

Pronunciation Teaching Post-ELF

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1 THE ELF-PREMISE

Do you remember the millennium bug? We were all warned that on new year's day of 2000, our computers would cease to function properly. Didn't happen. What DID happen around that time however was a quiet but seismic shift in assumptions about the goals of pronunciation teaching.

In the late nineties, people like Brian Jenner were already worrying away at the unchallenged assumption that learners should aim for one of the standard, prestige accents of English such as RP. Jenner (Jenner 1997) 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?

But why stop at 'native'? Surely there were even more people around the globe who were effectively communicating with one another in accents of English which could not be considered 'native', so why even insist on a native-like one? This premise seems obvious in hindsight, but it took Jennifer Jenkins (Jenkins 2000) to make it explicit and begin to explore its implications. Let's call the premise, 'The ELF Premise' (where ELF stands for English as a Lingua Franca).

There have been plenty of arguments, to and fro, about the *implications* of The ELF Premise, but few people would coherently deny the premise itself – namely, that English is now used as a global lingua franca, and that this must be borne in mind when we are thinking about the goals of pronunciation teaching. If, as I suggest, the premise is unquestionable, then we no longer need to spend time arguing in its favour, and instead, we may concentrate on assimilating it into our pedagogical phonology model. This process of assimilation following the paradigm shift is what I am calling 'Post-ELF'.

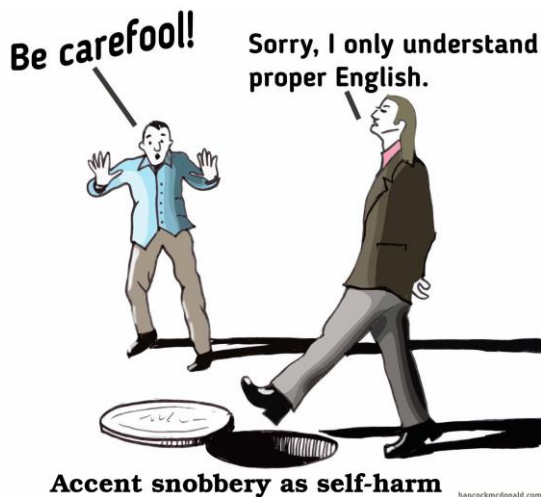
2 ACCENT SNOBBERY

I suggested that in teaching pronunciation, we must take account of the ELF premise. One broad implication of this premise is suggested by the prism and light metaphor in the image below. The prism represents the ELF premise. In a pre-ELF scenario, our model of pronunciation is like the white beam of light before it enters the prism. It is a single, monolithic model – perhaps RP or General American. The vision is that everybody would learn to speak that way and everybody would come to understand English spoken that way. There was a symmetry therefore between productive and receptive pronunciation.



As the light passes through the prism, we see that it splinters into a rainbow of different colours. Similarly, when we take account of the ELF premise and move into a post-ELF scenario, we must accept that the outcome of pronunciation learning around the globe will be a wide spectrum of differing accents. People simply will *not* end up speaking one and the same accent even if this were desirable. Providing they are widely intelligible, none of the accents in this spectrum are intrinsically superior or more ‘correct’ than any of the others. We now have an asymmetry between productive and receptive pronunciation. Each speaker will have their own accent (or range of accents) in English, and each in turn must learn to tolerate, receptively, the differing accents of their various interlocutors.

In the above description, I have been talking exclusively about pronunciation 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



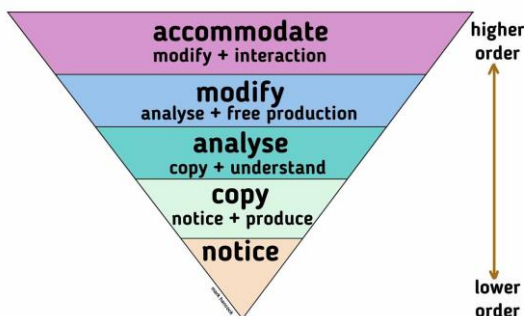
stigma to certain accents quite irrationally. Accent snobs are not doing anybody any favours – not even to themselves, as this cartoon shows! However, you need to take account of accent snobbery in teaching pronunciation. If your students are likely to find themselves in contexts where they may be victims 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. So: Context is paramount!

3 A HIERARCHY OF PRONUNCIATION SKILLS

Above, I suggested that pronunciation teaching post-ELF must distinguish productive and receptive competences, and these will be asymmetrical.

