Pronunciation Issues In Non-Native Contexts: A Malaysian Case Study

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Abstract

While the spread of English has given prominence to the role of intelligibility, it has also raised questions about the intelligibility and phonology of new varieties of English. This paper asserts the importance of pronunciation, but argues that traditional pronunciation models need to be critically re-examined. Proposing a shift in focus from the native speaker to the highly competent L2 speaker of English, it reports on a study undertaken in Malaysia and discusses ways in which proficient speakers of English modify their pronunciation patterns to attain greater intelligibility. It concludes by suggesting ways in which L2 research on intelligibility can reconfigure itself both ideologically and methodologically, and examines the significance of the findings with respect to aspects of pedagogy and 'the lingua franca phonological core'.

THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH

This paper has its roots in the spread of English in the world and its consequences. The growth of English as seen today is unparalleled in history, and has resulted in a new demographic distribution of the language, as well as in new uses and users. One direct consequence of this is that nearly a quarter of the world's population or between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people have some level of fluency or competence in English, and this figure is growing steadily (Crystal, 2003). A second outcome is that non-native speakers of English, including ESL and EFL speakers, now outnumber native speakers. Although exact numbers are difficult to obtain as they depend on how speakers are categorised and what proficiency levels are taken into account, Crystal's (2003) extrapolations put the number of ESL and EFL speakers at 300-500 million and 500-1000 million respectively, in comparison to 320-380 million native speakers.

This spread of English also means that changes to the language are inevitable. This is the basic premise in Widdowson's (1997, p. 140) portrayal of English as a virtual language that is "variously actualized" as it spreads, resulting in "adaptation and nonconformity". Adaptation suggests appropriation and pluralism, whilst nonconformity implies discarding compliance with Inner Circle1 norms. Hence, there is growing consensus that in international and especially, intranational uses of English in the Outer Circle, native norms are not only unrealistic, but inappropriate and often alienating. These advances have also been accompanied by calls to sever the ties to the traditional bases of English in 'colonial lands', to resist linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999), to liberate the language, and to 'dehegemonize' it (Parakrama, 1995) to acculturate the language and to reclaim the local (Kachru, 1992; Canagarajah, 2005). Such propositions further champion the nativisation[2] of English, and its development without reference to Inner Circle norms.

The Phonology Of Non-Native Varieties Of English

In tandem with the growth of English, new varieties of English have sprung up and developed all over the globe. It should be noted that although these new Englishes differ from the traditional varieties in a number of ways, the difference is most conspicuous in the area of phonology, which maintains distinctive features even in the educated sub-

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[1] Kachru (1985) represents the spread of English in the world in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles. The Inner Circle comprises the traditional bases of English, and includes Britain, America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle is made up of countries where English has a long history of institutionalised functions and is used intranationally. They include countries like Malaysia, Singapore, India, Ghana, Nigeria etc. The Expanding Circle includes the rest of the world, where essentially English is used in restricted contexts and plays a role as a foreign language. This includes China, Japan, Greece, Brazil, Indonesia etc.

[2] Nativisation refers to the processes which create "a localized linguistic identity of a variety" (Kachru, 1992, p. 6)

varieties. A factor promoting divergences in the phonology of the sub-varieties of English is the existence of substratum languages in non-native countries, which invariably exert an influence on the L2, and researchers have shown the predominance of transfer in matters of phonology (Odlin, 1989; Jenkins, 2000; Major, 2001). Furthermore, although different aspects of a language may be adapted and shaped in varying degrees to reflect local sensitivities, it is one's accent that is inextricably and overtly linked to one's social, cultural and individual identity (Pennington and Richards, 1986; Gatbonton et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2005).

Clearly, the unprecedented spread and use of English as both an international and intranational lingua franca only illustrate the tension that exists between maintaining international intelligibility and retaining local identities. How do educators in non-native settings respond to this dilemma, among others, in the context of pronunciation teaching?

