

Intelligible Pronunciation: Focus on the Proficient L2 Speaker

Joanne Rajadurai

MARA University of Technology, Malaysia

The field of pronunciation has never been short of controversies which are often expressed in various ways in the curriculum. In many ESL countries, if pronunciation is explicitly taught, it is usually done with a rigid adherence to native norms, despite professions to the contrary. This paper argues that with the growth of English as a local, regional and global lingua franca in countries like Malaysia, traditional pronunciation models need to be critically re-examined, and a shift from the native speaker to the highly competent L2 speaker of English be considered. Reporting on a study undertaken in Malaysia, the paper discusses the ways in which proficient speakers of English modify their pronunciation patterns to attain greater intelligibility. In this way, the article explores new ways of investigating intelligibility and pronunciation needs, and concludes by highlighting the significance of the findings with respect to conceptual, empirical and pedagogical issues.

DEVELOPMENTS AND DILEMMAS IN THE FIELD OF PRONUNCIATION

Some Controversies in Pronunciation

The field of pronunciation teaching and learning has never been short of controversies. Largely ignored in the grammar-translation approach, pronunciation made a comeback in the heyday of the direct method and audiolingualism,

and then it was sidelined again with the advent of the communicative approach. Not only has pronunciation as an ESL component waxed and waned in popularity according to the Language Teaching Method of the day, it has often been plagued by questions about whether it can and should be taught, and if so, what the goal of pronunciation teaching should be. Moreover debates have continued over models to be used, the aspects of pronunciation that should be focused on, the techniques that should be employed and the manner in which pronunciation should be assessed.

In the last couple of decades, there seems to be renewed interest in pronunciation issues among linguists, fuelled by current emphases on broader phonological aspects of connected speech, and their link to communicative functions in spoken discourse. Unfortunately, this surge in research interest has not always led to a concomitant increase in enthusiasm for pronunciation teaching in many ESL classrooms.

A number of factors have contributed to this relative neglect of phonology, and many of these revolve around important pedagogical and sociolinguistic issues. For example, it was believed that pronunciation was an area which was most susceptible to the influences of age and L1 transfer – factors over which the teacher had very little control. Hence, pronunciation was viewed as a component of L2 learning that is most resistant to change, and therefore the least useful for teaching purposes. Moreover, pronunciation had, in the past, been associated with discrete sound elements, and this view of pronunciation did not sit comfortably within the communicative paradigm embraced in many ESL classrooms, with its emphasis on fluency, meaning and authenticity. Teachers have also found it difficult to integrate pronunciation with other language skills, and have often found themselves uncomfortable and ill-equipped when it comes to pronunciation teaching. Seidlhofer (2001) points out that many teachers “frequently regard pronunciation as overly difficult, technical or plain mysterious” (p. 56). Aside from curriculum and classroom difficulties, assessment of pronunciation is yet another contentious area as evidenced by pronunciation descriptors in speaking performance scales. Many oral proficiency tests use the native speaker as the yardstick, while

others, including large-scale global proficiency tests, describe the expert user in terms of accuracy and fluency but it is often unclear exactly what these terms mean. Adding to these concerns is the fact that pronunciation is directly linked to crucial issues of intelligibility and identity. It has not been easy to reconcile the glibly cited goal of international intelligibility, with the fact that pronunciation is also a site in which our social, cultural and individual identities reside. Porter and Garvin (1989) thus argue that teaching pronunciation to L2 learners will inevitably “go against the grain” as it will “tamper with their self-image” (p. 8).

Surrounded by these dilemmas, 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, dealing with it in a rather ad-hoc and unprincipled manner or, in the event that it is given sufficient emphasis in the curriculum and classroom, pronunciation is often taught with a rigid adherence to prescribed norms, which usually means native norms.

The Native-Nonnative Debate

I would like to briefly address this last issue, for despite recognizing 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 materials 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 Circle¹, where hardly anyone in the community, and certainly nobody in the classroom, not even the

¹ Kachru (1985) represents the spread of English in the world in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles. 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 and others.

