
Changing Contexts and Shifting Paradigms in Pronunciation Teaching

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The history of pronunciation in English language teaching is a study in extremes. Some approaches to teaching, such as the *reformed method* and *audiolingualism*, elevated pronunciation to a pinnacle of importance, while other approaches, such as the *cognitive movement* and early *communicative language teaching*, mostly ignored pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). Currently, it seems clear that pronunciation deserves neither fate, either to be unfairly elevated to the central skill in language learning or banished to irrelevance.

To a large extent, pronunciation's importance has always been determined by ideology and intuition rather than research. Teachers have intuitively decided which features have the greatest effect on clarity and which are learnable in a classroom setting. Derwing and Munro (this issue), recognizing this tendency toward teacher intuition in determining classroom priorities, make an appeal for a carefully formulated research agenda to define how particular features actually affect speaker intelligibility. That such an appeal is needed suggests, in Derwing and Munro's words, that pronunciation "instructional materials and practices are still heavily influenced by commonsense intuitive notions" and that such intuitions "cannot resolve many of the critical questions that face classroom instructors" (p. 380).

During the past 25 years, pronunciation teachers have emphasized suprasegmentals rather than segmentals in promoting intelligibility (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Morley, 1991), despite a paucity of research evidence for this belief (Hahn, 2004). Recent carefully designed studies have shown some support for the superiority of suprasegmental instruction in ESL contexts (e.g., Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). Also, wider availability of software that makes suprasegmentals' discourse functions more accessible to teachers and learners will encourage work with suprasegmentals (Chun, this issue; Pickering, this issue). However, the importance of suprasegmentals for communication in English as an international language (EIL) is uncertain (Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 1999). It is also by no means clear that all suprasegmentals are equally learnable. Pennington and Ellis (2000), for example, found that although some

elements of intonation, such as nuclear stress, appear to be learnable, other elements, such as pitch movement marking boundaries and the intonation of sentence tags, are not. Even for those who advocate the centrality of suprasegmentals, a more nuanced approach is clearly needed.

COMPETING IDEOLOGIES

More fundamentally, pronunciation research and pedagogy have long been influenced by two contradictory principles, the *nativeness principle* and the *intelligibility principle*. The nativeness principle holds that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language. The nativeness principle was the dominant paradigm in pronunciation teaching before the 1960s, but its influence was rapidly diminished by research showing that nativeness in pronunciation appeared to be biologically conditioned to occur before adulthood (Lenneberg, 1967; Scovel, 1995), leading to the logical conclusion that aiming for nativeness was an unrealistic burden for both teacher and learner. Despite extensive ongoing research into a critical period for acquiring pronunciation, in practice very few adult learners actually achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language. Factors such as motivation, amount of first language (L1) use, and pronunciation training are positively correlated with more native-like pronunciation, but none of these other factors seems to overcome the effects of age (Flege & Frieda, 1995; Moyer, 1999).

Although an overwhelming amount of evidence argues against the nativeness principle, it still affects pronunciation teaching practices. Popularly, the principle drives the accent reduction industry, which implicitly promises learners that the right combination of motivation and special techniques can eliminate a foreign accent. In language classrooms, it is common for learners to want to “get rid of” their accents (as one of my recent students expressed it). Many teachers, especially those unfamiliar with pronunciation research, may see the rare learner who achieves a native-like accent as an achievable ideal, not an exception.

The second principle is the intelligibility principle. It holds that learners simply need to be understandable. The intelligibility principle recognizes that communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong, that there is no clear correlation between accent and understanding (Munro and Derwing, 1999), and that certain types of pronunciation errors may have a disproportionate role in impairing comprehensibility.

The intelligibility principle implies that different features have different effects on understanding. Instruction should focus on those features

that are most helpful for understanding and should deemphasize those that are relatively unhelpful. This assumption of differential importance is evident in most intelligibility-based arguments for pronunciation instruction. For example, the longstanding belief that instruction should focus on suprasegmentals (e.g., Avery & Ehrlich, 1992) assumes that a focus on these features leads to better and quicker speaker intelligibility than a focus on segmentals.