Pronunciation Teaching In Non-Native Contexts

Surrounded by various controversies, ESL teachers have often been tempted to take the path of least resistance, dismissing pronunciation as being unimportant or unteachable, paying it mere lip service as attention is diverted to more 'essential' or 'tidy' areas, or dealing with it in a rather ad-hoc and unprincipled manner. In the event that pronunciation is given sufficient emphasis in the curriculum and classroom, it is often taught with a rigid adherence to prescribed norms, which usually means native norms. I would like to briefly examine a couple of these common responses in greater detail, through a consideration of whether pronunciation should be taught, and if we should adhere to a native-speaker model.

Should Pronunciation Be Taught In ESL Classes?

If pronunciation issues are so fraught with controversies, and if there are perhaps aspects of one's accent that are not easily amenable to change, is there any justification to focus on pronunciation in the classroom? Although the effectiveness and benefits of pronunciation teaching have not been conclusively proven, this merely echoes the general pattern for other components of language learning, and may be partly attributed to variations in research, from sampling and settings to mode and focus of instruction.

What is undeniable is that limited pronunciation skills can undermine a learner's self-confidence, restrict social interaction, and negatively influence estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities (Morley, 1991). Without adequate pronunciation skills, a person's communicative skills may be severely hampered, and this in turn may give rise to speech that lacks intelligibility, leading to glitches in conversation and to strain on the part of the listener. Studies have also indicated that poor pronunciation or heavily-accented English tends to be stigmatised at the workplace, and speakers often report being discriminated

against and disadvantaged when it comes to employment or promotion (Lippi-Green, 1997; Mashor, 2000; Derwing, 2003). Jenkins (2004) points out that because pronunciation conveys locutionary as well as illocutionary force of utterances and engages with identity issues, improved pronunciation will promote intelligibility and counter stereotyping and stigmatising, and these, she stresses bolster the case for explicit pronunciation teaching.

Today, English is widely regarded as a global or international language, and this undoubtedly implies that there is a need for people to understand each other's Englishes. While pronunciation is admittedly only one of several factors contributing towards intelligible speech, 'error gravity' research, which has attempted   to isolate the role of particular linguistic features relative to others in the determination of intelligibility and the interpretation of meaning have consistently pointed to the importance of pronunciation. Hence, researchers have affirmed the centrality of intelligibility as a key component in communication (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001), and pronunciation experts have stressed improved intelligibility as the most important goal of pronunciation teaching (Pennington and Richards, 1986; Morley, 1991; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Clearly, pronunciation is a vital element in effective communication, as endorsed not only by researchers, but also by respondents like students, teachers and immigrants (Rajadurai, 2001; Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Derwing, 2003). Although the relative effects of the various language components on intelligibility remain unresolved, the evidence clearly points to a threshold level where pronunciation is concerned, and speakers who fall below this level will have communication problems no matter how well they control other aspects of the language like grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Lam and Halliday, 2002). In short, reasonably intelligible pronunciation will give the speaker communicative empowerment: effective language that will help one not only to survive, but to succeed as well (Morley, 1991). It is not surprising then that Morley believes that not attending to a student's pronunciation needs, "is an abrogation of professional responsibility" (p. 489).

Should The Native-Speaker Provide The Norms For Pronunciation Teaching?

Despite recognising the growth of lingua franca English and professing support for international norms, many ESL and EFL classrooms continue to teach pronunciation in strict compliance with traditional native-speaker models, driven partly by the convenience of published material that come complete with accompanying audio-aids. However, this has given rise to a rather bizarre state of affairs, especially apparent in classrooms of the Outer Circle, where hardly anyone in the community, and certainly nobody in the classroom, not even the teacher, speaks like the recorded voice heard on these imported tapes and CDs played in classrooms. Yet, there is this tacit assumption that the native accent reified on these recordings is the ideal pronunciation and that

anything that falls short is somewhat defective and in need of correction. Where does this leave the learner and the teacher?