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 strongly believe that L2 users should be given the right and freedom to opt for their choice of models. After all, Timmis' (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" (Timmis, 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 (Rajadurai, 2005). For instance, Jenkins (2000), who made a case for a lingua franca phonological 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 British speakers of RP (Received Pronunciation) or speakers of other 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. This is the basic premise in Widdowson's (1997) portrayal of English as a virtual language that is "variously actualized" as it spreads, resulting in "adaptation and nonconformity" (p. 140).

If the internationalization and nativization 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

then 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 recognizably 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.

DETERMINING INTELLIGIBILITY AND PRONUNCIATION NEEDS

Various Approaches to Investigating Intelligibility

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 load² (Brown, 1988a; Catford, 1987) 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

² Functional load may be defined as the number of words in the lexicon that the phonemic contrast serves to keep distinct (Catford, 1987).

remain about their applicability to countries of the Outer Circle. It may be argued that when it comes to research into a nativised³ 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) that “it is necessary to recognize nativised? norms for intranational 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” (p. 318). Such a view gives prominence to pragmatism, a plurality of norms, and the development of endonormative standards.

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. This will allow for an account of how competent non-native speakers actually use English.

The Proficient L2 User

Today, it is a well-known fact that non-native speakers of English, including ESL and EFL speakers, outnumber native speakers. 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. Beneke (1991, quoted in Lesznyák, 2002) estimates that about 80 percent of verbal interactions in which English is used as a second or foreign language today do not involve native speakers. While it is obvious that non-native speakers of English possess varying degrees of proficiency, it

³ The term nativised variety is used to describe the English used in the Outer Circle, which is usually characterised by distinctive localised forms of the language (Kachru, 1992).

is equally evident that much of their interaction in English is successful, and that a sizable proportion of them are proficient users of the language. These statistics have spurred scholars to rethink their assumptions about the use and users of English, and led to calls for research into English as adopted and appropriated by its non-native speakers, and especially competent, successful users. For instance, the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) describes itself as exclusively focused on “English as it is spoken by this non-native speaking majority of users” (<http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/>). As the VOICE homepage puts it, “These speakers use English successfully on a daily basis all over the world, be it in their personal, professional or academic lives. They are not language learners but language users in their own right. Thus, it is clearly worth finding out just how they use the language”. Aside from such large-scale corpora, Prodromou’s (2003) research concentrates on samples of “natural, spontaneous speech produced by proficient non-native users of English as a foreign language” (p. 11) in his quest to describe successful users of English.

Together with other researchers, a case is slowly but surely being built for a shift in focus from the traditional native-speaker paradigm, to one that recognises the value of proficient L2 users, and what they have to offer the field of applied linguistics. Pakir (1999) calls for research to be conducted from “the fresh perspective of English-knowing bilinguals as they emerge as the new actors on the world stage” (p. 108) and Tomlinson (2005), discussing ELT in Asia, highlights the urgency of describing the English used by effective communicators.

In the context of pronunciation, I believe that there is a clear need to collect, analyse and describe the English used by proficient and communicatively successful L2 users, as this description would shed light on what intelligible speech looks like when used by competent non-native speakers. In fact, some studies have shown that for non-native listeners, the intelligibility of non-native speakers, particularly proficient ones, can surpass the intelligibility of native speakers (Bent & Bradlow, 2001). This, of course, does not mean that the English used in everyday, informal interaction should be promoted for

international communication or used as a pedagogical model - even if this sub-variety is highly valued as a symbol of identity and solidarity. But, this holds true even with respect to 'authentic', informal native varieties, which rarely perform well on the global stage. Burgess (2004) writing in the Guardian says "I've observed Australian kids in Japan having huge problems communicating in English because they have no notion of how much their own speech works only in an Australian context". This observation only underscores the fact that to be communicatively competent, a speaker must be able to switch, when necessary, from a private voice meant for local consumption to a public voice meant for global communication. As this imperative concerns both native and non-native speakers alike, a more democratic basis for language development is established. Such a perspective would allow for an internationally intelligible sub-variety to be built on a local accent, with modifications made towards enhancing intelligibility for a wider audience, thus bringing together two crucial features of a pronunciation model: international intelligibility and local identity. This notion formed the basis of this exploratory research into aspects of pronunciation undertaken in Malaysia.

