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The teachability-intelligibility issue: vowel length in GlobEnglish

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(Published in Gagliardi, C. & Maley A. (2010) ,*EIL, ELF, Global English: Teaching and Learning Issues.* Peter Lang: Bern)

It is an indisputable fact that English has become not just a global language but *the* global language. There are other languages that can claim this prerogative (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Italian, etc. – see *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 2006), but none of these can question the privileged position English occupies as a world language. The 'English factor' in Graddol's words (2007) is everywhere, and yet, despite this gratifying thought to both native and non-native speakers for what it means in terms of greater easiness of communication, there are a number of elements that can challenge the idea of a unified world system (Monroy, 2007). There is on the one hand, an increasing internal centrifugal movement, which, although observable in other linguistic systems, is particularly evident in the case of English, as titles like *World Englishes* (Kachru, 1985), *The English Languages* (Tom McCarthur, 1998), *Englishes* (Görlach,1991), *More Englishes* (Görlach 1995), *Still more Englishes* (Görlach, 2002), *World Englishes* (Jenkins, 2003), *World Englishes* (Melchers & Shaw, 2003) show; on the other, emerging pronunciation standards in nations like India, Singapore, Pakistan, Nigeria, etc., "each as 'correct' as any other" (Quirk, 1985: 2-3), are superseding normative models such as RP or GA as better options in a world where NNs (non-native speakers) with different linguistic backgrounds outnumber Ns (native speakers) (Graddol, 1997; 2006). No wonder that experts fear

that fragmentation could be a reality unless some action is taken.

There has been no lack of proposals to fill this gap, ranging from those who consider Standard Scottish as a better option than RP or GA (Abercrombie, 1965; Crystal, 1995; Trudgill, 2005) – thus departing from the normative models –, to those like Crystal (1997) whose WSSE (World Standard Spoken English) is a compromise between different varieties of English without prioritising any one in particular. Between these two possibilities, Ufomata (1990) claims that 'basic RP', supplemented with those common features from standards of English as an L2 which may not cause unintelligibility, would be a possible solution, whereas Jenkins's LFC (Lingua Franca Core) while giving the lion's share to RP and GA for crucial features, leaves the door open to other possible phonetic realizations of English when pronounced by NNs speakers of English. Provided – and this is a big proviso – intelligibility is not impaired. No wonder that she considers the NN fluent bilingual speaker of English as the 'optimum pronunciation model' (Jenkins, 2000: 226). It is her model I shall discuss below as it is the most articulate and full-fledged proposal made so far.

One notable aspect of her model is that international intelligibility between natives and non-natives should be defined by empirical evidence – a point repeatedly stressed by proponents of the LFC movement, notably Jenkins herself (2005) and Seidlhofer (2004, 2005). This is certainly a welcome idea as it leaves out impressionistic pronouncements about the usefulness and viability of the LFC. From a pedagogical perspective, this model offers a further advantage: because English phonology is not envisaged in terms of the native models alone, accent reduction is not a must any more. On the contrary, it is 'accent addition' what is suggested, in the sense of not penalising foreign accent if it does not interfere with intelligibility. As a result, the learning task is alleviated, the focus being on those aspects that are both teachable and learnable (Jenkins, 2000: 132-133).

1. Vowel features in the LFC

In discussing vowels, Jenkins stresses three main aspects that I will discuss at length, since they impinge on the teachability-learnability issue. In her view, a) vowel length contrasts should be maintained before fortis/lenis consonants (Jenkins, 2000: 145). (e.g. *live-leave*), b) /3:/ should be "pronounced correctly" (2000: 145) despite the fact that she allows for "regional qualities if consistent" in the case of the rest of the vowels, and c) she claims that "it is the length rather than the quality of diphthongs that is most salient for intelligibility" (2000: 145). Let us take each of these claims in turn.