Jenkins's (2000) *lingua franca core* (LFC), a proposal for intelligibility-based pronunciation instruction, shares this assumption about intelligibility, albeit with an important difference in communicative context. Jenkins argues that her approach supports EIL (also called ELF, or English as a lingua franca) communication, but her recommendations have caused pronunciation teachers in all contexts to revisit their beliefs about intelligibility and the primacy of suprasegmentals. Dauer (this issue) provides an ESL response to the LFC, both praising its renewed emphasis on segmentals and arguing that its de-emphasis on suprasegmentals will not serve learners well, given that the boundaries between ESL and EIL communication are more fluid than the LFC suggests.

The LFC also raises issues for EFL contexts, where its recommendations would seem to be most at home. However, because students in EFL classrooms share the same L1, they converge toward second language (L2) pronunciation that is heavily influenced by the L1. Thus, the documented tendency of different L1 speakers to converge toward more internationally intelligible pronunciation (Jenkins, 2000) does not seem to operate in EFL contexts. Walker (this issue) describes a technique used successfully to help learners who share the same L1 converge toward pronunciation that will be more intelligible in EIL communication.

Despite the current dominance of intelligibility as the goal of pronunciation teaching, both the nativeness and intelligibility principles continue to influence pronunciation in the language curriculum, both in how they relate to communicative context and in the relationship of pronunciation to identity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Most currently published pronunciation materials are consistent with the nativeness principle. These materials hold that prestige native speaker versions of English are the proper models for pronunciation learning. Although most native speakers of English speak neither General American nor Received Pronunciation (RP), published materials rely on these accents for examples, giving a skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners' communicative needs. Deterding (this issue) describes how Singapore English speakers who are used to RP

found Estuary English speech, which they are more likely to encounter in England, to be often unintelligible. Deterding argues that pedagogical reliance on prestige models is counterproductive for learners' ability to understand normal speech.

The intelligibility principle carries a sensitivity to context. Intelligibility assumes both a listener and a speaker, and both are essential elements for communication. Levis (in press) describes the context sensitivity of intelligibility in terms of a native speaking–nonnative speaking (NS–NNS) listener-speaker matrix for assessment (Figure 1). The four quadrants reflect different aspects of intelligibility and suggest different priorities for language teaching.

Quadrant A has NS speakers and listeners and is usually assumed to be the standard for successful communication. This assumption implies that the speakers' varieties are mutually intelligible, although it is not clear just how mutually intelligible native varieties actually are. Research has shown that understanding in NS communication is often more complex than one would expect (e.g., Cutler, Dahan, & van Danselaar, 1997). Quadrant B, with NS speakers and NNS listeners, is a normal configuration for language teaching in an ESL context. It is also the norm for most language teaching beyond ESL contexts, in which print and audio materials are based on NS models. However, the ways in which NNS listeners actually decode and interpret NS speech is not completely clear. Quadrant C reflects most current research on intelligibility, where NNS speakers communicate with NS listeners. This model assumes that NSs already have the ability to communicate and makes NNSs responsible for communicative success. Quadrant D, where both speakers and listeners

FIGURE 1
Speaker-Listener Intelligibility Matrix (Levis, in press)

		LISTENER	
		Native Speaker	Nonnative Speaker
SPEAKER	Native Speaker	A. NS–NS	B. NS–NNS
	Nonnative Speaker	C. NNS–NS	D. NNS–NNS

are NNSs, reflects EIL communication, in which NNSs use English as a lingua franca to communicate with each other.

Field (this issue) reports on research in which NNS listeners interpret misstressed words, some with changes in vowel quality. This study shows that NNS listeners behave somewhat differently from NSs, especially with regard to changes in vowel quality, leading Field to suggest that unstressed syllables may often be unimportant for intelligibility, a conclusion not so different from Jenkins’s (2000).