THE BROAD RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

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 questions this paper will briefly address are:

1. What kinds of code and phonological choices are made by the speakers, and what is their significance?
2. How does the phonological variation present in Malaysian English or ME relate to intelligibility?

Selected findings that relate to the questions listed above will be reported and discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Code and Phonological Aspects of Malaysian English

First, the corpus showed that speakers routinely and effortlessly orient to their goals and to the context of interaction via the skilful selection and use of various forms or sub-varieties of English. These may be labeled Colloquial Malaysian English or CME and Standard Malaysian English or SME, and represent end-points of a cline of sub-varieties regularly heard in Malaysia. That most interactions recorded showed smooth progress with hardly any evidence of miscommunication is testament to the fact that the speakers had managed to successfully select the right code and modify aspects of their speech to meet intelligibility requirements of various occasions and audiences. In strictly formal contexts and in interactions with non-Malaysians, SME was clearly the preferred code. Most other communicative situations seemed to elicit both CME and SME in varying proportions. It was clear that code-mixing and code-switching were common modes of interaction used by the speakers.

Second, the data attest to the use of nativised forms of pronunciation within this cline of sub-varieties. A detailed phonological analyses of the sub-varieties showed that SME differed from CME in that it was characterised by fewer glottal stops, greater use of aspiration, increased use of long vowels, greater use of lexical and nuclear stress, increased use of tone-unit boundaries

as well as a reduced rate of speech. These features will be discussed in a later section.

Third, the analysis pointed to the fact that the various sub-varieties have acquired a range of social meanings. At the risk of over-simplifying and polarizing the distinctions between the sub-varieties, SME may be seen as indexical of formal, correct speech, symbolizing education and power whilst CME is indicative of casual, informal talk, symbolizing friendliness and solidarity. This suggests that there is more than one type of prestige variant in Malaysian society: not only is it true that SME and CME may carry differential prestige in different activities and circumstances, so do other languages in the community.

Phonological Variation and Intelligibility in Malaysian English

In order to determine the phonological features deemed crucial for wider intelligibility, it was necessary to compare the ways in which these proficient Malaysian speakers modified their speech⁴ 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. In other words, to identify the phonological features that facilitate wider intelligibility in the speech of Malaysians, a comparison of colloquial and standard or educated sub-varieties of Malaysian English was undertaken. 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

⁴ This approach is grounded in Long's Interactionist position (1985) and finds support from research on modified interaction that has examined the negotiation between interlocutors and the consequent re-structuring of speech, including improvements in pronunciation, in efforts to be intelligible (Gass & Varonis, 1989; Long, 1983).

in Malaysian English that differ from RP⁵ 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.

In the interest of space, I shall limit the following discussion to only selected segmental and suprasegmental features as used by the speakers in the study.

Segmental Aspects

Except for the dental fricatives [T] and [D], the rest of the English consonants may be deemed essential for wider intelligibility. The dental fricatives, however, may be substituted, and in the case of Malaysian speakers, an acceptable substitute is the dentalised plosive - [t∞] and [d∞], used especially in function words like *the* and *this*, but also, though less frequently, in content words like *think* and *brother*. 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. Further support for permitting this substitution comes from the following considerations. First, the relative contrastive value or functional load between [T] and [t], and [D] and [d] is low. For instance, while the [r]-[l] distinction contrasts 589 words in English, or has a relative functional load of 83% in word initial position, [T] and [t] distinguish only 117 words (27% word initially), while [D] and [d] only distinguish 58 words (19% word initially) (Catford, 1987; Higgins, 2002). Second, these sounds in English and particularly [T] have relatively low frequencies⁶, with [T] at

⁵ RP is used as a reference point, because Malaysian English is derived from British English.

