogma and denial. I will discuss the possible implications of ELF for pronunciation teaching goals, and suggest how we can distinguish features which are important for global intelligibility from those which are not. I will highlight the importance of distinguishing productive and receptive goals, and consider the issue of what part models play in a context where accent variability is a central concern. I will consider contexts where simple intelligibility is not enough. Finally, I will suggest that a shift in how we express goals, from product (model accent) to process (accommodation) may provide a means of getting past the impasse of dogma and denial.*

**English is a global Lingua Franca, and this must have implications for pronunciation teaching.** This, to me, was the fundamental insight in Jennifer Jenkins' groundbreaking book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (Jenkins, 2000). This book has inspired a whole movement of research and theory which has come to be referred to by the acronym ELF (from 'English as a Lingua Franca'). As awareness of ELF began to spread across the ELT community, reactions tended to polarize between dogma and denial. On the dogma side were militants who saw native pronunciation models such as received pronunciation (RP) as a residue of colonialism which needed to be uprooted. From the denial point of view, these militants were a noisy distraction who would hopefully tire themselves out and go away. These are caricatures admittedly, but I will outline them briefly as illustrative extreme positions at either end of a spectrum.

**Dogma**

Dogma took Jennifer Jenkins' *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (OUP 2000) as a revered text, particularly the list of pronunciation features known as the 'Lingua Franca Core', which provided fixed set of pronunciation essentials. These were not to be questioned or understood, but

Hancock SO! 60 (2019)

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

## From being intelligible to being themselves: pronunciation for today

Robin Walker suggests EFL and ELF approaches to pronunciation can work together.

When I came into EFL in 1981, the dominant methodology was audiolingualism. New structures were presented to learners, often in surreal contexts, and then drilled extensively in a stimulus-response, behaviourist approach to learning. Meaningful communication was seldom sought since accuracy was the goal. More specifically, native-speaker accuracy was sought, and sought relentlessly. Error was failure to learn, and led inescapably to remedial practice.



This was true for pronunciation as much as it was for grammar, and one of only two accents, RP (Received Pronunciation) or GA (General American), served as the norm, the model and the goal. Other accents were not deemed suitable for EFL, and instruction, ideally, would have and employ one or other standard accent in class. But change, big change, was on the horizon.

**1980s – EFL, pronunciation and the communicative approach**

The arrival of the communicative approach in the early 1980s had a major impact on pronunciation teaching. Pronunciation was now viewed as a part of meaningful spoken communication, and not just as a part of an abstract linguistic system. The emphasis on native-speaker mastery was seen as both unrealistic and unnecessary, and Abercrombie's (1949) concept of 'comfortable intelligibility' was resurrected; increasingly experts agreed that 'language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation' (p.120).

Another key change in pronunciation teaching with the arrival of communicative language teaching was the almost diametric shift from a focus on consonants and vowels to one on suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation. Individual sounds, it was argued, were not the main cause of problems of intelligibility, since '... in the absence of complete mutilation of the phonemes by the non-native speaker, the suprasegmentals will carry the day because they bear the meaning of the message' (Sleaves, 1989: 183).

The teaching model continued to be RP or GA, however, and as with the audiolingualist method, the ideal instructor for pronunciation was still seen as being a speaker with the target accent. This continued to marginalise those teachers whose accent was neither, which in practice was (and still is) the vast majority of teachers, myself included.

On paper, attitudes to error softened, and these were now seen more as interlanguage errors than as failed learning in need of remedial attention. The remedy for these interlanguage errors, rather than mechanical drills, was further exploration of the target feature, together with communication activities that would require improved pronunciation for their successful completion.

64 www.modernenglishteacher.com | Volume 28 | Issue 3

Walker MET 28/3 (2019)



## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?

# 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. 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 if a listener who makes the adjustment, not the listener.

