Native vs. Non-native Attitudes to Non-native Englishes: Implications for English as an International Form of Communication.

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English can only be an efficient medium for spoken communication if its speakers are comfortably intelligible to both native and non-native speakers with widely diverging language backgrounds. This should be reflected in the pronunciation norms for any internationally viable variety of English. The importance of intelligibility is, of course, also recognized by those who see international English fundamentally as a medium for communication between non-natives, and, like Jenkins (2006), exclude native-speaker considerations. This does, however, beg the question of how to define intelligibility in terms of the widely variant standards of non-native speech without any recourse to native-speaker English.

Be that as it may, many non-native speakers will wish to retain access to a type of English that can be used easily with non-native and native speakers alike. A recent study (Van den Doel 2006), based on an Internet survey of well over 500 native-speaker respondents from all over the English-speaking world, shows that Jenkins’ recommendations may cause non-native speech to be affected by serious issues of intelligibility and acceptability. While intelligibility is obviously of prime significance for native speakers, they also regard acceptability as a major concern. The study also indicated that pronunciation features in nonnative speech are likely to be notably downgraded when they are also stigmatised in local native Englishes. This may be taken to indicate that a truly international English pronunciation model requires that the attitudes and needs of native speakers be taken into account.

The recently published Handbook of Varieties of English (Schneider et al.) provides a detailed inventory of a vast array of different types of English, ranging from a great many native varieties to some of the major ESL accents spoken worldwide. This inventory could easily be expanded – consider, for instance, the different varieties of English spoken in Greater China alone. Despite all the linguistic diversity so painstakingly recorded in the Handbook and elsewhere, Jenkins (2000, 2006) and her followers appear to suggest that all non-native Englishes are to be seen fundamentally as variations on, or aspects of, one new variety: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The idea behind this appears to be that this type of English comes into being spontaneously, as it were, whenever non-native speakers communicate with others – largely as a result of accommodation and convergence between interlocutors.

If, as Bruthiaux (2003: 168) has suggested, such communication is largely restricted to short interchanges in a limited number of domains (e.g. tourism and trade), one wonders how quickly and effectively such accommodation is expected to take place. This would be even more of a problem in one-way interaction – in the case of a newsreader, a lecturer, or a speaker on a public address system. This will be familiar territory to anyone marooned in an international airport by a severely delayed flight and left to the tender mercies of non-native announcers and ground staff without any inclination for linguistic accommodation. In spite of such problems, however, ELF is seen as the new majority variety of English – simply because of the numerical,

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1 This paper is loosely based on a previous article which has appeared as Van den Doel, Rias. 2007. International Intelligibility in EIL. Asian EFL Journal 9:4. 29-38. The content is reproduced here by permission of the editors. Note that some extra material has been added.
but contentious, argument that there are more non-native than native speakers. Jenkins and her epigones even expect that, as soon as this lingua franca has gathered enough momentum, it will even be adopted by native speakers for the purposes of international communication – that is to say, once the projected reality of ELF has taken over all cross-cultural interchange.

The contentious nature of such claims is further aggravated by attempts to define criteria for intelligibility within ELF, as Jenkins has done. This is inherently paradoxical – as indeed has been noted by others (Gibbon 2005, Scheuer 2005, Trudgill 2005b, Wells 2005). Whilst ELF is supposedly based on description of non-native interaction, nevertheless it implicitly prescribes to non-natives how this interaction should take place. In particular, one wonders to what extent Jenkins’s (2000: 135) partition of ‘phonological areas’ into ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ or ‘peripheral’ may be regarded as a thinly veiled version of the more traditional division into ‘native-like realisation’ and ‘learner error’ – but this time with the Jenkins Lingua Franca Core as the new gatekeeping device. Another paradoxical feature is that ELF sets out to ignore the concerns of native speakers, even though it is essentially ‘grounded’, by Jenkins’s (2000: 131) own admission, in native-speaker varieties. Finally, despite its non-native emphasis, it is remarkable that so many of its most famous proponents are in fact themselves native speakers. This raises the spectre of ELF as an ill-disguised attempt on the part of English-speaking Western educationists ‘to control what sort of English people should speak’ – as Holliday (2005: 164) seems to imply. Such endeavours by Westerners to ‘democratize’ English may, at least according to Holliday (2005: 165), ‘be more to do with the West satisfying its own needs’, and may be actively opposed by the very learners that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of these charitable schemes.

