

Lingua Franca Core: The Outcome of the Current Times

Yue Shu

The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010

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Abstract: English is in prevalence nowadays. Though Lingua Franca Core (LFC) is not totally formed and regarded as a mature model, it can have some advantages and be put into practice at the current stages. Teachers should all target for a multilingual environment and focus on the core features of pronunciation, primary stress, and articulatory settings. If the teachers are native English speakers, they should be more careful to students' pronunciation as they may neglect the importance of this part and overemphasize word stress, rhythm, and intonation. Though LFC has its own research target learners, it may well be beneficial to most learners to some degree. No matter these learners are native people or non-native people, they may not have an excellent command on pronunciation, so learners may learn some new phonological knowledge taught with content in LFC.

1. Introduction

English was mainly spoken and ruled by native speakers (NS) but now a majority of them are non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers constitute only a very limited part. It is said that received pronunciation speakers contain around 3% of the whole (Jenkins, 2002). Over the past decades, people used to utilize native English models to judge whether one's English is correct or not. However, people now find it necessary to make new policies for relative models that suit the appetite of the majority: the non-native speakers. This new model should also be generally similar to the native English varieties so that it can be transferred and fully used around the world (Jenkins, 1998). Considering the target group is made up of low proficiency English learners, there are some advantages and disadvantages of the LFC. This paper will present the advantage part and the disadvantage part within the core features first, then the non-core features. Then some general doubts (such as preconditions and motives) and favoring points of this framework will be described.

New models cannot live without satisfying content for support. Phonology is highly essential when referring to the content during English learning procedures of its non-native speakers. Without appropriate pronunciation, non-native speakers cannot communicate with each other smoothly and their dialogues will lose intelligibility. Lingua Franca Core is mainly based on some key points of phonology, aiming to assist the non-native speakers to learn English pronunciation better.

Since the phonological systems of native speakers and non-native speakers are quite different (Jenkins, 1998), the preconditions and the main motives of setting up LFC are to particularly satisfy the need of non-native speakers. Jenkins firmly believe that since native speakers are different to non-native speakers in terms of pronunciation habits, the influence of L1 transfer, different language environment, and many other factors, learners of English should be treated with regard to whether they are native speakers or not.

2. Key contents within LFC

Moving on to the content of LFC, there are several key points that should be kept in mind. As in Jenkins' argument, the LFC can be divided into the core part and non-core part. Additional mutual assistance and effort are also demanded. The core part means some essential features for those non-native speakers of English, without which the speech will cause loss of intelligibility. Some features within this range can be:

All the consonants are significant, except /θ/ and /ð/.

The initial consonant clusters

The length of the vowel will affect the comprehension and intelligibility

The mid-central NURSE vowel

Some primary (nuclear stress)

As for these core features, Jenkins believes that non-native speakers should pay effort to learn the features well. It is mainly because there is basically no alternative for these features and only with a good command of these features may learners make themselves understood.

The non-core part means some unimportant features for learners of English that will not affect the intelligibility (Jenkins, 1998). Native speakers are supposed to make more effort as to this part because if this effort is implemented further comprehension will be achieved. This non-core part includes features such as:

The repeatedly mentioned /θ/ and /ð/ in Jenkins articles

Final consonant clusters

Individual vowel quality and some reduced vowels

Vocalized L – all “L” can be expressed as a light “L” and dark “L” is not needed

Lexical stress, intonational tones, and rhythms of the sentences

Lingua Franca Core mainly aims for those who only want to communicate with other non-native speakers and carry on relatively simple dialogues in English. Such a framework is not so beneficial to the highly proficient learners but might be useful to the low proficient learners. According to Jenkins (1998), he safely ignores those bilinguals, claiming that these bilinguals are competitive enough and have limited need to reset their pronunciation settings. Some non-native speakers with low proficiency may still want to become skilled at English speaking and communication someday, and the others just want to have basic skills to communicate with other low-proficient English speakers.

Some main core items listed in LFC are reasonable. First, it is obvious that substitutions of /θ/ and /ð/ are generally acceptable, and this view is also agreed by other scholars (Seidlhofer, 2004; Trudgill, 2005). Second, British English /t/ between vowels is better than the American flapping vowel. By means of reducing the unnecessary varieties of consonants, Jenkins does relieve some burden of recognizing and learning English pronunciation. Third, sometimes omission will need to obey L1 rules. For instance, “factsheet” cannot be pronounced as [ˈf ætʃi:t] or [ˈfæk ʃi:t]. This is because the low-level learners, as mentioned by Jenkins (2002), have insufficient ability to deduce the meaning of words according to the contextual cues.