That quality and length are key parameters in defining English vowels is something that all phonologists would readily subscribe to; but disagreement arises the moment one has to decide which one should prevail over the other. This disagreement is manifest in the different way British phoneticians transcribe vowel sounds: some prioritize quality at the expense of quantity on the grounds that the latter has no significance (e.g. Abercombie, 1964; Windsor Lewis, 1972, Wells and Colson, 1971, etc.); others, like Jones, consider that length "constitutes the fundamental difference [….] quality [being] incidental" (*Outline, 342*); and then we find a compromise position where both parameters are envisaged as pivotal. Such is the case of the three leading current English pronunciation dictionaries (*Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*, Longman, 2000), *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation*, O.U.P., 2003), *Cambridge Pronouncing Dictionary*, C.U.P., 2006). By stressing vowel quantity and not being too strict on vowel quality (and favouring approximation rather than exact imitation of RP/GA sounds) Jenkins takes up a clear quantitative stance. This is in open contradiction to her claim

that the LFC syllabus should have a "rhotic /r/ only" (2000: 201), for rhoticity nullifies vowel lengthening, as Scot English, Canadian English, and other rhotic varieties exemplify.

Her choice of rhoticity – a feature of GA, the other normative variety – is based on a commendable simplicity criterion: it seems easier to pronounce /r/ in a checked syllable than suppress it and realize it with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel; moreover, spelling acts as a sound reinforcer. Orthographic representation was in fact another criterion used by Jenkins in support of rhoticity (2000: 139). It was also one of Abercrombie's arguments when he expressed his view that Standard Scottish was a better option for foreign learners of English than RP (1965). Why then, one may ask, should vowel length be a feature of the LFC? Jenkins follows Bryan Jenner here (1989), despite the fact that this is a controversial issue. She admits (2000: 144) length in English is in effect at the expense of the nature of the phonetic environment – a key argument put forward by the advocates of a qualitative approach. For her second claim, that occasionally both parameters (quality and quantity) are necessary, she concurs with A. Brown (1990) that while it may be true for a small group of words, it is not a strong argument. On the other hand, to contend that length should be obligatory on the grounds that it is "reasonably stable across varieties of E." (2000: 144), is to bring in, in our view, a vicious circle argument: if length is distinctive in certain varieties (the non-rhotic ones), it has to be mandatorily stable, otherwise the short vs. long distinction would not apply. As to whether a shortened vowel before a fortis consonant brings about "better intelligibility" (2000: 145), Jenkins offers no empirical support to substantiate such a claim; she offers no evidence either to back up her argument that it is "more comfortable to produce a shortened vowel sound before a fortis consonant than it is to retain full phonemic length" (2000: 141). More comfortable to whom, one may ask. My impression is that Jenkins has been forced to make length compulsory on the grounds that vowel quality has been granted a considerable degree of freedom.

2. Some empirical facts

2.1 Monophthongs

We have pointed out the incongruity of making length compulsory and fostering at the same time a rhotic realization in the LFC. We wanted to test empirically how relevant length in English is. The first argument in support of vowel quality as a key criterion comes from Gimson (1949). He reports on an experiment where a number of phonetically untrained speakers of English were asked to utter monosyllabic words containing [ɪ, æ, ɒ, ʊ] and [iː, ɑː, ɔː, uː] with their normal quality but with reverse length (i.e. lengthening the ones in the first group and shortening the ones in the second). The result was that the first, short vowels, with the exception of [ae] (perceived as a kind of [ei]) were recognised as such despite their lengthening; in the case of the long group, they were correctly identified with the exception of [ɔː] (often identified as [ʊ]), and shortened [ɑː] (occasionally identified as [ʌ]). The conclusion then is that length does not seem to be a necessary requirement at all, a fact which experience corroborates, otherwise speakers of rhotic varieties would not be able to understand those with a rhotic accent, and vice versa, which is not the case.

We also carried out an experiment in order to test further the validity of Jenkins' claim. We used for this two blocks of structures: five short sentences consisting of monosyllabic words containing long and short vowels (see Appendix 1), and ten English sentences containing this time polysyllabic English words (see Appendix 2). Both sets were read out to five native speakers of English (near RP variety) with knowledge of Spanish, and to five lawyers and five business people, all speakers of Spanish as their first language. Their knowledge of

English was judged to be not higher than a pre-intermediate level.

