ELF: Beyond Dogma and Denial

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*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

simply implemented – they were based on research. A large number of features which had hitherto been popular components in any phonology syllabus, such as the *TH* sounds and weak forms, were not included in the Lingua Franca Core, and must therefore be dropped from the syllabus. Although ELF theory was actually much more nuanced than this, I think for most teachers who were paying attention, it was the Lingua Franca Core that was the most salient takeaway. It may still be today, despite the fact that ELF theory has evolved in a different direction.

Denial

Meanwhile, denial consisted in closing your eyes and hoping it would all pass over. It was best to keep quiet, because confrontations with dogma could get rather explosive. But it was difficult: there was something undeniable in the basic insight of ELF theory: English IS a Lingua Franca, and this must have implications. Unfortunately, these implications – at least as they appeared to be outlined in Jenkins (2000), seemed too destructive to contemplate – teachers who had spent years if not decades accumulating pronunciation expertise saw their investment at risk of becoming valueless, as the foundations were ripped away from underneath. Deniers therefore tried to keep calm and carry on as before. Few of them dared to talk about ELF, but it was always there like a stone in the shoe.

This confrontation between dogma and denial created an impasse which was not a great boost for pronunciation teaching. Teachers who had never liked pronunciation gleefully concluded that they didn't need to bother with it any more, since the message from on high seemed to be that 'anything goes'. Teachers who had always liked it had to take their enthusiasm underground – carry on as before but don't shout too loud about it. Between these two extremes, there was disorientation. It was stalemate. Teachers didn't know what to make of it and pronunciation was quietly sidelined, much as it had been in the heyday of the communicative revolution. My feeling is that we need to get beyond dogma and denial, and the purpose of this article is to see what pronunciation teaching might look like from that vantage point.

Nativeness versus Intelligibility

A traditional point of view was that the purpose of pronunciation teaching was to help the learner to sound more like a native speaker. John Levis has called this orientation, 'The Nativeness Principle' (Levis 2005). A contrasting point of view suggested that the goal should be to help the learner be understood – what Levis called, 'The Intelligibility Principle'. Both principles are challenged somewhat by ELF.

The Nativeness Principle runs into the problem that there are no native speakers of English as a Lingua Franca. In ELF, an American speaker is no more native than an Armenian speaker. A Brit is no more native than a Brazilian. So who is going to provide the model?

The Intelligibility Principle is appealing, but runs into the problem of 'intelligible for who': Who is to be the judge of what is intelligible? Traditionally, this role lay with the native speaker but as we have just seen, in ELF there are none. People who speak English as a mother tongue do not have a privileged position in this

context. Indeed, they may be poor judges of how intelligible someone is in an ELF context, and may be poorly understood themselves.

Beyond Models

The Nativeness Principle always had to confront the problem that there are many different native accents of English, so which speakers should be elevated to model status? Traditionally, this has been resolved by settling on a speaker of a single idealised prestige variety of English such as Received Pronunciation (RP) in the UK or General American (GA) in the US. Brian Jenner questioned the idea that learners should aim for one of the standard, prestige accents of English in a *Speak Out* article back in 1997 (Jenner, 1997). He pointed out that millions of people were able to make themselves understood in any number of regional or global native accents, so why would we insist on a specific variety? Jenkins (2000) effectively took this argument one step further by removing nativeness from the equation: many non-natives are able to make themselves understood too. This is a point that Derwing and Munro are careful to make: '... accent and intelligibility are not the same. Speakers with foreign accents do not necessarily fail to get their messages across effectively' (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Insisting on a single target model such as RP has had the effect of alienating many teachers of English who don't speak that variety themselves. I've had teachers say to me things like, 'I don't teach pronunciation because I'm Scottish'. This reaction seems wrong on so many levels, but I don't think it is the teacher that is wrong, I think it is the model-driven paradigm that the teacher is responding to.

Part of the problem with the dogma versus denial confrontation is that it has hijacked attention and focussed it all in the wrong place: on the target model. We've tended to obsess about product (model) when really it would be more fruitful to focus on process. When ELF knocked native standards like RP of the pedestal, the most urgent question seemed to be: 'What do we replace it with?' Initially, some thought the Lingua Franca Core might do the job, but that was a misunderstanding. The global Lingua Franca is plural, emergent and dynamic – it varies from place to place and evolves across time. The list of features in the Core, on the other hand, are based on research consisting of analysing recordings of specific speakers in specific places at specific moments in time. They do not describe a stable variety of English anybody can take as a model. So still there was no model, and there seemed no way forward

But could it be that we don't need to worry so much about a model anyway? As a matter of fact, there is a default model in most classrooms: the teacher. This was always quietly the case, even when RP or GA were on the pedestal. Teachers didn't all suddenly become RP or GA speakers on entering the classroom. Teachers spoke in their own accents, and those in turn would be the accents that the learners would be most exposed to. Why not simply admit and accept this fact?