There is indeed a considerable body of evidence (cf. Major et al. 2002, Major et al. 2005, Scheuer 2005, Van den Doel 2006) to suggest that a great many learners of English may be biased against non-native English and therefore do not wish to be taught non-native models. This is not a recent development. Christophersen (1973: 85) has described how, when presented with ‘native-speaker’ schemes to simplify English pronunciation designed with the interests of non-native speakers in mind, learners rejected ‘indignantly the idea that “normal” English [was] to be withheld from them.’ Timmis (2002: 248) also reported ‘some desire among students to conform to native speaker norms, and this desire is not necessarily restricted to those students who use, or anticipate using English primarily with native speakers.’ This led him to conclude that, ‘[w]hile it is clearly inappropriate to foist native-speaker norms on students who neither want nor need them, it is scarcely more appropriate to offer students a target which manifestly does not meet their aspirations’ (2002: 249). A much-quoted view (e.g. Holliday 2005: 9) is that of a Chinese teacher, Kuo, who makes the following point:

> Although I did feel comfortable to be told that I did not have to be native-speaker like, I would definitely feel upset if I could not reach my own expectation in pronunciation. … If we take Jenkins’s view and tell them to stay where you are …. At some point we would terribly upset the learners because they might want to … It’s been clear that I’m a language learner from the periphery and – listen to this – I prefer to speak for myself!

It is not, however, only learners who may object to being taught the non-native models they already have access to. Even Jenkins’s own research suggests that non-
native teachers also overwhelmingly favour native-like accents, particularly those from the UK and the US (2007: 186). This, however, has not led to any changes or modifications to her proposals. Instead, Jenkins suggests that the non-native teachers in question may have been ‘brainwashed’ by native-speakerism (2007: 187) or suffer from ‘linguistic insecurity’ (2007: 247). It is difficult to reconcile such assertions with Jenkins’s stated position that she does not wish to patronise anyone (2007: 21).

One issue mentioned by Holliday (2005: 165) in the context of Western-initiated ELT innovations is the ‘liberation trap, where the supposedly democratizing English-speaking Western TESOL is not appreciated by the people it is supposed to be helping and imposes its own constructions upon them.’ It may be argued that Jenkins is also caught in this trap. She is unable to accept that ‘those who are not in a position to change their attitude because they are, in effect, the victims of an ideology that is imposed upon them’ (2007: 59) may believe themselves to be free agents, motivated by disagreement with her proposals. Instead of allowing for the fact that such learners and teachers are making a pragmatic choice for a native-like model, Jenkins depicts them as trying to conform to a native-speaker identity which they will never achieve (2007: 231, 240). In this scenario, learners following native-speaker models are presented as being no different from people who want ‘to change the colour of their skin, the straightness of their hair, or the shape of their eyes to conform to other groups’ (Cook 1999: 196, as quoted in Jenkins 2006: 154).

Such an essentialist line of thought posits learner choice as being inextricably linked to a static L1 identity which needs to be nurtured, rather than choices being prompted by pragmatic considerations – which is particularly relevant for those learners who have instrumental rather than integrative motivations for following a native-like model (cf. Gardner and Lambert 1959). But even in cases where learners wish to integrate into native-speaker communities, there is, pace Jenkins (2000: 211), no good reason to assume that the adoption of a native-like model of English will obliterate their L1 identities. For most learners of English, their L1 is not a heritage language like Maori or Irish which is under attack from English linguistic imperialism (cf. Phillipson 1992), but a system in which they habitually express an identity of their own quite apart from English. It is perhaps only those firmly committed to a monolingual Anglophone view of the world that do not allow for this.

