

AN ACHIEVABLE TARGET FOR SPECIFIC SETTINGS

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Goals for pronunciation

As teachers we need clear goals for our learners. They clarify our thinking and provide students with achievable targets. Once attained, these generate a sense of progress, which in turn renews motivation.

For the teaching of pronunciation in ELF settings, the goal is to be intelligible to other non-native speakers. Research into spoken interaction between non-native speakers (Jenkins 2000) made a first solid approximation as to which pronunciation features are essential for this. Collectively, these are known as the *lingua franca core* (LFC), and are summarised in Table 1.

<p>1. Consonants: all the consonants, except /θ/, /ð/ and dark /l/. Rhotic 'r'. Aspiration of word-initial /p/, /t/ & /k/).</p>
<p>2. Vowel quantity: i.e. long & short vowels, and the shortening of vowel length before fortis (voiceless) consonants.</p>
<p>3. Consonant cluster simplification: no deletion of sounds in word-initial clusters - addition is preferable. Deletion of /t/ and /d/ in medial & final clusters as for NS norms.</p>
<p>4. Nuclear stress: i.e. correct location of the most prominent stress in a tone unit.</p>

Table 1: the Lingua Franca Core (see Jenkins 2000, pp134-156 for full details)

Are these goals appropriate to our own teaching situation? We can go some way to answering this through the following questions:

1. Is the LFC a complete teaching programme?
2. Who will the LFC equip my learners to be intelligible to?
3. How easy will it be for learners to achieve competence in the LFC?
4. Will the LFC work in my local context?
5. Who or what is the pronunciation model for the LFC?

1. Is the LFC a complete teaching programme?

Despite being a core, the LFC is a complete programme for the purpose of communication in ELF settings. When the learner is competent in the items in the LFC, their task can be seen as being over. However, once they have mastered these items, learners are, of course, free to move on and to develop their competence in a number of ways. Jenkins, for example, offers four additional stages. Together they equip learners both to deal with the full range of L1 and L2 accents, and, importantly, to accommodate phonologically to their interlocutor in their speech (Jenkins 2000: 209-210).

2. Who will the LFC equip my learners to be intelligible to?

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) means learning the language in order to engage with its native speakers. Estimates vary as to the exact number of native speakers, but the figure of 380 million (Crystal 1997) is widely cited, with a figure of 1,200-1,500 million generally accepted for competent non-native speakers. Mastery of the Lingua Franca Core means being intelligible to the 1,500 million non-native speakers. Competent users of the LFC are also intelligible to the 380 million native-speakers, provided these have no hidden or overt aversion to non-native speaker accents.

Competence in a native-speaker accent, on the other hand, does not guarantee intelligibility with the 1,500 million non-native speakers of English. Studies have shown that for non-native listeners, native speakers are not necessarily as easy to understand as competent non-native speakers (Smith 1992; Bent 2001). Smith, for example, concluded that '[n]ative speakers (from Britain and the United States) were not found to be the most easily understood...' (1992: 88).

3. How easy will it be for learners to achieve competence in the LFC?

A target of a native-speaker accent implies a significant workload, even without aiming for full native-speaker pronunciation. For Spanish-L1 learners of English, for example, the vowel system alone involves at least nine distinct points of intervention (Kelly 2000), as opposed to only one - vowel length - for students working on the LFC. Many suprasegmental elements of NS accents are absent from the LFC, further reducing the workload. Given how little time is available for pronunciation work in most teaching contexts, a reduced workload is a significant advantage.

A second issue is that of achievability, where we need to distinguish between *teachable* and *learnable* (Dalton & Seidlhofer 1994). By teachable we are referring to items that respond well to direct intervention by the teacher, as is the case with many consonants, though not with /θ/ and /ð/ (Menyuk 1968; Eckman 1977). Intonation, in contrast is felt to be only learnable. '[T]he complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation ... makes it a very difficult thing to teach ...'. (Roach 1991: 168).

With a native-speaker accent as our target, a significant number of items appear to be only learnable. In contrast, the items in the LFC are almost all teachable, although this is not to say that the LFC is an easy option.

Intelligibility through the LFC is dependent on learners becoming fully competent in its different components, beginning with the almost entire consonant inventory of English.