⁶ It must be borne in mind that these figures for functional load and order of

0.37% and [D] at 3.56% (Gimson, 2001, p. 216). The higher frequency of [D] is due to its occurrence in a number of commonly-used function words like *the, this, that, then, they* etc, making it highly unlikely to be confused with [d] which occurs primarily in lexical words. Apart from these factors, the generally rare featuring of [T] and [D] in the languages of the world may mean that they are possibly universally difficult in terms of articulation, and Pennington (1995) describes them as phonetically marked. Unsurprisingly then, there are a growing number of varieties, both non-native (like Singapore English, Philippine English) and native (like some accents of Irish English, Black Vernacular English) that have [T], [D] substitutes (Brown, 1988a; Tayao, 2004; Trudgill & Hannah, 1994). This implies that the use of [t ∞] and [d ∞] as substitutes for /T/ and /D/ is not expected to cause problems in international communication.

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 /æ/ although slight lengthening may occur for /æ/, 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.

A feature that emerged as clearly essential or 'core' is maintenance of vowel length contrasts, for instance between the vowel pairs [I]-[i:], [V]-[A:] and so on. Although the data manifested some variation in vowel quality, when it comes to vowel quantity, speakers were more careful to maintain length contrasts between words like *did* and *deed*, *duck* and *dark*, and so on. As for diphthongs, /I@/, /aI/, /aU/, /OI/ and /U@/ are consistently realised, but not /eI/, /@U/ and /e@/. The data show that the latter may be substituted with the long monophthongs [e:], [o:] and [E:] respectively, as in *make*

frequency of sounds in English have been derived from a particular accent of English, namely RP.

[me:k], *show* [So:] and *care* [kE:], without intelligibility being compromised. Corroboration for the importance of vowel quantity comes from functional load considerations, which show certain contrasts to carry relatively high contrastive value/relative value, like [I]-[i:] (471 / 95%), [V]-[A:] (172 / 38%), [Q]-[O:] (157 / 26%), whilst [U]-[u:] carries a lighter load (18 / 7%) (Catford, 1987; Higgins, 2002). What this implies is that vowel length contrasts, especially those which distinguish a higher number of English words, are important contributors to comprehensibility. Aside from internal contrastive considerations, there is external evidence suggesting that some contrasts could be regarded as less important, particularly as either or both of the [U]-[u:] and [Q]-[O:] contrasts are not found in a number of native varieties, including some accents of American, Canadian, Northern Ireland and Scottish English, as well as most new varieties of English (Brown, 1988b; Hung, 2002). Perhaps, then, while vowel length distinctions are a significant contributor to intelligibility, not all contrasts are equally important.

Phonotactic Considerations

Onsets or word-initial consonants, as in *pit*, *spit* and *split*, are always realised in full, with no attempts at systematic simplification evident in the data analyzed, 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. These findings find support from Jenkins' (2000) lingua franca core, which state that no omission is permitted in word-initial clusters, but that middle and final clusters may be simplified according to the phonotactic rules of the English syllable structure.

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 competence in English or lack of familiarity with the local accent - speakers automatically activate the important organizing 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. The data show speakers pausing, changing their pitch or rhythm, and using phrase-final lengthening as indicators of tone-unit boundaries, which tended to correspond to grammatical units. There is some research that corroborates the importance of using tone-units to enhance the comprehensibility of speech. Research by Blau (1990), and Anderson-Hsieh and Dauer (1997) found that inserting short pauses at major constituent boundaries or after key lexical items facilitate the intelligibility of L2 speech. Similarly, Bremer, Roberts, Vassuer, Simonot, and Broeder (1996) studying real and simulated inter-cultural encounters point to speed of delivery, segmentation and emphasis on key words as important strategies in preventing problems of understanding. It is reasonable to conclude that the optimum use of tone-units is crucial for enhancing intelligibility.