In another study in this issue, Riney, Takagi, and Inutsuka show how Japanese and American listeners judge degree of accent differently. American listeners used primarily segmental clues (/l/ and /ɹ/) to determine strength of accent, but Japanese listeners appeared to use suprasegmentals to determine strength of accent. This finding suggests that emphasizing suprasegmentals in teaching NNSs does little to decrease NS listeners’ perceptions of NNSs’ accent, and that pronunciation teachers need to think more about how learners perceive speech rather than relying solely on NS perceptions.

In reality, the two-by-two matrix in Figure 1 is simplistic, reflecting a view of English that divides the world into native and nonnative speakers. Kachru’s three circles of Englishes (Kachru, 1986) adds a third type of English user into the matrix, the speaker of a nativized variety. Thus, the question of intelligibility should be addressed using a three-by-three matrix (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
World Englishes Speaker-Listener Intelligibility Matrix

		LISTENER		
		Inner Circle (IC)	Outer Circle (OC)	Expanding Circle (EC)
SPEAKER	Inner-Circle	<i>IC-IC</i> (<i>NS-NS</i>)	1. IC-OC	<i>IC-EC</i> (<i>NS-NNS</i>)
	Outer Circle	2. OC-IC	3. OC-OC	4. OC-EC
	Expanding Circle	<i>IC-IC</i> (<i>NNS-NS</i>)	5. EC-OC	<i>EC-EC</i> (<i>NNS-NNS</i>)

The four italicized corners of the matrix reflect the same communicative possibilities shown in Figure 1, but the bolded sections of the matrix are relatively unexplored. Both Quadrant 1 and Quadrant 2 include inner-circle and outer-circle interlocutors, and in both cases, the standardized nature of inner-circle Englishes may shift the perceived responsibility for being intelligible to outer-circle interlocutors (Bamgboṣe, 1998). At this juncture, the communicative context becomes crucial. In U.S. university settings, for example, graduate teaching assistants from outer-circle countries such as India are routinely tested for spoken English proficiency, even when their English proficiency is otherwise indistinguishable from inner-circle graduate students. It seems evident that such testing is conducted because outer-circle speakers have unfamiliar accents, not a lower proficiency in English. In an outer-circle setting, however, an inner-circle interlocutor is more likely to recognize the validity of the outer-circle accent.

Quadrant 3, in which outer-circle speakers are interlocutors, likely has the same kind of variation in intelligibility as NS-NS communication. Outer-circle speakers will likely have the same difficulties with unfamiliar accents and registers that inner-circle speakers have with unfamiliar dialects.

Quadrants 4 and 5 include outer-circle and expanding-circle interlocutors. These interactions often occur in contexts without inner-circle speakers. As a result, pronunciation issues may cause breakdowns in communication similar to those described by Jenkins (2000), who found that pronunciation caused a loss of intelligibility in NNS-NNS communication. It would be surprising, however, if the two quadrants had the same bottom-up processing difficulties discussed by Jenkins. In general, the proficiency of outer-circle speakers is more like that of inner-circle speakers than that of expanding-circle speakers, for whom English is a foreign language. Thus, an outer-circle listener and an expanding-circle speaker, as in Quadrant 5, are more likely to negotiate intelligibility using context or top-down knowledge of English than are an expanding-circle listener and an outer-circle speaker, as in Quadrant 4, where bottom-up processing constraints are likely to be more severe.

IDENTITY

Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 have a weakness: In judgments of intelligibility, they ignore, on the positive side, the role of language identity, and on the negative side, language attitudes. Accent is influenced not only by biological timetables but also by sociolinguistic realities. In other words, speakers speak the way they do because of the social groups they belong to or desire to belong to. The role of identity in accent is perhaps

as strong as the biological constraints. Accent, along with other markers of dialect, is an essential marker of social belonging.