As shown below (Table 1), the intelligibility of native speakers of English was lower than non-natives in the first batch of sentences. This was not surprising though, since, unlike Spanish, length is distinctive in RP and, therefore, may be crucial in terms of word identification; particularly in the case of monosyllables occurring in a poor (i.e. non redundant) linguistic context. Contrariwise, the second batch of sentences (Table 2) was correctly perceived by the native speakers group, intelligibility reaching 100%. Spaniards scored slightly lower due to their occasional lack of familiarity with some of the terms appearing in the sentences. Thus, these results, despite the modest sample used, further stress the subservient role of quantity to quality in terms of vowel discrimination.

Number of Sent.	*Engl-Ns (correctly identified Ss) .*	*%*	*Ns of Spanish (correctly identified Ss)*	*%*
1	4	80%	8	80%
2	4	80%	8	80%
3	4	80%	7	70%
4	5	100%	10	100%
5	5	100%	9	90%

Table 1. Number of correctly identified vowels in sentences consisting of monosyllabic words

Number of Sent.	*Engl-Ns (correctly identified Ss) .*	*%*	*Ns of Spanish (correctly identified Ss)*	*%*
1	5	100%	10	100%
2	5	100%	10	100%
3	5	100%	10	100%
4	5	100%	10	100%
5	5	100%	10	100%

6	5	100%	10	100%
7	5	100%	9	90%
8	5	100%	9	90%
9	5	100%	8	80%
10	5	100%	9	90%

Table 2. Number of correctly identified vowels in sentences consisting of polysyllabic words

2.1.1. The status of /ɜː/

Jenkins makes an exception with /ɜː/ – a marked phoneme – considering that both parameters, quality and quantity, are needed here for the correct identification of this sound. One wonders what the reasons are for this exception to the rule of prioritizing quantity at the expense of quality as she does with the rest of the vowels. In support of vowel quality, she resorts to Schwartz' research in 1980: he found that his informants substituted /ɜː/ with /ɑː/, length remaining equal. As for quantity, Jenkins uses her own data where she noticed that "substitutions of /ɜː/ [...] caused intelligibility problems on several occasions" (2000: 134). On page 57, she more explicit pinpoints that "Japanese NBESs have great difficulty in producing the sound /ɜː/". We have not had access to her data, but one is surprised to find that in the Japanese extracts given on pages 60-61 of her *Phonology of English* (2000) words like *whiskers* and *fingers* have been transcribed with [ɜː], an unlikely realization if, as claimed, Japanese have great problems with such a phoneme.

In our experiment, while not all the native speakers understood the sentences of the first block (one out of five failed) containing long and short central monophthongs, understanding was complete when they listened to sentences in the polysyllabic block containing words with the long phoneme (*thirty, purpose, commercial, concert, journey* and *person*). In all these cases the reading was done replacing schwa with [e +

r] (e.g. *jouney =*jerney, purpose=*perpose,* etc.). This obviously suggests that intelligibility is not impaired due to rhoticity. Even less so in the case of polysyllabic words where rhoticiy *cum* linguistic and contextual context leave no room for doubt as to the meaning of the utterance.

An indirect proof of the role of checked /r/ in terms of intelligibility is provided by Walker (2001). In the list of errors made by Spanish speakers when pronouncing English, his comments following some of the various phonemes are a clear illustration of the role played by rhoticity as a means to reducing intelligibility problems. We read, for instance, that /æ, ʌ, ɑː/ are confused "except where 'r' occurs in the spelling" (2001: 6). Also /ɒ, əʊ, ɔː/ are confused "if there is no 'r' in the spelling" (2001: 6*),* and further down, "/ɜː/ is replaced by the vowel + r" and /ɪə, eə, ʊə/ are "replaced by the vowel 'r'". Thus almost half of the list is not a problem any more provided that the English spoken is a rhotic variety, vowel length being non distinctive (Trudgill, 2005).