Within the same core part, some other items are remained to be improved due to the lack of convincing support. First, Jenkins suggests that rhotic “r” is better and therefore more learnable than non-rhotic varieties of “r”. Nevertheless, Wells strongly criticizes this view and claim that in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa people are accustomed to pronouncing non-rhotic sounds. These homophonic clashes do not cause the loss of intelligibility or other serious problems. Second, that addition is allowed in LFC is not grounded. If so, words like “product” can be reproduced into “poroduct” or “paroduct”, but neither of them makes sense. Third, Jenkins also argues that contrast between long and short vowels is vital. As for this point, some words’ meaning would vary according to the length of vowel, such as “live” and “leave” but many others will keep the original meaning, such as “product”: it will not lose its meaning either produced as [ˈprɒdʌkt] or [ˈprɔ:dʌkt] (Wells, 2005). Wells (2005) mentions that the NURSE /ɜ:/ sound is highly marked and not easy to be altered. He also mentions that although Mandarin Chinese speakers have similar sounds with /ɜ:/, most people from other countries such as Japan have no idea about this sound, which makes it difficult to acquire. Therefore, this feature is not that important to be fully acquired by the learners.

Some non-core items are true to the Chinese EIL learners. First, the LFC claims that dark L is not necessary. Given that many Chinese EIL learners do have trouble in L-darkening, it may be good for them to lower the requirements. Second, weak form (i.e. the use of schwa) will not have an adverse effect on intelligibility. Most Chinese EIL learners overuse the stress in a long phrase or a sentence, with frequent end stress (Deterding, 2011). If the weak form is not strictly required, Chinese EIL learners will be free from this problem.

Within the non-core part, some items are not very convincing. First, vowel quality should be treated more carefully. Sometimes, vowel quality will not trigger different meanings such as /bəs/ and /bus/ (Jenkins, 2002), but that is not true if one pronounces bus /bəs/ as boss /bo:s/ consistently. The loss restrictions on vowel quality may follow assimilation and cause total loss of intelligibility, such as red paint is first pronounced as /reb pænt/ and then reproduced as “rob paint” /rob pænt/ for a second time. Second, the placement of word stress also needs to be emphasized more. Many words’ meaning will be altered if the word stress is reset. For example, the meaning of dessert either as /dɪˈzɜ:t/ or as /ˈdezɜ:t/ is not related to each other.

As for the general limitations, Trudgill (2005) doubts the precondition of setting up LFC. He claims that almost all non-native speakers will more or less need to deliver a formal speech or attend some significant meetings where they hope to be decent and speak nativelike English rather than just be understood. Trudgill (2005) also believes that there is nothing to do with the phonological systems. Instead, native people are prone to neglect their language capacity differences with their non-native counterparts, and that causes the decrease of intelligibility. Some native speakers would utilize over-formal or over-informal expressions which turn to be vague and unclear to convey any information. In this case, the too much formal expressions are usually referring to the academic words and the over-informal expressions can be the idioms or proverbial phrases or sentences. In other situations, the speed is always problematic for non-native speakers to understand the intended information. This is hard to be avoided, however, since it could be even more common within a sheer EIL environment. (Ferguson, 1971).

Apart from the unreasonable preconditions, Trudgill (2005) also questions the motives of establishing such a framework. He believes that people's need could be well satisfied by the current native model, and there is no need to build up a new one. Given that the current native model works quite well, the only possible conflict remains to be solved is how far we should utilize this model. Although Trudgill admits the existence of occasional "inherent difficulties of English" while applying the native model, he argues that the phenomenon is quite rare when it refers to segmental phonology. People all over the globe have more or less some common phonological segments with the native model, which makes the native model learnable and acceptable enough. For example, the Mandarin Chinese speakers have a similar sound to American rhotic equivalent r despite Japanese speakers do not.

