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Intelligible, comprehensible, non-native models in ESL/EFL pronunciation teaching

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation models in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) are changing. This paper reviews purposes for pronunciation teaching, questions the hegemony of native English speaker (NES) models, and explores the possibility of incorporating at least some attention to non-native English speaker (NNES) models when teaching ESL or EFL pronunciation. A premise is that samples of non-native English (NNE) speech are useful as pronunciation models as long as they are intelligible and comprehensible. Two advantages of working with illustrations of intelligible, comprehensible NNE language samples are their transparency as aspirational models and relevance to learners' pronunciation needs. In support of this position, the paper reports questionnaire research through which 34 specialists in pronunciation teaching characterized the qualities of a recorded speech sample of an NNES, the award winning film actor Javier Bardem. One purpose was to determine if Bardem is a comprehensible NNES. A second purpose was to characterize qualities of Bardem's speech as a way of informing pronunciation pedagogy. The changes in instructional perspectives and teaching practices the paper proposes reject a deficit model of NNE pronunciation and foreground positive dimensions of what intelligible, comprehensible NNESs are able to do well.

1. Introduction

What models of English pronunciation are most relevant to English language learners' needs? Informed by several strands of applied linguistics (e.g., critical pedagogy (CP), intelligibility research, second language acquisition, teaching English as a Lingua Franca (ELF),[1] teacher identity theory), the paper cautions teachers of English to speakers of other languages not to overemphasize native English speaker (NES) models when teaching pronunciation but to include at least some attention to non-native English speaker (NNES) models as well. For a sample of non-native English (NNE) speech to be useful for purposes of pronunciation teaching, however, relevant listeners (e.g., classroom learners, their teacher, likely prospective interlocutors, material developers) should perceive it to be intelligible and comprehensible. There are many challenges associated with trying to identify the intelligibility/comprehensibility of an NNE speech sample. These include a listener's: L1, familiarity with

Abbreviations: CP, critical pedagogy; ELF, English as a Lingua Franca; I&C, intelligible and comprehensible; NES, native English speaker; NNE, non-native English; NNES, non-native English speaker; I&C NNES, intelligible and comprehensible non-native English speaker; L2, second language.

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[1] Though there may be some technical distinctions between them, the paper follows Jenkins (2007) and Walker (2010) in employing the term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as a synonym for English as an International Language.

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NNE speech, receptivity, attentiveness, level of fatigue, familiarity with the topic being spoken about, etc. Because such characteristics impact listeners' perceptions (Pickering, 2006, 2012), it is impossible to describe a particular NNE speech sample as being intrinsically intelligible or comprehensible. Attempts at such descriptions are necessarily tied to contexts of instruction and learners' needs.

In the discussion, my intention is to extend themes previously explored by Cook (1999) and Graddol (2006) in connection with different areas of second language (L2) instruction into the area of L2 pronunciation teaching. Traditionally, target models for teaching the pronunciation of ESL and EFL have been proficient NESs from what Kachru (1986) terms 'inner circle' nations such as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States (Levis, 2005). In addition, the pronunciation models commonly featured in published teaching materials tend to reflect mainstream dialects from Canada, England (i.e., as opposed to Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), the United States, and other inner circle nations (Grzega, 2005; Kanellow, 2009). Rogerson-Revell (2011) offers a useful distinction between models and goals for pronunciation instruction. While a pronunciation model serves as "a set of standard pronunciation forms for a particular accent" that can be used as "a point of reference or guideline" for instructional purposes, goals for pronunciation teaching "may vary depending on the particular contexts in which the learner needs to communicate" (p. 8).