4. Will the LFC work in my local context?

If we take context in a geographical sense, learners in Central Asia, say, represent a classic ELF context, since they are most likely to use their English for communication with other non-native speakers. In this respect, the LFC is ideal. In practice, of course, it is perfectly possible to be working in a school in Poland, say, and have students in class who want to speak with a NS accent. If these students are clear as to what this implies in terms of time and ability, it is our job to help them. As Jenkins points out, it is 'important not to patronize those learners who ... wish to work towards the goal of a native-speaker accent, by telling them they have no need to do so.' (Jenkins 2002: 101)

However, even when a learner's goal is an NS accent, nothing in the LFC is 'unnecessary' or constitutes an 'obstacle' for the learner. That is to say, nothing needs 'unlearning'. The opposite is not true; speakers competent in a standard NS accent such as RP or GA, need to avoid using certain features of their accent, especially certain suprasegmental features, in order to be intelligible in ELF settings.

Another important context-related issue is that of multilingual versus monolingual groups. Jenkins strongly advocates the use of communication tasks in order to improve phonological accommodation skills (2000; 2002), which she sees as essential to effective interaction with interlocutors from a wide range of L1 backgrounds. Such tasks train learners in actively adjusting their pronunciation so as to converge on internationally intelligible forms from the LFC. Teachers working in the UK with multilingual groups, for example, are ideally situated to use these tasks to improve their learners' phonological accommodation skills.

Unfortunately, with monolingual groups, which is where the majority of English is taught around the world, providing learners with communication tasks can have the opposite effect. In order to complete the task, they converge *not* on the LFC form of an item, but on a pronunciation influenced by their shared L1. This will often be unintelligible to listeners from other L1 backgrounds, although Walker (2005) has suggested a partial solution to this problem.

In a completely different sense, monolingual groups have a great advantage over multilingual groups when working towards mastery of the LFC, since the teacher's job 'is simplified by the homogenous first language background of the learners...' (Brinton, 1995). By approaching the LFC through the learner's L1 whenever possible, we switch the emphasis away from what the learner **cannot** do, to what they already **can**. As a result, pronunciation ceases to be a fight to reduce the learners' *foreign* accents, and becomes a case of adding any 'missing' LFC elements to the accents (i.e. phonological competence) they already possess. (Walker 2001)

5. Who or what is the model for the LFC?

If NS English is not the most intelligible accent in ELF contexts, what do we put in its place as a model for our learners? Ideally, we would use recorded materials of competent non-native speakers from multiple L1 backgrounds. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, virtually no such materials exist. The first outcome of this situation is that for NS teachers working with multilingual groups in Inner Circle countries, the absence of suitable recorded material complicates their task considerably. As a minimum they will need to become aware as to when their pronunciation differs from ELF pronunciation, and point this out to their students. Of course, this is similar to the way NS teachers who do not have an RP accent are trained by some examining boards, and so is not new to us. A further step, but one which could prove considerably more difficult for some, would be for teachers with NS accents to 're-train' themselves in ELF pronunciation.

In contrast, with monolingual groups outside the UK, the competent, NNS local teacher is an ideal model. The fact that this teacher will very probably not have a NS accent is not relevant to ELF settings, as we have seen. Indeed, the opposite is true, since if they have experience as users of English for ELF communication in their own lives, such NNS teachers:

- represent an achievable target to their learners
- are ideally situated to help their learners to produce new sounds since they themselves have successfully been through the same learning process
- often have a good formal knowledge of the learners' L1 phonology, and so can use this to help in the pronunciation of ELF items.

Conclusion

The LFC is not a 'cure-all', and has never been put forward as being one. Nor is it an abandonment or lowering of standards, something it has been attacked for. It is simply a pronunciation target for a specific setting. As such, it is obviously not valid for all contexts. However, with the LFC, learners have a set of goals that offer an achievable, reduced workload. Moreover, the LFC does not require them to master features of pronunciation that are irrelevant or unhelpful in other contexts. Teachers with multilingual groups have the chance to use techniques that develop their learners' phonological accommodation skills in a natural way. Teachers with monolingual groups have the advantage of a shared L1 background.

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