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 SME. 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, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz's (1982) study of the interaction between a West Indian speaker of English and a native English speaker showed how each community used their voice in

different ways to signal what is important. Observations of this nature led Pennington (1989) to draw attention to studies that have indicated prosodic and kinesic peaks coinciding, and to suggest, therefore, that gestures be treated as part of the intonation system “If intonation is part of a gestural complex ... signaling emotions and their degrees of intensity; then there should be many obvious ways in which visible and audible gestures are coupled to produce similar and reinforcing effects” (p. 31). It is likely then that prominence is signaled in various ways in different varieties of English⁷.

Other aspects of connected speech like stress-timed rhythm, reduced vowels, weak forms, liaison, assimilation, and elision appear to be non-core or non-crucial features as they are not significantly used by the speakers to enhance intelligibility. While some words are realised with reduced vowels (e.g. *machine* [m@Si:n]), others are realised with full vowels (e.g. *commit* [kQmIt]), and these never affected intelligibility in any of the interactions in the corpus. Arguments for the exclusion of these principles of gradation from the core list of phonological features are as follows. First, vowel reduction 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. Defending the use of full vowels, Bauer (1995, p. 324) describes it as what “we would expect to find particularly in clear speech, speech which is oriented towards the needs of the listener.” It would be unreasonable then to suggest that vowel reduction be a core phonological feature, even if it is characteristic of native speech. In addition, Hung (2002) puts forward the argument that one could claim that

⁷ 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 (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus Discourse in English), 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 & McCarthy, 1997, 2004).

the massive neutralisation of unstressed vowels in RP makes it less intelligible, because it obscures the relationships between morphologically derived words such as *office* and *official* [Qfɪs, @fɪs@5]. In contrast, using the unreduced vowel [Q] makes the morphological relationship between *office* and *official* much more transparent [Qfɪs, Qfɪs@5]. Thus, far from adversely affecting intelligibility, one could claim that the use of unreduced vowels makes speech more intelligible, at least to non-native speakers, many of whom use little if any vowel reduction. Support for this has come from a study by Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, and Balasubramaniam (2002) which 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. In fact, Bauer (1995) documents that in New Zealand English, full vowels are used in place of what, in many other native varieties, is a weak form or reduced vowel, and like Hung, points out that this allows for morphophonemic transparency.

Other Aspects of Speech

Speech rate emerged as an important variable. Because the local 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. Other research, too, has affirmed the importance of a reduced speaking rate for wider speech comprehensibility. Daniloff and Hamarburg (1973) showed that reducing the rate of speech enables speakers to articulate sounds more clearly as they are able to avoid unintentionally changing the relative durations of consonants, vowels, and pauses and the coarticulatory interactions between neighbouring sound segments. Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler (1988), in a review of studies of speaking rate of native speech, note that an increase in speaking rate is generally associated with a

decrease in comprehension. Their investigations into non-native speech showed similar results. Supporting these findings, Munro and Derwing's (1995) research concluded that a reduced speaking rate could serve as a compensatory strategy when normal speech met with reduced comprehensibility.

One area which emerged 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. 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 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 (Rajadurai, 2006).

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 organising principles of the non-native variety, which may be unrelated to the native variety, may be captured.

Moreover, the investigation, which has taken into account multilingual realities and naturalistic contexts, has portrayed proficient bilinguals as competent and skilful speakers, manipulating their phonological repertoire to achieve their purposes — as opposed to the common construction of them as perennial learners with deficient communication systems.

This multiple 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. Hence, as opposed to the more common examination of intelligibility via a decontextualised comparison of varieties, this study promotes the notion of intelligibility as interactional: people speak differently in different situations (intra-speaker variation), and people react to speech differently in different settings.

Pedagogical Considerations

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, whereby 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.