First, let me say that I believe that L2 users should be given the right and freedom to opt for their choice of models. After all, Timmins' (2002) survey among teachers and learners in 14 countries showed that despite the increasing use of English in international contexts, there was an expressed preference for native-speaker pronunciation norms. While he is cautious in pointing out that "the native speaker can be an interesting point of reference without being an object of deference" (Timmins, 2005, p. 124), other researchers have argued for the need to look beyond espoused desires of non-native speakers, to discern underlying motives and attitudes. For instance, Jenkins (2000), who made a case for a lingua franca core, has come to acknowledge the confounding dimension of identity that may result in non-native speakers not wanting to represent themselves as lingua franca speakers (Jenkins, 2005). Their ambivalence in wanting to sound native-like, even while acknowledging that their accents carry and convey their identity, seems to stem from a sense of insecurity and lack of confidence as learners. These conflicting attitudes are manifestly related to deeper psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic issues, as well as prevailing language ideologies, like "the politics of accent" (Derwing, 2003), and may need to be more critically examined and contested.

In short, while acknowledging the rights of learners to choose the norms to which they wish to aspire, it would be naïve and even counter-productive to ignore pervasive dogma that conspire to create and perpetuate insecurities and self-doubt in non-native speakers. All things considered, I would argue that a blind submission to native English norms is unreasonable, inappropriate and unrealistic, and this is especially true in countries of the Outer Circle, where English is used both intranationally and internationally.

First, even if the native model were deemed appropriate, it is seldom available in daily encounters in non-native contexts. The majority of non-native speakers of English, including ESL teachers, have never been taught by a native speaker, and the very small minority who have, were not necessarily taught by RP speakers or other speakers of prestige accents. More significantly, though, is the fact that imposing native-speaker norms circumscribes teacher autonomy and robs non-native teachers of any sense of confidence, forcing them to perform on an unequal playing field; the same is true for the L2 learner. It is thus unreasonable to expect pronunciation norms to remain tied to a native-speaker model.

Second, as one's accent is inextricably linked to one's social and individual identity, the desire to maintain and safeguard the local identity precludes adopting RP or any other native speaker model as the norm. Tay (1982) declares that the educated Singaporean rejects an exonormative norm simply because he wants to sound Singaporean. As Cook (1999, p. 194) astutely notes, "people simply cannot be expected to conform to the norms of a group to which they do not belong".

Third, acceding to native norms is unrealistic because it fails to take into account the phenomenal spread of English, changing patterns of use, and the current lingua franca status of the language. Intranationally, English is widely used in many non-native countries, resulting in it being reshaped to express local cultures and identities. This also means that today, no single exonormative model of English can adequately fulfill the diverse functions served by English in many of these communities. Internationally, the lingua franca status of English implies that diversity is only to be expected.

If the internationalisation and nativisation of English have removed L1 speakers as the sole custodians of the language with the right to dictate standards of pronunciation for L2 use, how do we ensure that speakers of various Englishes remain intelligible to one another? How much variation is permitted, and in what areas are variations acceptable and likely to occur? How do we go about conducting research that looks beyond the traditional native speaker model and yet acknowledges the need for varieties of English that develop to share a core that would render them recognisably English, and internationally intelligible? These were some of the questions that provided the initial impetus for this study of Malaysian English, an Outer Circle variety of English.

Researching Intelligibility And Pronunciation Needs In Non-Native Contexts

To preserve international intelligibility some scholars have continued to espouse native norms as the only legitimate model. Others, however, have devised fresh proposals founded on theoretical constructs, like functional load[3] (Catford, 1987; Brown, 1988a) or frequency of occurrence (Gimson, 2001). Aside from these, attempts have been made to put forward an international pedagogical core that would guarantee intelligibility for all speakers. These have been conceptualised in terms of shared elements or a core of commonality among varieties of English (Jenner, 1997). Even more recently, based on in-depth research on instances of miscommunication and communication breakdown among learners of English, Jenkins (2000) proposed a lingua franca phonological core or features that would guarantee mutual intelligibility among speakers of different L1s. Her framework also took into account ideas of perceptual salience of different features, the teachability-learnability distinction, as well as the role of phonological universals.