2. Literature review

Over recent decades a growing number of English language teaching specialists have been rethinking purposes, models and goals for pronunciation teaching. Jenkins (2000, 2005, 2007), McKay (2002), and Walker (2010), for example, present empirical evidence to inform the work of language teaching professionals through research into English as a lingua franca (ELF), a term focused on the forms of English which emerge when English serves as the default language of communication between speakers of different first languages (L1s). Several issues associated with the study of ELF have challenged previous assumptions about pronunciation teaching, including: Is it more important for NNESs to be understood by NESs or by other NNESs? Given a particular career path or purpose for English-mediated communication, who are NNESs' interlocutors most likely to be? Does being understood within an NES community make it more likely that one will be understood within an ELF community? In some ELF settings, might forms of non-native English be just as useful to NNE speakers as more standard forms of native English speech? What is the impact on in-process ELF interactions when an NES arrives on the scene? Is there a phonological lingua franca core which cuts across alternative ELF settings? If such an ELF inventory exists, which features of English phonology are either more or less essential to teach? ELF research and strategies for teaching the pronunciation of ELF have gained attention especially in Europe where language teachers have long recognized the importance of English as a primary means of communication between NNESs in settings where NESs are not present (Grzega, 2005). Walker (2010) discusses implications for teaching the pronunciation of ELF supported by contemporary research.

Although ELF literature represents one area of inspiration for the present investigation, there are other research traditions to acknowledge as well. Discussions of World Englishes (e.g., Kachru, 1986; Jenkins, 2003) demonstrate that outer circle varieties of English such as Indian, Singaporean, and Nigerian English are contributing to a vibrant expansion in the use of English worldwide (Kirkpatrick, 2007; McArthur, 2002). Rooy (2009) explains that learners from expanding circle parts of the world (e.g., Korea, Egypt, Japan) are becoming more accepting of English speakers from the outer circle as pronunciation models. Despite continuing evidence that a large percentage of ESL/EFL learners have the personal goal of being able to acquire a native-like English accent (Derwing, 2003; Kang, 2010; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006; Timmis, 2002), second language acquisition specialists have realized for decades that those who initiate their study of an L2 in adolescence or adulthood face special hurdles. Although there is some limited evidence to the contrary (e.g., Bongaerts, van Summeren, Planken, & Schils, 1997), few learners who initiate L2 study in adolescence or adulthood will ever gain complete control over its phonological dimensions (Levis, 2005; Moyer, 1999; Scovel, 2000). The issue is not that attainment of a native-like accent is impossible, but it is uncommon and few L2 learners ever accomplish this (Ortega, 2009). As Derwing and Munro (2005) comment, "there is no reason to believe that this goal is achievable in typical ESL classrooms" (p. 384). Also, most ESL/EFL teachers realize native-like phonological control is an unnecessary goal as long as learners continue to progress toward relevant levels of intelligibility/comprehensibility (Kanellow, 2009; Munro & Derwing, 2011). Knowing that few NNE speakers will ever become native-like accented English speakers, it seems unfair and perhaps even unethical to lead learners to believe they will ever be able to do so. Yet, this is exactly what most language teachers have been doing during the modern era of English language teaching through implicit messages an overemphasis on NES models conveys. Extending a tradition perhaps best articulated by Cook (1999), it may be more productive in the long run to foster learner awareness that some intelligible and comprehensible (I&C) NNE varieties of spoken English can serve as legitimate aspirational models. By including at least some attention to the speech of I&C non-native speakers of English as a normal part of pronunciation instruction, teachers will be presenting learners with more accessible models more likely to resonate with their own experiences as ESL/EFL learners.

Approaching similar themes from yet another perspective, a starting point for specialists in critical pedagogy (CP) is to call into question some of the foundational constructs of our field such as the constructs of NES and NNES. In so doing, CP specialists remind us of "the subjective, the social, and the partisan nature of reality, and the ways in which our understandings of the world" might, even if inadvertently, serve to constrain roles for NNESs in the teaching of pronunciation (Hawkins & Norton, 2009, p. 31). From CP specialists we learn how important it is for all teachers of English, but especially NESs, to participate in "the process of critical reflection on language ideologies and linguistic theories" so that ESL learners as