2.2 Diphthongs in the LFC

Jenkins's claim regarding diphthongs echoes Jenner in two respects: like him, she does away with the centring diphthongs, their final schwa being replaced by /r/ as befits a rhotic variety; more debatable is her acceptance of Jenner's contention that, as with the monophthongs, length is pivotal in the case of diphthongs: "it is length rather than the quality of diphthongs that is most salient for intelligibility", Jenkins writes (2000: 145).

Once again, I am of the opinion that she disregards quality as a key criterion for intelligibility without providing this time any empirical evidence of her own. The problem is that, unlike vowels, where the choice between quality and quantity conveys phoneme status as pointed out above, one cannot say the same of diphthongs. The three pronunciation dictionaries referred to above (*EPD, LPD* and *ODP*) are a case in point: none of them

captures length despite the fact that phonetically, diphthongs, like long vowels, are very much reduced when checked by fortis consonants. The reason is that such a reduction does not impinge on intelligibility, for it only affects the first element (besides there not being many minimal pairs where length should be critical), so the overall make-up of the diphthong remains easily identifiable. On the other hand, although is it true that, as regards quality, one finds "considerable variation in both elements" (Cruttenden, 2001:120), such variation in diphthongs rarely poses a problem to the foreign learner; and if it does, it has seldom been given high priority because they might affect intelligibility. For instance, in the list given by Walker (2000) showing the main stumbling blocks Spanish speakers find when learning English as a foreign language, /ei/ is the only diphthong mentioned, which – he says – is at times confused with /e/ (an observation I have failed to notice throughout more than twenty years of teaching English to university students).

Kenworthy (1987), in the section devoted to problems foreign learners encounter when pronouncing English, lists nine languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and Turkish). Of these, only Chinese, Turkish and French speakers (and Spaniards if we believe Walker) can have problems with the pair /**eɪ**/-/e/(e.g. *mate-met*); /**əʊ**/-/**ɔː**/(e.g. *coat-court*) *may* also be a problem to French, Germans and Italians. Curiously enough, there are no diphthongs in Arabic, but Kenworthy acknowledges that "these seem rarely to cause problems" (1987: 125). Jenkins herself reports that diphthong substitutions did not normally cause problems in the data. If this is so, there is little point then in loading the LFC with a feature that has never been present in the teaching of English to foreigners, ie make length distinctions in the case of diphthongs.

Conclusions

From what has been discussed, it seems evident that vowel length should not be part of the lingua franca core if defined as a rhotic variety. In the case of monosyllables, where length is more crucial in non-rhotic varieties, we have argued that is not a problem at all because rhoticiy copes with any possible breach in intelligibility. Moreover, interactions between non-native speakers of English tend to rely more on polysyllabic than on monosyllabic words – at least in a European context. In the former, length is even less necessary, for besides rhoticity, both the linguistic (phonological adjustment due to redundancy) and the situational context can disambiguate any possible misunderstanding.

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APPENDIX 1

MONOSYLLABIC WORDS

1. Please, sit in this seat. **/iː/-/ɪ/**
2. You should bring Jude with you **/uː/-/ʊ/**
3. There's a bird in the shed **/ɜː/-/e/**
4. Cut this in half and pass it to mum **/ɑː/-/ʌ/**
5. Come on, mop the floor. **/ɔː/-/ɒ/**

APPENDIX 2

POLYSYLLABIC WORDS

1.– I must be at Heathrow airport at fourteen **thir**ty.
2.– How are you? I'm feeling bad: I have a heart condition
3.– Any business conversation will normally have a very specific **pur**pose.
4.– A com**mer**cial company will use advertising to inform his customers of a change in policy.
5.– Name in order of preference three companies into which you desire to be commissioned.
6.– The concert was fantastic, but the **jour**ney was awful.
7.– As a councillor, I launched a long-**term** programme to make **ser**vices much more responsive to the people who use them.
8.– A society which attaches so much importance to material growth encourages competition, not co-operation.
9.– A will is a declaration of a **per**son's intention concerning the allocation of property after death.
10.– The pressure of unstable market conditions has forced the banks to employ several new borrowing techniques.

Note: Syllables in bold type have /ɜː/ as their nuclear element.