As innovative and exciting as some of these approaches are, questions remain about their applicability to countries of the Outer Circle. It may be argued that when it comes to research into a nativised variety of English, the crucial question of intelligibility has to be linked to the ways in which English is used within the local speech community, rather than externally or independently derived. This is in line with the argument put forward by Bhatia (1997, p. 318) that "it is necessary to recognize nativized norms for intranational

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[3] Functional load may be defined as the number of words in the lexicon that the phonemic contrast serves to keep distinct (Catford, 1987).

functions within specific speech communities, and then to build a norm for international use on such models, rather than enforcing or creating a different norm in addition to that". Such a perspective would allow for an internationally intelligible sub-variety to be built on a local accent, with modifications made towards enhancing intelligibility, thus bringing together two crucial features of a pronunciation model: international intelligibility and local identity.

Together with the need to look beyond the native speaker to provide data, models and frameworks then, is the need to stay true to the realities and ecologies of multilingual societies. I would like to suggest that one way forward would be to focus on proficient or successful L2 speakers of English, and explore ways in which they adjust their speech and pronunciation patterns to accommodate to different interactants. Such an approach, while novel and largely untried, finds support in research on 'modified interaction' that has examined the negotiation between interlocutors and the consequent re-structuring of speech in efforts to be intelligible. Research on native - non-native conversations, and even conversations among non-native speakers of different L1s have consistently shown that pronunciation improves as a result of adjustments prompted by the need to be understood as participants negotiate meaning (Long, 1983; Gass and Varonis, 1989). Such studies have shown that speakers constantly reprocess and modify their output towards comprehensibility, for example, by chunking of information, speaking more slowly and articulating more clearly (Gass and Varonis, 1989; Shehadeh, 1999). In fact, it has been suggested that intra-speaker variation of this sort is often a matter of instinctive accommodation, as speakers converge towards the speech of their interlocutors or adopt more target-like forms in a bid to make their speech intelligible to interlocutors of different L1s (Jenkins, 2000). Using these studies as a point of departure, an investigation was carried out to examine the ways in which highly proficient speakers of English in Malaysia modify their speech patterns in different interactional settings, in order to identify the phonological features that facilitate wider intelligibility in the speech of Malaysians

THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

This research was conducted as an in-depth case study, involving three proficient Malaysians. The data collected included audio-taped recordings of naturalistic speech which amounted to about 20 hours, as well as interviews with the speakers. The analysis focused on the ways in which these speakers adjusted their speech in various contexts to accommodate to different interactants in the belief that such speech modifications would shed light on what Malaysians need to do phonologically to be intelligible to their intended audience.   The primary question this paper addresses is: how do proficient Malaysians modify their speech to attain greater clarity and intelligibility?

More specifically, the route to determining what features are deemed crucial for wider intelligibility was done through a comparison of the ways in which these proficient

Malaysian speakers modified their speech to attain clarity, intelligibility and communicative effectiveness in less intimate contexts and among less familiar interlocutors, who included Malaysians and non-Malaysians, with the latter group comprising both native and non-native speakers of English. Because the speakers in the study were competent users of English, alternations in their speech were not always overtly triggered by comprehension difficulties or interlocutor feedback; often, it was simply a case of accommodating to the needs of interlocutors and occasions.