The Variability Principle

The Intelligibility Principle needs some way of getting beyond the 'for who?' problem. Teachers can't simply suppose that just because *they* find a certain

accent intelligible, everybody else will. In order to advise learners what to keep or change in their pronunciation, we teachers need to develop our intuition as to what is or isn't likely to be widely intelligible in an ELF context. The Lingua Franca Core has a very useful role here – it helps to open our mind to the kind of depth we have to dig into commonly held assumptions. No feature of English phonology is so fundamental that it can't be questioned. The schwa, for instance, may be the most common sound in native English, but that doesn't give it diplomatic immunity: it still has to justify any attention we may pay to it in terms of its contribution to understanding or being understood.

Our intuitions about intelligibility can be sharpened by an awareness of accent variation. If a given accent has a pronunciation feature which is 'non-standard', and yet speakers with that accent get along fine and are widely understood, then clearly that feature is not problematic. A rule of thumb might be, 'if it exists in a widely understood variant of English, then it's probably ok'. For example, TH is pronounced as F in some widely understood accents of English, so it's probably not a big problem if my student pronounces it that way. We could call this rule of thumb, 'The Variability Principle'.

The Key: Essential versus Optional

I would like to propose categorizing pronunciation features using the metaphor of a key. The two ends of a key have very different characteristics. The end which goes into the lock – call it 'the business end' – needs to have a precise and specific shape. The other end – the handle – can be any shape you like, within reason.
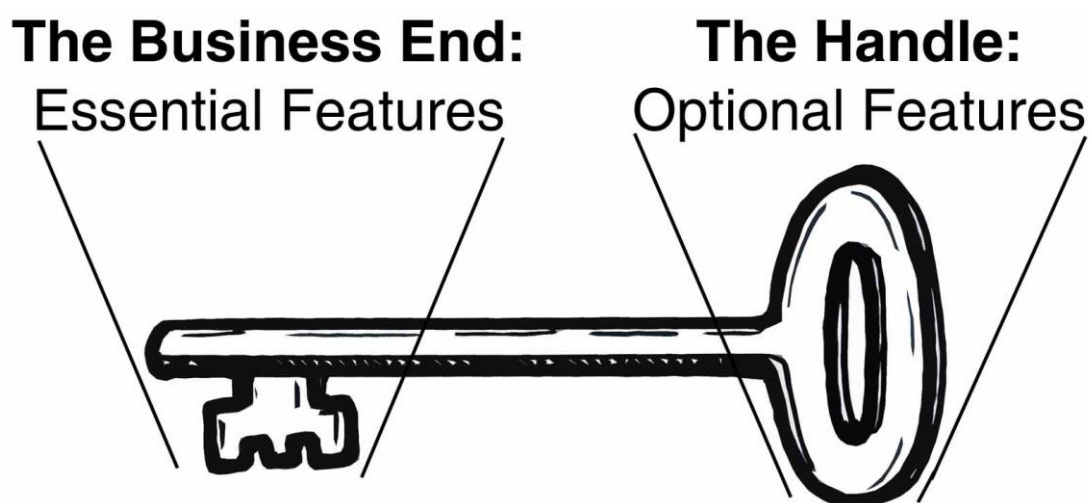

Figure 1. The key as a metaphor for essential versus optional features of pronunciation

The lock represents access to the global speech community. In terms of pronunciation, the equivalent of the key's business end are features which are essential to be widely intelligible. I would suggest that these include phoneme distinctions and stress (subject to the variability principle above). The equivalent of the key's handle are features which are optional as regards intelligibility. These are features which speakers employ not to make themselves clearer, but on the contrary, to make articulation easier – namely, reductions. These include

the gamut of features commonly listed under the umbrella term 'connected speech', including weak forms, assimilation, linking, and schwa. These features are optional, as can be clearly demonstrated by the fact that speakers can be understood even when they don't use them – arguably better understood. For example, stage actors often hyper-articulate their lines. It's easy to imagine an actor saying, 'To be or not to be' *without* using the weak form of 'to', and they do this precisely to be more clearly intelligible, not less. To sum up, the general intuition I am proposing here is that aspects of pronunciation to do with careful articulation to enhance clarity for the listener's benefit are 'the business end'. Aspects of pronunciation to do with making articulation easier, for the speaker's benefit, are 'the handle'. 'Handle' features are easy to identify because the clue is in the word which we often use to refer to them: reductions.