While Jenkins ascribes the wish to sound more native-like to the pressures of a native-speakerist language ideology (2006: 154-155), she ignores the fact that non-natives may just want to come across as clearly as possible not only to native speakers, but also to those millions of non-natives who have made the same choice. From this point of view, it would clearly be in the interest of non-native speakers to be given access to a native-like model. The adoption of such a model has the added advantage of being more ambitious than teaching non-natives to sound non-native (a non-target since, by definition, they must already be in this position). Such a model should not be offered to all learners as a target which they are required to attain without any modification – simply because this would be unrealistic in the case of virtually all adult learners – but as a reference point other than their L1. Arguably, this would even be helpful in enhancing learners’ ability to communicate with other non-native speakers. Speech perception research shows (see, for example, Trudgill 2005a: 219) that natives find it easier than non-natives to understand other speakers of English – especially when it comes to non-native speech containing far less crucial phonetic and phonological information. Native speakers (like Jenkins) are better able to use contextual information, whereas non-native speakers of English (like me) find it tougher to process another speaker merging minimal pairs. As such, it is essential, if
one wishes to improve learners’ ability to understand other speakers, to instruct them in making all crucial phoneme contrasts. Opposed to such a broad view of international English is a narrower view, which concentrates on non-native interaction only, and ignores the gravitational pull of native-speaker varieties.

It is in fact very difficult to describe any kind of English, or define any kind of criteria for international intelligibility, without recourse to native-speaker English. This is evident from the inclusion, in the core of English as a Lingua Franca as defined by Jenkins, of a great many features of native English. One example is Jenkins’s noble but somewhat obvious recommendation to preserve most English consonant sounds (Jenkins 2000: 132). There can of course be little doubt that this would improve intelligibility – but the details are somewhat questionable, like her insistence on aspiration of initial fortis plosives. This is surprising, given the fact that there are a great many non-native speakers of English for whom aspiration is not a significant acoustic cue. In actual fact, far more important for the learner are other features which are actually recommended for exclusion. Such a strategy could lead to phoneme confusion or severely negative attitudes on the part of native and non-natives because they are well-known candidates for stigmatisation. This would be true of the English dental fricatives /θ θ/, which Jenkins excludes from consideration, recommending as replacements either /f v/ or /t d/. (What happens, one might ask, if an f/v substitutor comes up against a t/d substitutor?)

Jenkins (2000: 27) suggests for deciding on the inclusion of certain features in the Lingua Franca core whether or not these are found in any local native varieties of English. If certain non-standard phonemic realisations also occur in local native varieties, it would seem ‘unreasonable’, as Jenkins (2000: 139) puts it, ‘to have ‘higher’ expectations of L2 speakers.’ But of course, if native-speaker norms were indeed totally irrelevant, it should not matter in the slightest whether non-native variation is similar to native variation. In addition, certain of these forms may be much stigmatised, not just by speakers of other varieties, but also by these very speakers themselves. Even though Jenkins (2000: 138) encourages the use of what we may call ‘th-substitutions’ in ELF, she recognises that ‘at the time of writing, these sounds are still stigmatised in the L1 communities by speakers of RP, GA, and other more standard L1 varieties.’ Although the implicit suggestion that such stigmatisations may be suspended in the near future seems premature, it does recognise the problem of native-speaker attitudes as they affect non-native learners. Nevertheless, in her (2007) study, Jenkins (2007: 251) proposes that the stigma may actually be removed by ‘marginalizing the N[ative]-S[peaker] variants and prioritizing the N[on-]N[ative ]S[peaker]’ realisations in pronunciation teaching. It remains to be seen, however, how feasible such proposals are.