The pull of identity is also strong for NNSs of a language. Jenkins (2000) describes how same-L1 NNS pairs pronounce English with a greater number of deviations than do pairs of speakers from different L1s. This tendency toward convergence, even when it means speaking English with more deviant pronunciation, indicates the importance of identity. The addition of biological constraints to L2 pronunciation makes the acquisition of a prestige variety of English especially difficult. Gatbonton, Trofimovich, and Magid (this issue) show how ethnic group affiliation is a critical factor in pronunciation accuracy. They argue that inaccuracy may reflect neither lack of ability nor interest but rather social pressure from home communities or other students who speak their L1. In fact, speakers who are too accurate risk being seen as disloyal to their primary ethnic group.

The tension between accent and identity is perhaps strongest for teachers from outside inner-circle countries. As teachers, their accents may be a matter of pride (Sifakis & Sougari, this issue) or uneasiness because NS pronunciation is seen as “the yardstick for intelligibility” (Golombek & Jordan, this issue, p. 520), but it is never a neutral issue. Jenkins (this issue) describes NNS teachers’ ambivalence when discussing accent. Teachers exploring ELF pronunciation goals approve of them for others, but they often want to match their own pronunciation to NS norms. Jenkins says that despite verbal assent to ELF goals, “most [teachers] nevertheless continued referring to NNS differences from RP or GA as ‘incorrect’ forms rather than ELF variants, as if they could accept ELF in theory but not in practice” (p. 540). Sifakis and Sougari (this issue) find some willingness among Greek teachers to consider ELF goals, although the teachers in their study strongly adhere to inner-circle pronunciation norms. Progress in adopting ELF goals, suggest the authors, can only be achieved by explicit in-service and preservice education on how English functions in the teachers’ immediate geopolitical environment.

Accent is also intertwined with race in determining professional identity. Golombek and Jordan (this issue) report on two Taiwanese teachers of English studying in a U.S.-based TESL master’s program. Both teachers claim that NS teachers in Taiwan are judged as much on appearance as on language. In fact, white teachers are often preferred, so that native speakers of Spanish and French are also considered to be speakers of American English because they look the part. Golombek and Jordan call for teacher education programs to help NNS students “imagine alternative identities” (p. 513) for themselves, identities that go beyond restrictive notions of pronunciation intelligibility and employ a variety of factors to establish professional legitimacy.

These examples suggest how identity is complicated not only by the desire to belong, but by the attitudes and prejudices of others. If the positive aspect of identity is the desire to belong, the negative is the desire to exclude. Mugglestone (1995) traces the rise of the prestige accent in British English, in which RP became the mark of those who went to the right schools and therefore the mark of socioeconomic power and status, but that also made it a gate-keeping tool that could be used to exclude. Lippi-Green (1997) similarly discusses how accent is used in American English to discriminate against speakers of nonprestige varieties. Using language in general and accent in particular to discriminate has been called the last publicly acceptable form of discrimination. Language thus comes to be the acceptable substitute for discrimination based on other qualities such as racial, ethnic, and class differences (Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Currently, pronunciation theory, research, and practice are in transition. Widely accepted assumptions such as the primacy of suprasegmentals, the superiority of inner-circle models, and the need for native instructors have been rightly challenged. ESOL professionals are recognizing that judgments of intelligibility involve nonlinguistic as well as linguistic factors, and that even completely intelligible pronunciation may be evaluated negatively. Decisions about adjusting accent are not value free because accents are intimately tied to speaker identity and group membership. Increasing evidence also shows that the context of instruction directly affects how pronunciation should be addressed. Users of English who interact professionally in inner-circle contexts may need to adjust to an inner-circle model, but English users in the outer or expanding circle may find that inner-circle models are inappropriate or unnecessary (Jenkins, 2000). These findings indicate that teaching pronunciation is only partially a pedagogical decision, and that old assumptions are ill-suited to a new reality.

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