In general, the data suggest that features in Malaysian English that differ from RP[4] may sometimes be modified in standard usages, to enhance comprehensibility, but equally, other features may be maintained without intelligibility being adversely affected. Aspects of pronunciation which were significantly modified to aid wider intelligibility were regarded as 'core' features; aspects of RP that were not approximated to, yet caused no misunderstanding in conversations, were regarded as 'non-core' features or as variation that was permissible. Quantification of particular phonological features was done in standard variationist terms of relative frequency of actual over potential occurrences and a chi-square analysis was carried out in order to determine if patterns that emerged were significant. In the interest of space, what follows is a brief description of selected segmental and suprasegmental features that emerged as important for intelligibility in the speech of the Malaysians speakers investigated in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Segmental Aspects

Except for the dental fricatives [T] and [D], the rest of the English consonants may be deemed essential for wider intelligibility on the grounds that they were consistently used by the proficient Malaysians in the study. The dental fricatives, however, may be substituted, and in the case of Malaysian speakers, acceptable substitutes are the dentalised plosives - [t∞] and [d∞]. This variation is considered permissible because it does not appear to pose any threat to intelligibility anywhere in daily contexts of use, not even in speech addressed to non-Malaysians.

As for phonetic features, aspiration of the voiceless plosives [p^h], [t^h], [k^h] in stressed positions, albeit rather weakly aspirated at times, is clearly used in more standard English, and this underscores its perceived importance for intelligibility.

A third point to note is that excessive use of glottal stops, rampant in colloquial Malaysian English, is markedly reduced in more careful speech, and this seems to

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[4] RP is used as a reference point, because Malaysian English is derived from British English.

suggest that elimination of glottal stops can help enhance intelligibility.   While glottal stops are   widely used among different varieties of English, the danger posed by the use of the glottal stop in Malaysian English is its tendency to typically shorten the preceding vowel, as in *work* [w@?k] and *bought* [bQ?t]. In other words, the extensive use of glottal stops results in the detrimental loss of vowel length. Less crucially, it results in speech that is clipped and rather jerky, producing a staccato effect (Tongue, 1974; Brown, 1988b).   Hence, while the use of glottal stops per se may not be an obstacle to intelligibility, its effect on vowel length in Malaysian English makes it potentially problematic in the speech of Malaysians.

As for vowels, it does not appear essential that the entire vowel system of RP be kept intact. While RP pronunciation ideally displays seven short vowels, standard Malaysian English, as used by the speakers in this study, may be said to exhibit six: a high front vowel [I], a mid front vowel [E], which represents both /e/ and /&/ (although slight lengthening may occur for /&/), a low central vowel [V], a mid central vowel [@], a low back vowel [Q] and a high back vowel [U]. This set of short vowels optimally occupies the phonological space, forming a viable system and it is suggested that they must be maintained for ease of communication in English.

Another feature that emerged as clearly essential or 'core' is maintenance of vowel length contrasts, for instance between the vowel pairs [I]-[i:], [V]-[A:], [@]-[3:], [U]-[u:] and [Q]-[Q:/O:]. There was some indication, though, that while vowel length distinctions are a significant contributor to intelligibility, not all contrasts are equally important. As for diphthongs, /I@/, /aI/, /aU/, /OI/, /U@/ are consistently realized, but not /eI/, /@U/ and /e@/ which may be substituted with [e:], [o:] and [E:] respectively without intelligibility being compromised.

Phonotactic Considerations

Onsets or word-initial consonants, as in *pit, spit and split*, are always realized in full, with no attempts at systematic simplification evident in the data analysed, and it is suggested that they must be maintained for optimum intelligibility. As for final clusters, simple codas and complex codas ending in fricatives and affricates like /s/ and /tS/ need to be retained (e.g. *machines* [m@Si:ns] and *lunch* [lVntS]). However, the data consistently indicate that final and middle plosives of a complex coda can be deleted as in *ground* [gRaUn] and *friends* [fREns], without rendering speech unintelligible. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that coda simplification of this sort has grammatical consequences, in that it may lead to the past tense and participle forms being omitted even in writing.

Suprasegmental Features

Analysis of the speech of these selected proficient Malaysian speakers of English shows that tone-units should be regarded as an essential contributor to intelligibility. Whenever

the speakers perceive a need for extra clarity in their speech – which can be due to the nature of the task, the interlocutor's degree of competence in English or lack of familiarity with the local accent - speakers automatically activate the important organising functions of the tone-unit, codifying information into coherent chunks that not only helps them slow down their speech and enunciate better, but also aids the listener to comprehend an extended discourse more easily.