In an English-as-a-lingua-franca speech community, we will pronounce locally and understand globally. The accent or range of accents we can produce will be much smaller than the range of accents we are capable of understanding.

We teachers will have to recognise that our learners’ pronunciation skills will need to be interactive, because communication is a two-way street. The capacity to adapt to an interlocutor – known as ‘accommodation’ – will take its place as the highest order in a hierarchy of pronunciation skills. This hierarchy could perhaps be represented in a similar way to Bloom’s well-known hierarchy of thinking skills, as in this diagram:



In the diagram, each higher layer includes the layer below it and adds something – it is incremental. From lower to higher: The learner ...

1. notices a pronunciation feature.
2. tries to copy what they have noticed.

3. tries to understand the patterns in what they are copying.
 4. tries to apply that understanding in order to modify their own speech.
 5. modifies their own speech and accommodates to the speech of their interlocutors.
- The higher up in this hierarchy that the learner is able to reach, the better they will be equipped to take their place in a global speech community in which English is a principal lingua franca.

This perspective on pronunciation skills will have a range of implications for teaching:

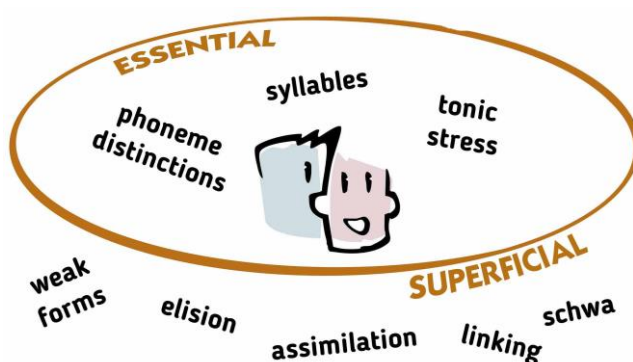
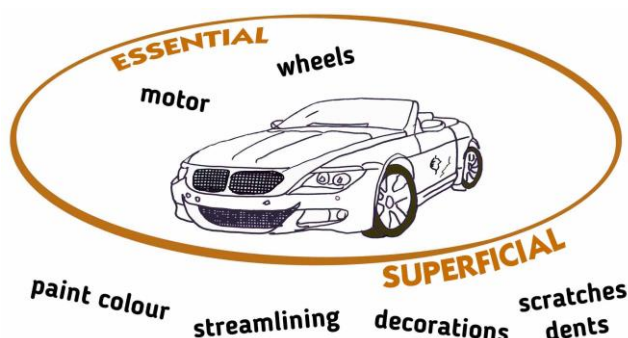
- a. Many traditional materials and practices will remain appropriate.
- b. Others may need to be modified in some ways – most notably, in the way we give feedback during the activity.
- c. Some will still be of value, but possibly only for receptive purposes rather than productive.
- d. Finally, there will be a need for some new materials and practices to be added to our repertoire.

4 ESSENTIAL VERSUS SUPERFICIAL

Now we will turn to the question of what features of phonology we should focus on. Let me begin with an analogy. If you think of a car, you can probably divide its features into essential and superficial. For example, wheels and a motor are essential (currently, at least). The colour doesn't matter and is superficial, and the exact body shape probably doesn't matter much either. There are even features which are accidental such as scratches and dents in the body work.

Imagine now that an alien finds a car floating in space (slightly more likely now Elon Musk has sent one out there). Let's suppose the aliens set out to make cars of their own. They may have no idea which features are essential and which are superficial or even accidental. Imagine the absurdity of them copying all of these features slavishly, down to incidental scratches!

Where I'm going with this analogy is that there may be a similar absurdity in some of what we traditionally do in pronunciation teaching. In parallel to the car analogy, we could perhaps divide features of English phonology into *essential* and *superficial*, and here is an attempt to do just that.



For the Listener's or Speaker's Benefit?

Here's an observation: notice that the *essential* features are for the benefit of the listener – these features serve to make the intended communication clearer and less ambiguous. Meanwhile, the *superficial* features are for the benefit of the speaker – they make

the message easier and quicker to articulate. Features of connected speech, for example, are like streamlining on a car. The car still moves without the streamlining; speech still makes sense without the features of connected speech.

This observation has implications for pronunciation teaching, especially in relation to the learner's needs and objectives. Productively, if learners are aiming exclusively for intelligibility, then they should perhaps focus only on the essential features. If on the other hand, they would also like an easier life, in terms of the work they have to do to articulate, then they would also benefit from working on some of the superficial features.

