As teachers we are continually revising our priorities in everything we do, and the teaching of pronunciation is no exception. At the end of the 3rd edition of his now classic ‘Introduction to the Pronunciation of English’, for example, Gimson sets out clear priorities for learners seeking minimum general intelligibility (Gimson 1980). Some years later, Joanne Kenworthy revived Abercrombie’s term of comfortable intelligibility (Kenworthy 1987), and of course, since its creation in 1988, the pages of *Speak Out!* have witnessed a number of important contributions in this respect. Barbara Bradford, for example, gave us the benefit of her long experience at SOAS to provide us with clear goals both for a multi-lingual group, and for a Japanese L1 group (Bradford 1990). From the other side of the Atlantic, Judy Gilbert recently shared her thoughts with us as to priorities for beginners (Gilbert 1999), in an article that gave us a preview of her recent coursebook (Gilbert 2001).

*Speak Out!* was also home to what in hindsight is now seen as a groundbreaking piece of work, namely Bryan Jenner’s article *Teaching Pronunciation: The Common Core*, which was an attempt to determine “what all native speakers of all native varieties have in common which enables them to communicate effectively with native speakers of varieties other than their own” (Jenner 1989). This article influenced many of us, as it certainly did Jennifer Jenkins, who, taking the international status of English into account, and on the basis of her own meticulous research into intelligibility problems between non-native speakers (Jenkins 2000), went on to modify Jenner’s core to produce a target for those seeking international intelligibility. This has become known as the *lingua franca core* (LFC), the elements of which have been presented in detail already (Jenkins 1996a, 1996b, 2000), and which naturally have undergone evolution since. For our present purposes, however, they can be summarised as:

- **Vowel quantity**: the distinction between long and short vowels is more important than exact vowel quality, and should be our main concern with diphthongs, too.

- **Consonant conflations**: the substitution of one consonant for another can cause serious confusion for both NS and NNS listeners. (An exception is made regarding /D/ and /T/.)

- **Phonetic realisations**: some such approximations may lead to unintelligibility, as with /B/, the fricative sound the Spanish use for the ‘b’ in *cabin*, for example.

- **Consonant cluster simplification**: consonant deletion to simplify a cluster affects intelligibility considerably, whilst epenthesis seems to cause far fewer problems.

- **Prominence and weak forms**: in terms of NNS production, teaching should focus on achieving correct prominence on stressed syllables, rather than on weak forms or schwa.

- **Tone groups**: failing to use tone groups to divide the stream of speech into manageable, meaningful chunks has a serious effect on intelligibility for all listeners.
Nuclear/contrastive stress but not tone: putting nuclear stress on the wrong word in an utterance, will direct the listener’s attention to the wrong place, leading to confusion.

All of the sets of priorities described above are of great value to us as teachers, although the LFC is unique in being the first set of priorities based upon empirical data which addresses the current situation of English as an international language. It is worth reminding ourselves, perhaps, that recent estimates suggest that for at least 80% of the users of English in the world today, the language is not their L1 (Crystal, 1997).

The LFC and priorities determined through contrastive analysis

Whichever our final choice, for the majority of us it is desirable, and even inevitable, that we allow one or other of the above sets of priorities to guide us in our work on pronunciation. The common alternative to doing this is to follow the goals previously determined by the contrastive analysis of the phonologies of both English and the learner’s L1. Table 1, for example, which was put together by reviewing the indications of O’Connor (1967), Kenworthy (1987), and Taylor, (1993), shows the goals established by such lists for Spanish speakers of English. The full list is quite formidable, but in marked contrast the shaded areas highlight the priorities which remain once we ‘filter’ the contents of Table 1 through the LFC. The resulting set of goals is noteworthy for two fundamental reasons:

a) the total workload required of teacher and learner is now greatly reduced;

b) the new goals are more achievable both in terms of teaching and learning.

Time restrictions aside, the absence of such intimidating issues as ship-sheep or hat-hut vowel contrasts, of weak forms and schwa, or of exact choice of tone, relieves both learner (and in many cases teacher) of an onerous burden, a burden that on too many occasions, at least here in Spain in my own experience, led staff and students alike to a sense of both failure and frustration. This is an important point, since it is only by generating achievable goals that we can ever hope for pronunciation to occupy its natural place in the language learning process.

Pronunciation and monolingual groups

The advantages of working on pronunciation with multi-lingual groups are varied and self-evident. Moreover, the work of Jennifer Jenkins points us towards a whole new methodology based on the natural phenomenon of accommodation among L2 users of English who do not share the same L1 (Jenkins 2000, Chapter 7). However, for the majority of us, the current reality is one of monolingual groups, a situation which is not necessarily negative per se. As Donna Brinton points out “... the task of the EFL pronunciation teacher is simplified by the homogenous first language background of the learners since knowledge of this language can generally be brought to bear in constructing the pronunciation syllabus.”(Brinton, 1995).

Moreover, if we cease to see the learner’s L1 as an obstacle to be overcome en route to achieving our goals, and view it much more as the basis on which to build our progress,
and as a means of access to the new pronunciation goals, the already bright situation outlined in the previous section becomes significantly more optimistic. By openly starting from the learner’s L1, we not only contemplate the reduced, achievable set of goals identified by the LFC. Equally importantly, we switch the emphasis towards what our learner CAN do (it is already part of their L1), and away from what they supposedly can NOT do. By working away from what we already have, we reduce the negative psychological effects of always stressing what students ‘lack’, and highlight the value of their own language as a tool for learning English. This should prove especially positive with learners who explicitly or otherwise do not wish to lose touch with their own national/regional identity.