There is some evidence to suggest that lexical stress is important as it can be a potential source of communication difficulties. To take one example from the data, when the word *broccoli* was pronounced [bRo'kQli] with the stress assigned to the second syllable instead of the first, it was clearly not understood by an American interactant. While there is insufficient evidence in the corpus to declare unequivocally that lexical stress should be treated as a core feature, the salience of this feature stems partly from Malaysian speakers' tendency not to reduce weak syllables, which coupled with misplaced stress patterns could result in distortions in the phonetic shape of words. Therefore , I argue that this tendency not to reduce unstressed syllables needs to be compensated for by the use of lexical stress; otherwise, intelligibility could be compromised (see also Field, 2005).

Nuclear stress is also imperative. It is clearly used in more formal speech and this is what recommends it as a core feature. However, the data indicate that while prominence is detectable, it is not always conspicuously marked because of the narrower pitch range that typically characterises more formal uses of English in Malaysia. Instead, sometimes the nucleus is cued differently by the speakers, for instance by vowel lengthening or even gesturally. Although this observation was not further investigated in this research, other studies have shown how different communities use different features and strategies to signal what is important (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Pennington, 1989). It should also be noted that the traditional claim that native speakers always use a rise in pitch to mark nuclei of utterances has been disputed when real data are examined (see Levis, 1999). In fact, data from native-speaker conversations in the CANCODE[5], for instance, showed them employing various non-phonological features, including the use of word order, tails, heads and double negatives to emphasise and reinforce their points (Carter and McCarthy, 1997; 2004). It is likely then that prominence is signalled in various ways in different varieties of English, and this can be usefully investigated in future research.

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[5] CANCODE is the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English. It is a unique collection of spoken English, built up by Cambridge University Press and the University of Nottingham, and coded and stored in computerised databases.

The data gathered from these proficient speakers of English in Malaysia also indicate that other aspects of connected speech like stress-timed rhythm, reduced vowels, weak forms, liaison, assimilation, and elision may be regarded as non-core or non-crucial as they are not significantly used by the speakers to enhance intelligibility. While this finding may be contrary to what many pronunciation books advocate, it is worth noting that vowel reduction, elision and assimilation may be viewed as part of the process of lenition, whilst the retention of full vowels reflects fortition processes, which is what would be expected in situations that call for greater clarity in speech. Moreover, non-use of these features of gradation allows for morphophonemic transparency; for instance, it makes the morphological relationship between *office* and *official* much more transparent ([QfIs]-[QfIS@5] rather than [QfIs]-[@fIS@5]). Some support for this has come from recent research. For instance, a study by Major et al. (2002) showed that syllable-timed rhythm, characterised by non-reduction of unstressed syllables, actually facilitates intelligibility for many non-native speakers, whose L1s do not exhibit the effects of gradation. Thus, far from adversely affecting intelligibility, one could claim that the use of unreduced vowels and avoidance of elision and assimilation make speech more intelligible, at least to non-native speakers, many of whom use little if any vowel reduction.

Other Aspects of Speech

Speech rate emerged as an important variable. Because the local, colloquial variety of English tends to be spoken very quickly, situations calling for a more standard, formal code resulted in a slowing down of speech, accompanied by clearer enunciation (as the speakers described it) and the use of more clearly marked tone-units (as revealed by the data analysis). These modifications may be regarded as accommodation strategies that respond to the processing needs of interlocutors.

One area which surfaced as a key factor in the interviews with all three speakers in the study is that of clear articulation. When asked how they altered the way they spoke in the company of those unfamiliar with the 'Malaysian accent', all actors alluded to the need for clearer articulation. This is often neglected in pronunciation manuals, and Hung (2002) is quick to point out that good articulation like clarity and voice projection, are just as important as the accent itself. He argues that one can speak RP in a poorly articulated and therefore unintelligible manner, and by the same token, one can use a non-native accent with clear articulation, rendering it highly intelligible. What this implies is that clarity of enunciation, crucial to enhancing the intelligibility of speech, is a universal quality that is independent of any particular accent, and can be acquired by anyone speaking any accent.