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 these findings would have to be corroborated or qualified by further research, they have been cross-checked against Jenkins' (2000) *lingua franca* core as well as theoretical notions and broader sociolinguistic trends. While acknowledging the limited nature of this study, the findings do suggest 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. Again, it should be stressed that learners who wish to acquire the whole range of native-speaker features should be allowed to do so.

Aside from these phonological features, 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.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has responded to the controversies in the area of L2 pronunciation teaching and learning by presenting an alternative way of investigating intelligibility and determining pronunciation needs for learners of an Outer Circle country. In so doing, it has heeded Atechi's (2004) challenge: "If new English varieties are now being recognized and accepted as varieties of English in their own right, then trends like intelligibility should follow suit as well." It has proposed 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. It has highlighted certain aspects of pronunciation as perhaps being more important for intelligibility than others for Malaysian speakers of English. The study has demonstrated that proficient speakers must be bidialectal: able to switch, when necessary, from a private voice to a public voice and so embrace both "local appropriation" and "global appropriacy" (Alptekin, 2002, p. 63). This also means that educators must grapple with the uses of English for global communication, without losing sight of how it is embedded in local contexts.

THE AUTHOR

Joanne Rajadurai is a lecturer in the TESL Department of the Faculty of Education, MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. Her research interests lie in the area of sociolinguistics, and include issues of intelligibility and identity in spoken English. Her recent publications include *Intelligibility studies: A consideration of empirical and ideological issues* in *World Englishes* (2007), and *Linguistic representation of transactional conversation in the Malaysian workplace* in the *Journal of Communication Practices* (2006).

REFERENCES

- Alptekin, C. (2002). Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 56(1), 57-64.
- Anderson-Hsieh, J., & Dauer, R. (1997). Slowed down speech: A teaching tool for listening/pronunciation. *ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 413774*.
- Anderson-Hsieh, J., & Koehler, K. (1988). The effect of foreign accent and speaking rate on native speaker comprehension. *Language Learning*, 38(4), 561-613.
- Atechi, S. N. (2004). *The intelligibility of native and non-native English speech: a comparative analysis of Cameroon English and American and British English*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Retrieved on November 10, 2005 from: http://archive.tu-chemnitz.de/pub/2004/0088/data/atechi_intelligibility.pdf
- Bauer, L. (1995). Spelling pronunciation and related matters in New Zealand English. In J.D. Lewis (Ed.), *Studies in general and English phonetics: Essays in honour of Professor J.D. O'Connor* (pp. 320-325). London: Routledge.
- Bent, T., & Bradlow, A. R. (2001). The interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 114(3), 1600-1610.
- Bhatia, V. K. (1997). Introduction: Genre analysis and world Englishes. *World Englishes*, 16(3), 313-319.
- Blau, E. (1990). The effect of syntax, speed and pauses on listening comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(4), 746-753.
- Bremer, K., Roberts, C., Vassuer, M., Simonot, M., & Broeder, P. (1996). *Achieving understanding: Discourse in intercultural encounters*. London: Longman.
- Brown, A. (1988a). Functional load and the teaching of pronunciation. *TESOL*

Quarterly 22(4), 593-606.