Productive versus Receptive

Traditionally, pronunciation teaching has not distinguished what is taught for productive purposes from what is taught for receptive competence, but the need for this is amplified in the ELF context. We should expect learners to be able to produce features which are essential for intelligibility. Features which are optional, on the other hand, are just that. Learners may or may not choose to pick them up. What they can't choose however is what they may get exposed to as listeners. As listeners, they are very likely to be confronted with reduced forms in connected speech, so they need to have a receptive competence in these. I would argue that the best way for learners to acquire this competence is to have a go at producing these features themselves. In other words, we might conduct a drill in which learners reproduce features of connected speech, but not so that they will adopt these, but rather as a powerful way to raise awareness of them. If learners do not go on to adopt these features in their own speech, it is clearly not an error. There's no sense in 'correcting' a learner who produces the full vowel form in 'to', like our Shakespearian actor above.

Accent Tolerance

Above, I suggested that pronunciation teaching must distinguish productive and receptive competences. Learners cannot control what pronunciations they will be exposed to as listeners and this means we should teach 'optional' features for receptive purposes. Something else we should add, for receptive purposes, is the ability to cope with accent variation – that is, accent tolerance. As regards accents, productive and receptive competences will not be symmetrical: the accent or range of accents we can produce will be much smaller than the range of accents we need to be capable of understanding. To put it another way: in an ELF speech community, we will pronounce locally and understand globally. Accent tolerance will need to be built into the way we teach. To return to the example of TH phoneme above, learners will need to be aware of the common variants, no matter how they pronounce it themselves. They should be ready to hear 'think' as 'fink', 'tink' or 'sink'. A good place to start is with wide variables which cut across many accents such as rhotic versus non-rhotic: learners should be aware of both, but do not to be 'corrected' if they choose the opposite variant from the teacher. For example, in my accent, 'caught' and 'court' are

homophones but most of my students prefer to pronounce the 'r' in 'court, and that's fine, as long as they are aware of both.

When Intelligibility is not Enough

I think we must bear in mind that achieving intelligibility may not be enough for all learners' real or perceived needs, and I will outline three examples.
1. In the above description, I have been talking about accent exclusively in terms of intelligibility. This assumes that all the participants in the communication event are participating in good faith and without prejudice. However, I certainly wouldn't want to deny the existence of prejudice in the form of accent snobbery. People often attach stigma to certain accents quite irrationally. Irrational as it may be, however, you may need to take account of accent snobbery in teaching pronunciation. If your students are likely to find themselves in contexts where they may be victims of such snobbery (in job interviews, for example), then you would be wise to make them aware of this fact and help them if they want to take steps to avoid the problem.
2. ELF-aware teachers too must remember that not all learners are preparing for an ELF context. The clearest example, perhaps, is that of immigrants who wish to not only be intelligible in a local community, but assimilate into it. This may involve adopting features of the local accent above and beyond what it strictly necessary to make themselves understood.
3. Last but not least, I should mention the accent prejudices and preferences that the learners themselves may bring to the class. They may have been attracted to your school precisely because it advertises 'native teachers'. They may be convinced that they would like to speak like the Queen, or some other iconic speaker of the language. You may try to convince them that this goal is neither realistic nor necessary. You may point out how English is a Lingua Franca and most likely, they will be communicating with people from all kinds of different backgrounds. However, the 'Nativeness Principle' is deeply embedded in traditional schooling and it may be difficult or impossible to dislodge. Furthermore, we should bear in mind that some learners are strongly motivated to integrate into a target speech community even if they are unlikely to have a practical need to do so. This integrative motivation should be respected, just as much as the more instrumental motivation which we often associate with ELF contexts. Consequently, the goals of pronunciation teaching need to be constantly negotiated and reviewed during the time we spend with our learners.

Re-thinking Goals: Accommodation

In the section above entitled, 'Beyond Models', I mentioned the idea of moving from a focus on product to a focus on process. I would like to conclude by explaining what I mean by 'focus on process'. It is the process of understanding and making yourself understood in varying global contexts. The implication is that we see pronunciation teaching as strategic – as empowering students to modify their speech to suit the situation, and helping them to be more flexible in terms of understanding the variety of speech they will hear. This does not mean discarding all our previous classroom practices as some deniers may fear. As

Robin Walker writes, 'Teaching pronunciation for ELF is primarily about re-thinking your goals and re-defining error, as opposed to modifying classroom practice' (Walker, R. 2010: 71). The re-thought goal here could be described as increasing the learner's capacity to accommodate, that is adapt their speech according to the person they are speaking to. This notion of accommodation, in fact, was a crucial element in Jennifer Jenkins' book (Jenkins 2000) – it was not only about the Lingua Franca Core. So ironically, it was there at the beginning – the key to the problem of how to get beyond dogma and denial.

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