Finally, modifying one's speech and phonological patterns may be regarded as a kind of strategy that promotes interlocutor comprehensibility and communicative success. This requires a sensitivity to the audience, the desire to be understood and the ability to monitor and adjust one's pronunciation. This study demonstrates that communicating

effectively means skillfully adapting one's way of speaking English, including incorporating certain features of pronunciation, modifying one's speech rate, and even opting for the appropriate code choice in specific situations and with particular interlocutors. This underscores the fact that intelligibility cannot be defined in terms of a static, universal core of features that guarantees communicative success in every situation; rather it has to be built upon the existing phonological repertoire of the speaker and accompanied by crucial accommodative skills.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Conceptual And Empirical Considerations

Although the study was in many ways exploratory, it raises several important issues. The approach taken suggests the possibility of doing research into aspects of phonology without the traditional reliance on native–speaker norms to provide a prescriptive frame of reference. It therefore allows for a non-native variety to be viewed as an independent system, described in its own terms, and not merely as a typical list of shortcomings or deviances from a native norm. In this way, internal relationships and organizing-principles of the non-native variety, which may be unrelated to the native variety, may be captured.

Moreover, the investigation was grounded in naturalistic contexts that took into account multilingual realities as opposed to the monolingual bias that so often characterises pronunciation and intelligibility research (Rajadurai, 2006). In the process, it has captured and portrayed proficient bilinguals as competent and skilful, manipulating their phonological repertoire to achieve their purposes – as opposed to the common construction of them as perennial learners with deficient communication systems.

This case study has also allowed for the investigation of intelligibility to be firmly embedded in the sociocultural communicative context, and to be reconceptualised as a negotiated process rather than merely a fixed product. Within this perspective, it echoes the stance taken by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994, p. 12) that the relevant question to ask is "what is appropriate and necessary to be able to communicate in specific situations?"

Pedagogical Considerations

A Pedagogical Model

It seems to me that in countries which have a standard variety in addition to a more localised code, the pedagogical norms for an internationally intelligible sub-variety should ideally be based on the local standard model, rather than on a new, imposed exonormative model. Such a stand would also be consistent with Crystal's (2003) view of

bidialectalism, where speakers possess a regional sub-variety, providing access to a local community and another sub-variety which is more globally-oriented, providing access to the world community. This perspective has several advantages, not least being the simple fact that globalisation does not obviate the processes of localisation or nativisation, and using a local standard sub-variety would allow for some preserving of national identity as speakers continue to use some localised features in non-core areas. Moreover, the use of an endonormative model would help alleviate the fear of standards and models being exploited as an exclusive privilege, and crucially, pronunciation teaching can then be more positively viewed in terms of accent expansion and addition, instead of accent reduction and error eradication. Using students' colloquial English sub-varieties as the starting point would at least leave intact the first rungs of the ladder they need to climb to acquire the more standard sub-variety and with it, wider communicative success. What all this means, though, is that the competent bilingual must have the knowledge and skill to use the right sub-variety on the right occasion, and this should be accepted as a crucial component of communicative competence (Rajadurai, 2005) and incorporated into the curricula.

A pronunciation Syllabus

Through a phonological analysis of the speech of proficient Malaysian speakers of English, a prima facie case has been made for the promotion of certain core features as being more crucial for wider intelligibility than others. Although the research was essentially exploratory and the findings would therefore have to be corroborated or qualified by further research, they are tentatively suggested as a minimum threshold level, so that Malaysian learners' pronunciations will not detract from their ability to communicate. They offer an empirical foundation and a starting point on which pedagogical priorities can be derived. Other aspects of pronunciation which appear to be non-core can be dealt with at the level of reception rather than production. The framework and findings of this research which focused on proficient speakers of English in Malaysia underscore the fact that pronunciation must not only be treated as an important part of the ESL class, but that this training needs to tailored to specific countries and speakers. In fact, Robertson (2003) claims that materials and instruction that claim to be all-inclusive and good for one and all must be seen as inherently flawed.