- Brown, A. (1988b). Vowel differences between Received Pronunciation and the English of Malaysia and Singapore: which ones really matter? In J. Foley (Ed.), *New Englishes: The case of Singapore* (pp. 129-147). Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Burgess, R. (2004, April 15). Australia must attune to Asia's voice. *Manchester Guardian Weekly, Learning English*, 170(17), page numbers needed.
- Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (1997). *Exploring spoken English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2004). If you ever hear a native speaker, please let us know! In A. Pulverness (Ed.), *IATEFL 2003 Brighton conference selections* (pp. 116-124). Canterbury, Kent: IATEFL.
- Catford, J. C. (1987). Phonetics and the teaching of pronunciation: a systemic description of English phonology. In J. Morley (Ed.), *Current perspectives on pronunciation: Practices anchored in theory* (pp. 83-100). Washington, D.C.: TESOL.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(2), 185-210.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniloff, R. G., & Hammarberg, R. (1973). On defining coarticulation. *Journal of Phonetics* 1, 239-248.
- Derwing, T. (2003). What do ESL students say about their accents? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59, 545-564.
- Gass, S. M., & Varonis, E. M. (1989). Incorporated repairs in nonnative discourse. In M. Eisenstein (Ed.), *The dynamic interlanguage* (pp. 71-86). New York: Plenum Press.
- Gimson, A. C. (2001). *Gimson's pronunciation of English*. 6th ed. Revised by A. Cruttenden. London: Arnold.
- Gumperz, J. J., & Cook-Gumperz, J. (1982). Language and the communication of social identity. In J.J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity* (pp. 1-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Higgins, J. (2002). *Minimal pairs for English RP*. Retrieved August 8, 2004, from <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/marlodge/wordlist/index.html>
- Hung, T. T. N. (2002). English as a global language and the issue of international intelligibility. *Asian Englishes*, 5(1), 4-17.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The Phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jenkins, J. (2005). English as a lingua franca: Past empirical, present controversial, future uncertain. Paper presented at RELC International Seminar, Singapore.
- Jenner, B. (1997). International English: An alternative view. *Speak out!* 21, 10-14.
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk and H.G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11-36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). Models for non-native Englishes. In B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (pp. 48-74), 2nd ed. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Lesznyák, A. (2002). From chaos to the smallest common denominator. Topic management in English lingua franca communication. In K. Knapp and C. Meierkord (Eds.), *Lingua Franca communication* (pp. 163-193). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Levis, J. M. (1999). Intonation in theory and practice, revisited. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(1), 37-63.
- Long, M. (1983). Linguistic and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 5, 177-193.
- Major, R., Fitzmaurice, S. F., Bunta, F., & Balasubramaniam, C. (2002). The effects of nonnative accents on listening comprehension: Implications for ESL assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 173-190.
- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995b). Processing time, accent, and comprehensibility in the perception of native and foreign-accented speech. *Language and Speech*, 38(3), 289-306.
- Pakir, A. (1999). Connecting with English in the context of internationalization. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(1), 103-113.
- Pennington, M. (1989). Teaching pronunciation from the top down. *RELC Journal* 20(1), 20-38.
- Pennington, M. (1995). *Phonology in English language teaching: An international approach*. London: Longman.
- Porter, D., & Garvin, S. (1989). Attitudes to pronunciation in EFL. *Speak Out!* 5, 8-15.
- Prodromou, L. (2003). In search of SUE: the successful user of English. *Modern English Teacher*, 12(2), 5-14.
- Rajadurai, J. (2005). Revisiting the concentric circles: Conceptual and sociolinguistic considerations. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(4), 131-143.
- Rajadurai, J. (2007). Forum: Intelligibility studies: A consideration of empirical and ideological issues. *World Englishes*, 26(1), 101-103.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2001). Pronunciation. In R. Carter and N. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge*

- guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 56-65). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tay, M. W. J. (1982). The phonology of educated Singapore English. *English World-Wide*, 3(2), 135-145.
- Tayao, M. L. G. (2004). The evolving study of Philippine English phonology. *World Englishes*, 23(1), 77-90.
- Timmis, I. (2002). Native-speaker norms and international English: A classroom view. *ELT Journal*, 56(3), 240-249.
- Timmis, I. (2005). Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar. *ELT Journal*, 29(2), 117-125.
- Tomlinson, B. (2005). The future for ELT materials in Asia. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 2(2), 5-13. Retrieved on December 16, 2005, from <http://elt.nus.edu.sg/v2n2 2005/Tomlinson.htm>
- Trudgill, P., Hannah, J. (1994). *International English: A guide to the varieties of standard English*. 3rd ed. London: Edward Arnold.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1997). EIL, ESL, EFL: Global issues and local interests. *World Englishes*, 16(1), 135-146.