

Goals in teaching English pronunciation

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Abstract

Jennifer Jenkins's book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* has stimulated a welcome discussion of our goals in teaching English pronunciation. But her proposed Lingua Franca Core (LFC) is, to say the least, controversial.

The easy way out would be to regard pronunciation teaching as unimportant. We could treat EIL as a written code, and allow learners to stick with their L1 pronunciation habits. Furthermore, we might allow English to be pronounced as it is spelled. There are plenty of EIL users who indeed treat it more or less in this way. And yet — in grammar, would we be happy for learners to ignore everything that is difficult (the definite article, number, aspect, phrasal verbs)? In vocabulary, should we allow confusion of *come* and *go*, *bring* and *take*, or ignore the problem of such false friends as *actual* and *eventual*? If not, then our pronunciation model, too, must be based on that of native speakers.

The Jenkins LFC permits deviations from existing standard practice — e.g. the substitution of [t] or [s] for [θ], or inappropriate word stress — that evoke the worst negative stereotypes. (Like spelling mistakes, they are seen as *uneducated*.) But on the other hand it insists on many pronunciation features that constitute a real difficulty for one group or another of L2 learners. These include the consonant oppositions /b–v, r–l, p–f, s–ʃ, s–z, tʃ–dʒ, j–dʒ/ and the vowel opposition /i:–ɪ /. Confusion of /e–æ, æ–ʌ, ʌ–ɒ/ is implicitly condoned, but substitutions for /ɜ:/ are not allowed. (Why should Poles be favoured over Africans in this way?) Consonant clusters are still required, although if they cannot be achieved epenthesis is preferred over omission.

In intonation, Jenkins's insistence on the importance of nucleus placement (tonicity) is welcome. Nevertheless, there are many speakers of EIL who ignore it entirely.

As pronunciation teachers we must concentrate on those matters which most impede comprehension and intelligibility. We must inculcate fluency and confidence. We should exploit the findings of contrastive analysis. And we should not neglect the need to interact with native speakers.