Aside from these phonological features derived for Malaysians, on a more universal level, the analysis also points to the centrality of strategic communication skills that will enable speakers to modify and adapt their speech for specific interlocutors. These basically call for listener-oriented strategies that promote good articulation, clear speech, and optimum pace, as well as the key skills of rapport management and attending to the face wants of listeners. These too can be incorporated into classroom instruction.

A Comparison With Jenkins' (2000) LFC

Before ending this discussion, it is worth considering how the crucial features identified in this research compare to the set comprising Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca Core (LFC). Although the contexts investigated and the routes taken to determining the set of phonological features deemed crucial for maintaining intelligibility were very different, it is significant that the findings of this research offer substantial corroboration for her LFC in all areas: the consonant inventory, the phonetic requirement of aspiration, consonant clusters, vowel quantity and the use of nuclear stress. However, because this smaller study was confined to a group of proficient Malaysian speakers of English - unlike Jenkins' wider study that included learners of English from different countries - its set of core features is more specific, often forming a subset of Jenkins' LFC. This is evident in several areas:

- The data points to [t∞] and [d∞] but not [f] and [v] as permissible substitutes of /T/ and /D/ for Malaysian speakers desiring wider intelligibility.
- Regional variation, which takes into account speakers' L1s, results in a few additional requirements. For instance, this research argues against the promotion of glottal stops because of its detrimental shortening effect on the preceding vowel in Malaysian English.
- While the LFC promotes rhoticity, Malaysian English, having been derived from British English, is non-rhotic and this feature may be retained. Nevertheless, the growing influence of American English is also seen. For example, speakers may use the American intervocalic flap [4] alongside the British [t] as in 'better'.
- The inclusion of native recipients in this study (unlike Jenkins') is perhaps responsible for the tentative inclusion of lexical stress as helpful for enhancing the intelligibility of Malaysian English, as the data showed that words with misplaced stress coupled with unreduced vowels could lead to communication problems.
- The fluency of proficient Malaysian speakers of English (as opposed to the more hesitant speech of Jenkins' learners), and the speed with which the colloquial sub-variety is generally spoken resulted in tone unit boundaries emerging as a critical feature for intelligibility. Jenkins (2000) does include it in her LFC although she concedes that the lack of, or inappropriate use of, word groupings did not lead to problems in her data.

Despite these variations, overall, the findings of this study clearly provide valuable support for Jenkins' LFC.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has given consideration to some of the common principles and practices in the area of L2 pronunciation teaching and learning in non-native contexts. Highlighting certain shortcomings in research practices, and responding to the challenges of pluralism,

and globalisation, it has presented an alternative way of investigating intelligibility and determining pronunciation needs for learners of an Outer Circle country. It has employed an approach that has looked beyond the native speaker to provide data, models and frameworks, and in so doing, it has taken account of multilingual realities, privileged the proficient L2 speaker over the native speaker and given preference to real data and naturalistic contexts.

While acknowledging the limited nature of this study, the findings do suggest certain aspects of pronunciation as perhaps being more important for intelligibility than others for Malaysian speakers of English. Other aspects of pronunciation which appear to be non-core can be dealt with at the level of reception rather than production, although learners who wish to acquire the whole range of features associated with a native model should be allowed to do so. Pronunciation must be welcomed back into the Malaysian curriculum and be allowed to take its rightful place alongside other aspects of spoken language. An overhaul is therefore necessary in the areas of teacher training, curriculum design and materials writing so that the gaps between theory and practice, and global and local needs are adequately addressed.

It is hoped that this paper has highlighted how an enhanced understanding of phonological variation in the speech of proficient bilinguals can inform methods and pedagogical concerns in L2 studies.

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