Table 2 shows us some examples of how this use of the learner’s L1 phonetics might help Spanish learners of English to attain the consonants in the LFC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem dialects</th>
<th>Potential solution through Spanish/related languages &amp; dialects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/b/ and /v/ are often confused</td>
<td>/b/ is found in syllable initial position e.g. barra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/g/ is often replaced by /j/</td>
<td>/g/ is found in syllable intial position e.g. gato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/s, z/ are often confused</td>
<td>/z/ exists as an allophone in words like mismo, asno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/Σ/ does not occur</td>
<td>/Σ/ occurs in Catalan, Galician &amp; Asturian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/Z/ does not occur</td>
<td>/Z/ occurs in Latin American Spanishes, e.g. Argentinian yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/N/ does not occur</td>
<td>/N/ is found in banco, hongo, un cuento or similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/w/ does not occur</td>
<td>/w/ is found in suelo, muy or similar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, the advantages of possessing a full, working knowledge of the phonologies and phonetics of both English and the learner’s L1 are not limited to a single, broad technique for classroom practice. Such detailed awareness allows the teacher to pinpoint far more accurately the ways in which transfer from the L1 phonology will cause significant problems in attaining our goals. This in turn, as Donna Brinton suggests, will generate a new set of L1-specific high priorities for pronunciation work. With a Spanish group, for example, we would need to re-evaluate, among others, the following areas:

- **vowel length**: Spanish vowels are essentially of the same length, but the exact reality is NOT that the vowels are all too short. In practice, the short vowels are too long and the long vowels too short.
- **diphthongs**: all diphthongs are too short, the second element in particular being heavily clipped and very tense.
- **laxness**: there is no significant tense/lax distinction for Spanish vowels, and this together with problems of length, is the source of a great many problems of intelligibility.
- **phonetic realizations**: transfer from Spanish generates sufficiently deviant realizations in some consonants so as to render them unintelligible. The lenis stops /b, d, g/, for example, become fricatives /B, D, 7/ in intervocalic position, or can even disappear altogether. Worse still, there is a historic tendency for final consonants to be weakened to the point of disappearance, which effectively means deletion of morphemic elements.
- **nuclear stress**: nuclear stress placement will tend very strongly to be on the last or the penultimate syllable of utterance.
Instructors for monolingual groups
The need for the sort of detailed knowledge of the phonologies and phonetics of both English and the learner’s L1 raises the question as to who might be best suited to teach monolingual groups. The answer to this is not simple, but undoubtedly requires us to re-assess the value of both native-speaker and non-native speaker teachers. What either must possess could be broadly classified as:

- **formal knowledge**: NNS teachers often have a formal university background in both L1 and English phonologies. This is certainly true in Spain, although in my own experience they do not always see the usefulness nor implications of their knowledge for classroom teaching. Too many native speakers, sadly, have received very limited training in the phonetics and phonology of English, and have even less knowledge of their learner’s L1.

- **techniques**: undoubtedly the NS can be an excellent informant. In determining the exact meaning of a given intonation pattern, for example, this knowledge is invaluable. However, it is vital to recognise that a good informant is not by definition a good instructor. In some ways, the NNS teacher who has successfully trodden the path towards the production of one or other feature of English pronunciation, is better equipped to help learners than the native speaker, who may in practice be limited to providing a model for imitation.

- **psycholinguistics**: NNS teachers are only too aware of the psychological difficulties in learning a second language pronunciation, and so potentially have greater empathy with their learners and their problems. Of course, a native speaker of English who has learned a second language to a high level, is not unaware of just how ‘odd’ a foreign tongue can feel inside our mouths.

- **intelligibility**: the NNS teacher often has had first hand experience as to what is or is not intelligible to other users of English, be these L1 or L2 users. The case comes to mind of two colleagues from Oviedo University who travelled back and forth on the London underground substituting station names with near equivalents in their local language. The Asturian phrase ‘hojes seques’, /ˈoxes ˈsɛkes/, which translated into English means ‘dry leaves’, was entirely effective in obtaining tickets to Oxford Circus, for example. Such first hand experience of achieving intelligibility, means that the NNS teacher is better able to judge what constitutes acceptable performance from his or her own learners.

None of the above is put forward as a means of suggesting that native speakers are not good instructors of the pronunciation of English. However, until now it was all too readily assumed that they were just this because of the mere fact of being native speakers, and that inversely non-native speakers were necessarily poorer instructors. This is clearly not so, and it should now be apparent that the best instructor is the person with a detailed practical knowledge of both the L1 and L2 phonetics, i.e. the bilingual English speaker (BES) Jenkins mentions in her recent book (Jenkins 2000).

In conclusion, I would suggest that recent developments in terms of pronunciation priorities, but especially Jennifer Jenkins’ lingua franca core, are a significant step forward in the area of pronunciation teaching. However, this progress can be optimised with monolingual groups if we invert the standard, negative attitude towards the learner’s L1. This in turn requires us to re-examine the relative strengths of both native speakers and non-native speakers as instructors.

References

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