Some other scholars such as Seidlhofer (2004) hold similar views that LFC is unsettled. The focus of the questioning is the degree of LFC’s acceptance among ordinary people who have long taken native models as their reference and they are not reluctant to the native model; the norms and descriptions of LFC is rather vague so that scholars could hardly define the key parts of the framework and judge whether it is valuable; the model LFC lacks relative pedagogical models and law supports and is rather immature.

Though LFC has some shortcomings, Jenkins’ main contribution lies in her exploration of teacher efficiency and learner goals. As for teachers, Jenkins makes segmental contrasts systematically to identify their importance so that teachers can arrange their teaching key points and difficult points. As for learners, Jenkins first illustrates whether those contrasts are comprehensible, then gives out supportive reasons as proof. The LFC does assist learners to have less memory load and makes the rules of pronunciation much more learnable.

3. Pedagogical implications of LFC

With these advantages, this Franca Lingua Core could have some positive impact on teaching practice. L2 learners should learn from the errors and maintain the beneficial features of such a framework. This paper will then discuss some potential pedagogical implications from the teaching and learning environment, both from teachers’ and learners’ perspectives.

The supervisors of the school would be first advised to arrange international students from various countries into the same classroom to create a multilingual classroom environment. If students within a classroom are all from China, for example, to learn English. These students are still very likely to speak Chinese instead of English (Jenkins, 2002). This behavior is even

sometimes encouraged by advocates of translanguaging because they think students should take advantage of their mother tongue which can help them to search information in various ways (Martínez, Hikida, & Durán, 2015). The author, however, still believes that students are hard to control the perfect sum of speaking mother tongue, and the overuse of their own languages will be detrimental for students' second language learning. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to be stricter on students' language selection and create more chances for students to identify their problematic pronunciation, primary stress, articulatory setting and so forth.

To enhance the intelligibility of pronunciation, teachers should mainly focus on the core features of pronunciation, some primary stress within a phrase level and articulatory settings. Core features include 1). a relative systemic contrast, which means there are still some key contrasts are left unattended, such as THOUGHT /o:/ and GOAT /əʊ/ (Wells, 2005). However, students will feel confused about why they should learn some rules while not some other rules. To leave out some part of the whole contrastive system may even be more difficult for students to recall the detailed items; and 2). some other problematic vowel oppositions such as /e-æ, æ-ɐ/. As Wells mentions, German and Russian have trouble in distinguishing /e/- /æ/, and Japanese and Spanish speakers can hardly make /æ/ and /ɐ/. identical. Primary stress is key in a long phrase or a sentence. For example, in the sentence: "Marianna made the marmalade." with its stress on marmalade highlights that Marianna did not make ice cream but marmalade. If the stress moves on to the subject of the sentence – Marianna, then the sentence emphasizes that it is Marianna but not any other people that made the marmalade. From the example, people can tell the differently emphasized part that deserves listeners' more attention. 3). Mastery in articulatory setting will facilitate learners for quick acquiring of core sounds and nuclear stress. If the articulators are wrongly positioned, the learners may find it too hard to pronounce words correctly. For example, with mouth wide open, students will find it hard to produce sounds like /o:/ or /u:/. This skill can be acquired by careful observation from teachers and classmates or self-correction in front of the mirror.

Next, those non-native English teachers should also be stricter on themselves so as to provide a more precise language model for their students. Teachers are supposed to be more or less nativelike in this case since if not, teachers are very likely to lack enough phonetics and phonology knowledge. Students usually model after their teachers in many ways and pronunciation is within the range. As mentioned above, the late learners with low proficiency are the supposed target group of LFC. These learners are easily affected by negative L1 transfer (Jenkins, 1998) and deserve a more perfect and nativelike model from their teachers.

Supposing the teachers are native English speakers, then these teachers should pay more attention to students' pronunciation than usual. As suggested by Jenkins (1998), native speakers of English, when communicating with other native speakers of this language, tend to focus on their interlocutors' word stress, rhythm, and intonation. If native speakers are volunteering to teach the non-native learners, more attention to pronunciation than usual is required. Although the intelligibility cannot be guaranteed by correct pronunciation, the intelligibility will even decrease without a good command of pronunciation.

Students should critically utilize LFC, which means they should judge and pick out the useful parts to them. Although LFC should target at late learners with low proficiency, not all content within LFC is useful for them, and the distinguishing process is still needed. People vary from one to another, so it is hard to form a framework that suits everyone.

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