Whilst Jenkins may invoke empirical evidence to support some of her recommendations, claiming that they streamline non-native interaction, my own research (Van den Doel 2006) proves that many of these actually hinder interaction with native speakers – even though such interaction is, in my view, an important aspect of cross-cultural communication in English. My study (2006) was based on a large-scale Internet survey, in which thirty-one L2 pronunciation errors (some of which had close equivalents in non-deviant but regionally distinctive native speech) were presented to well over 500 native-speaker judges from throughout the English-speaking world, including Britain, Ireland, North America, and the English-speaking countries in the Southern Hemisphere. The pronunciation errors were presented to judges in the context of otherwise segmentally and suprasegmentally non-deviant sentences read out by bilingual actors using a widely recognised variety of English –
depending on the judges’ preference, this was either RP or GA (see Fig. 1). Respondents were asked to detect the errors as well as indicate their gravity on a 5-point Likert scale. In addition, they were required to self-identify their own accents in English. This made it possible to correlate participants’ accent self-identifications with their severity judgements.

Statistical analysis of all 31 errors revealed two general results. Firstly, it was evident that success in the detection of errors does not necessarily correlate with the assessment of their severity. North Americans reported fewer errors than did British, Irish and Australian judges, but regarded those detected as being more serious. This, for example, was true of the substitution of dental stops for dental fricatives, a feature which was far more stigmatised by North Americans than by other groups. Another result was that native speakers did not exclusively prioritise errors that affected intelligibility. In some cases they also regarded as extremely significant errors which did not impede communication but which nevertheless led to irritation or ridicule.

Many of the respondents offered additional comments on the errors concerned, and this reinforces the impression that such L2 pronunciation features are severely stigmatised, especially if those similar to L1 realisations. An informal assessment of how severely Irish respondents assessed an L2 realisation of a well-known but stigmatised characteristic of Irish English, namely schwa epenthesis in film, is provided in Figure 2 (cf. Van den Doel 2006: 182-183).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Accent self-identification</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
<td>Northwestern Irish</td>
<td>Inserted schwa, acceptable in my own variety of English, some other people say it also, so it [doesn’t] impede understanding really.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156</td>
<td>Southern Irish</td>
<td>Fil-um</td>
</tr>
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Another example was the L2 error of replacing the TRAP vowel with the DRESS vowel, a common feature of many non-native Englishes, which was found to be comparable to the raised realisations of the TRAP vowel attested in Greater London, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, as well as the American Midwest, the Northeast, and the Northern Cities. Multi-level statistical analysis revealed that this did not actually predispose respondents favourably to such close vowel realisations. Interestingly, an informal analysis of how respondents viewed these stigmatised non-standard forms (see Figure 3) suggested that they are often equated with an obsolescent version of RP, now associated with the Royal Family, exaggerated poshness, and old newsreels.

The set-up of the experiment also made it possible to compare native-speaker evaluations of L2 pronunciation errors with Jenkins’s proposals for ELF. It is vital to know how native speakers respond to what Jenkins views as characteristic ELF realisations, because a learner who has learnt to pronounce English in accordance with Jenkins’s recommendations may still wish to retain the option of communicating with native speakers, and may therefore want to be aware of any adverse native-speaker reactions to particular non-native accent features. If the pronunciation phenomena already mentioned are arranged into a native-speaker error hierarchy, there are several noticeable differences with Jenkins’s suggestions (see Fig. 4).