In addition, another way of making productive accommodation is not useful. However, rather than sitting in silence or hoping things will become clearer, it is better to be proactive often making 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 words in their memories. Instead, as John Field explains (2001), they build up an ever-increasing number of examples of different versions of the same sound, syllable or word by accumulating these different, variable 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 benefit from audio and computerized systems showing a variety of accents. Such an approach would address both intelligibility and listening comprehension, increasing communication flexibility and respect for accent diversity" (Scales, 2006: 722)

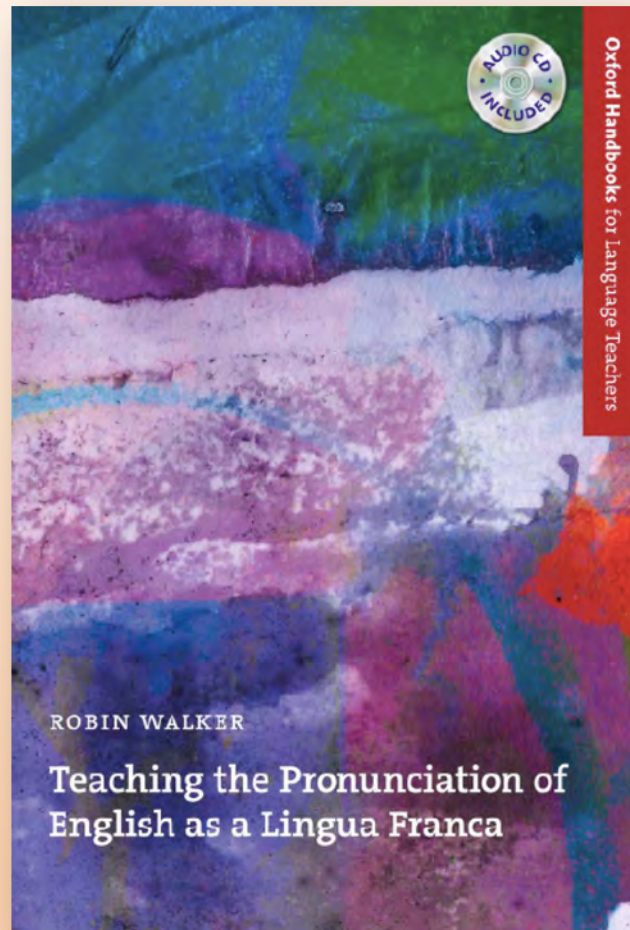
Learners using their English in an accent-rich environment such as a university are exposed to a significant range of accents on a daily basis. Many students, however, predominantly speak English in class with friends and colleagues who have similar accents because of sharing the same native tongue. 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.gma.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.elli.org](http://www.elli.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 [www.elli.org](http://www.elli.org).
- **You2Talk** (<http://you2talk.com>) uses

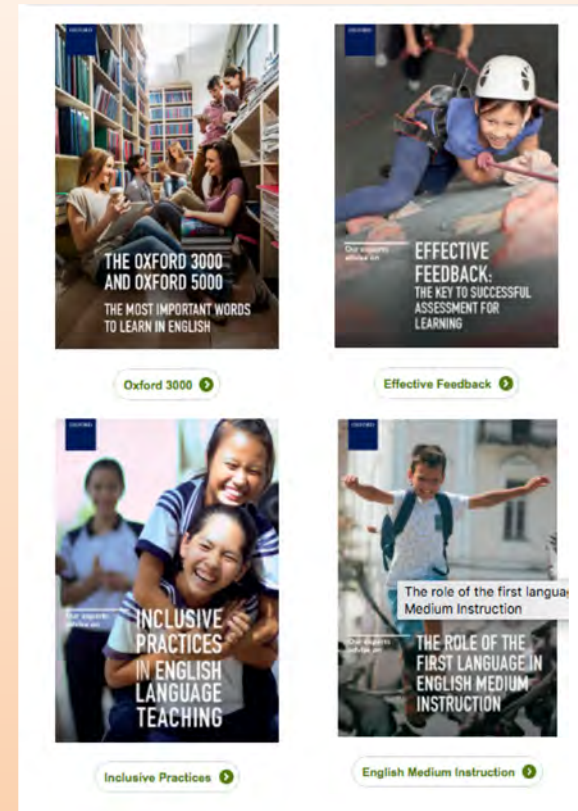
First published in  
Modern English Teacher 26/4

Download from <https://englishglobalcom.wordpress.com/articles/>

## 4) Can we teach intelligibility?



Oxford University Press, 2010



Pronunciation for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learner. OUP, late 2020 (?)  
<https://elt.oup.com/feature/global/expert/?cc=global&selLanguage=en>

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