Differentiated Feedback

The quality of the teacher's feedback probably needs to be different for the two kinds of pronunciation features. For the essential features, feedback needs to be insistent, and we need to find ways to demonstrate to the learners how their message is at risk of being misunderstood. For the superficial features, feedback advice can be more optional, with a socio-cultural flavour – for example, 'Some speakers of English find it easier to say it this way – give it a try, see if you like it'.

This last point may be made clearer with a concrete example. In my accent, the word *today* has stress on the second syllable, and the first vowel is reduced to a schwa. I find most learners do not pick up the vowel reduction, preferring to keep a full vowel for the letter 'o' – something like the vowel sound in *could* or even *two*. This is highly unlikely to cause misunderstanding (providing they don't also stress the first syllable, making *TWO-day*, as in 'a two-day journey', for example). Consequently, I point out the difference between my own pronunciation of *today* and my learner's version in the spirit of socio-cultural comparison rather than correct-versus-incorrect. It's up to the learners if they want to go along with my vowel reduction or not.

Productive or Receptive Goals?

The above observations about teaching implications have been concerned with features which we teach for productive purposes. For receptive purposes, learners need to work on both essential and superficial features, since they will most likely find both in the speech of their future interlocutors. I sometimes ask students to produce features which I intend to be mainly for receptive purposes only because sometimes, trying to produce something is the best way of becoming aware of it receptively.

5 BEYOND DOGMA AND DENIAL

When the implications of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) first hit the consciousness of the ELT community at the beginning of this century, 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 let me run with them a little.

Dogma

Dogma took Jennifer Jenkins' *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (OUP 2000) as a holy text, with the list of pronunciation features known as the 'lingua franca core' as a fixed set of commandments. They were commandments in the sense that they weren't there to be questioned or understood, but simply obeyed – they were based on research. Pronunciation teaching must focus on these features and no others. 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. Militants were quite vehement in insisting that such features be dropped. 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 into something quite different.

Denial

Meanwhile, denial consisted in closing your eyes and hoping it would all go away. 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 premise of ELF theory: English was a lingua franca, and this must have implications. It's just that these implications seemed too destructive to contemplate - decades of accumulated wisdom and expertise at risk of tumbling down as the foundations were ripped away from underneath. Deniers 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.

When Elephants Fight, it's the Grass that Suffers

This battle between dogma and denial 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 and pronunciation was quietly sidelined, much as it had been in the heyday of the communicative revolution.

A Change of Lens

The post-ELF scenario that I've been attempting to describe in this article is a bid to see beyond dogma and denial. I think that we must embrace and assimilate the ELF premise, but this needn't be as destructive as deniers have feared. It's a change of lens rather than a change of substance. Fundamentally, we need to move away from seeing pronunciation features in terms of correctness towards seeing them in terms of effectiveness. Rather than correcting, give feedback. Discuss pronunciation features with students in a spirit of discovery, comparing your versions and their versions. Discuss which variations are merely superficial features of accent, and which are likely to cause intelligibility problems globally.

What is Intelligible?

In order to advise students 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. The lingua franca core has an important role here – it helps to open our mind to the kind of depth we have to dig. 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 the attention we pay to it in terms of its contribution to understanding and being understood.

Accent Awareness

Our intuitions about intelligibility can also 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 doesn't need changing. 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 ok if my student pronounces it that way. I would mention it, but not insist on students changing it – I would leave that up to them.

An Obsession with Model

Dogma and denial has not been hugely beneficial for pronunciation teaching. It has hijacked attention and focussed it all in possibly the wrong place: we've tended to obsess about product when really it would be more fruitful to focus on process. By product, I mean the target model. When ELF knocked native standards like RP of the pedestal, the most urgent question seemed to be: 'What do we replace it with?' Initially, it seemed the lingua franca core might do the job, but that was a misunderstanding. The global lingua franca is emergent and dynamic, not a stable model anybody can aim for. So still there was no model, and there seemed no way beyond this impasse.

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 accent in most classrooms – the teacher's. This was always quietly the case, even when RP was on its pedestal. Teachers didn't all suddenly become RP speakers on entering the classroom. Why not simply admit and accept this fact?



A Focus on Process

Perhaps more important than product is process: 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. All of the features that pronunciation teachers have traditionally taught can be recast and evaluated in this light: as ways of increasing the students' capacity to accommodate. This idea of accommodation, in fact, was an important element in Jennifer Jenkins's (2000) book – 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.

(Article first published as a series of blog posts in May 2018 on pronpack.com)

References

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