**Figure 2.** Comments on schwa epenthesis volunteered by respondents from Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Accent self-identification</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>247</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Ridiculously posh</td>
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<tr>
<td>624</td>
<td>British – Standard</td>
<td>This sounds very posh!</td>
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<tr>
<td>642</td>
<td>UK - Standard/Southern</td>
<td>AAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRGSGHSHH H! Sounds German/ like the Royal Fàmily [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>882</td>
<td>Standard British English with a slightly Northern tinge</td>
<td>‘Bets’ sounds like the pronunciation of a wartime newsreel film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>902</td>
<td>British North West</td>
<td>Perhaps its because I’m Northern, but the emphasis drew attention to the ‘posh’ e sound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>980</td>
<td>Southern Irish</td>
<td>‘Bats’ as ‘bets’ sounds almost exaggeratedly RP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>British – Standard</td>
<td>British, very close to 'ideal' RP.</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>I am not sure what is not quite right about ‘bats’ but it sounds rather clipped - like Afrikaans.</td>
<td>‘bats’. New Zealand, Australia, South Africa: you name it. This causes problems when talking to those guys too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>This sounds more like an Australian or New Zealand pronunciation of ‘bats’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>313</td>
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<td>454</td>
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<td>951</td>
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<td>1019</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Comments on TRAP/DRESS confusion volunteered by different respondents.

It turns out that th-substitutions tend to rank among the most serious errors, especially those involving /θ/ in thin and author – but with the exception of the high-frequency function word that, which often passed unnoticed. This clearly suggests that stop realisations of /θ/ and to a lesser extent /ð/ are evaluated negatively by native speakers, especially by North Americans, probably as a result of their stigmatisation in accents such as basilectal New York City and African American Vernacular English. Also ranking highly are vowel errors, and in particular the common confusion of TRAP and DRESS. Furthermore, it is noteworthy how the seemingly trivial error of schwa epenthesis (also found in Chinese English) far outranks lack of aspiration (considered so important by Jenkins) and also any errors in vowel length. It is striking, however, that it was mainly the Americans and Canadians who considered aspiration to be insignificant. Finally, only a very low priority was given to overdark /l/ – which is for once entirely in keeping with Jenkins’s recommendations. However, once again, this error was ranked as overwhelmingly more significant by North Americans.

Surely what we can detect here is a noticeably British bias to Jenkins’s English as a Lingua Franca – especially her prioritisation of aspiration, as compared with her lack of concern for th-stopping and overdark-l. This would mean that the ordering of these features by the native-speaker judges hailing from her own country, Britain, have been given undue significance. If there were indeed any such bias, it would be of great significance – especially given Holliday’s (2005: 164) concern with the Lingua Franca project possibly being seen as a plot from the centre ‘to control what sort of English people should speak’ – in this case it would seem a variety that is acceptable mostly to the Brits. If the recommendations for LFC pronunciation do indeed turn out to reflect local rather than global concerns, this would not only suggest that the exclusive adoption of ELF pronunciation models does a disservice more to non-native learners than to the native speakers, but also that it even reflects the concerns and preferences of one particular group of natives.
Figure 4. Bar chart with error bars showing overall error severity and standard errors for a selected number of tokens.
There is no denying that the Lingua Franca Core, despite its native-speaker biases, was in fact designed with the interests of non-native speakers in mind. This is laudable in itself, as is its concern with the centrality of pronunciation training in language teaching. It is, however, difficult to accept that it would be in the interest of non-native speakers to marginalise the role of native-speaker models in international communication. Such an attempt at marginalisation appears to be motivated more by ideological concerns (some would say native-speaker oneupmanship) than on an actual analysis of non-native speaker needs and wishes. If we are going to continue to teach native-like models to learners of English, this should be done primarily with a view to its benefits to learners. To put it simply, if we decide to teach RP, this is not done for the sake of the RP or GA speakers, but first and foremost for the benefit of other non-natives. As targets, such native-like varieties may well be unattainable to most learners, but as models or reference points they may suit the needs and wishes of many different groups of English learners – even though, clearly, there are many contexts where other models, native or otherwise, may be preferred or simply be more practical. In other words, pronunciation is not taught to please any gatekeepers (as Berns 2008: 330 puts it) be they either the insensitive native speakers of ELF legend, or intolerant non-natives of any ilk, but in response to the way in which learners themselves perceive their own communicative priorities. Once such an analysis is made, it may turn out that learners may continue to require access, not only to non-native, but also to native models.
References


