

## **Pronunciation Course Development in the ELA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explains the changes to the AS pronunciation course which were implemented by the coordinators and instructors during the 2016 academic year. First, the overview of literature regarding intelligibility in the second language is outlined and, then, additional materials and several changes made to this course are discussed in detail. Next, the comments and suggestions received from instructors who taught this course are examined. Future plans and further challenges follow next and, finally, it concludes by suggesting practical ideas to better fit the goals of this course needed in the ELA program.

The pronunciation (PR) course was developed about 10 years ago as one of the elective academic skills (AS) courses. Since then, it has been offered to Stream 3 students twice a year in the autumn and winter semesters. In 2016, a total PR enrollment of 207 meant that 54% of Stream 3 took this course once a week, where they were taught by either native speakers (NS) or non-native speakers (NNS) of English for one term. Over these nine weeks, in an average class of 16, students were introduced to separate aspects of pronunciation to review and practice through activities such as information gap, minimal pair drills, personal recordings, text annotations, and speaking fluency activities. At the end of the course, students participated in a final assignment called the “Grande Finale.” To complete this project, each student selected an English passage (e.g., a poem, speech, soliloquy) to annotate and practice over the course of several weeks, with special attention given to a pronunciation element they needed to improve, before finally reciting it in front of a small group of classmates.

The goals of this course are to help students practice the basic elements of pronunciation and remind them of the importance of intelligibility. Interactions between NNS and NNS occur everywhere and become more common (Jenkins, 2002). In order to communicate clearly and smoothly with English speakers from all over the world, speakers need to make sure to speak intelligibly. First, this paper will review the theoretical background regarding intelligibility, then, explain the several changes and supplementary materials made by PR instructors and coordinators to promote intelligibility, and share feedback from PR instructors and students. Finally, it concludes by suggesting practical lesson ideas.

### **Literature Review on Intelligibility**

An estimated one billion people use English as their L2 and recognition of English has been changed and English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a conceptual response to this new context (Jenkins, 2005). For several decades, communicative skills and active interactions

have been stressed in Japanese English curricula, especially that of higher education. Among them, in terms of pronunciation teaching, intelligibility is one of the important elements of and goals for communication as students will likely have more NNS-NNS interactions than NS-NNS interactions. Consequently, in such a context, it is more important to be aware of speaking intelligibly than speaking like a native speaker of English. According to Munro and Derwing (1995), the definition of intelligibility is the degree to which a speaker will be able to make their messages clearly understood by an interlocutor. Jenkins (2002) points out that pronunciation is a major issue when it comes to losing comprehensibility or intelligibility. On the other hand, syntactic forms or grammatical miscues usually do not impede comprehensibility (Jenkins, 2002). As English users, it is always important to have an awareness of how to make interaction smoother.

However, it should be mentioned that, in spite of this trend, the concept of English as an international language is still deeply rooted. For instance, Munro and Derwing (1995) revealed that many NS listeners are more likely to downgrade NNSs because they perceive that any accentedness is seen as a problem. Another researcher, Kobayashi (2010), also discusses that non-European-looking people who reside in Japan experienced a certain discrimination in which Japanese students have a favorable attitude toward European-looking speakers. In addition, English learners prefer to be taught by European-looking teachers free of any NNS-sounding accent (Kamhi-Stein, 2004).

Despite these findings, English is used among NNS and interactions between NNS and NNS are more common (Jenkins, 2002). Thus, most Japanese English learners are likely to have more chances to use English with NNS. To respond to the global English usage, the ultimate goal of PR course at ELA program is to teach the important concept of intelligibility. In this present paper, first of all, some changes and additional lesson materials (including a google drive supplementary archive) implemented by PR instructors and coordinators are introduced. Next, this paper includes feedback from both PR instructors and students, and concludes suggesting hands-on ideas.

## **Context**

### ***Pronunciation Courses***

Pronunciation is offered to Stream 3 students who did not participate in the SEA program. Each class section (there are generally six to eight) of approximately 17 students meets once a week over the course of a term. Its syllabus, made by previous coordinators, is focused on specific pronunciation components including vowels, consonants, thought groups, word stress, stress & rhythm, and contrastive stress. The important concept of intelligibility is surely introduced and discussed at the first lesson.

Throughout the course, students practice pronunciation elements through activities such as information gap, jigsaw, audio as well as visual materials, jazz chants, tongue twister, and riddles in pairs or groups. In the final week, students complete the “Grande Finale”. Here, the individuals choose a relatively long passage in English (e.g., their favorite English poem or speech) that lasts about two minutes in duration when recited and one pronunciation element which they wish to improve. Then, they are required to annotate their chosen passage based on their pronunciation focus point, and over the preceding weeks, practice and

memorize text. At the final stage, students recite it in front of small groups. Their speech is video-recorded and evaluated by classmates as well as the instructor based on the rubric.

So far, according to the most recent end-of-term surveys (i.e., Winter 2015), this course received a positive appraisal from students. Therefore, as coordinators of the 2016 academic year, we have added audio materials and made a small change in order to focus more on the course goal of intelligibility. It should be noted that these additions were the result of collaboration and consensus among the PR coordinators and instructors at that time.

### *New Additions*

PR teachers and coordinators thought that making students exposed to a variety of “Englishes” spoken by both NS and NNS would be a benefit to the learners. Thus, we implemented the following changes.

First, audio materials were made available to both instructors and students. From Fall term 2016 to Spring term 2016, ELA instructors were invited to read a passage created by a PR coordinator (See Appendix A) and audio-record it. The aim of this was to create an archive of NS and NNS English accents. In the ELA program, NS instructors are from various countries as well as regions and NNS instructors have learned their English in different contexts and countries (See Appendix B). In addition to ELA instructors, some international students, enrolled in the master's program at ICU, kindly participated in this project. Ranging from Egypt to Papua New Guinea, their voice contributions enhanced this recorded accent archive. In PR class, instructors can make students listen to these recordings and ask students to identify where speakers come from/studied their English in order to promote the idea of World Englishes.

Another effective change was to have informal meetings in a regular basis. In the academic year of 2016, PR coordinators and instructors met every three weeks to share opinions and information on their classes, materials, and the syllabus. These meetings were usually planned for lunchtime or the Tuesday third period (used for the monthly ELA meeting) and they generally lasted 15 to 30 minutes. Notes were taken, previous ideas and plans of action were reviewed, and decisions were reached through consensus.

Next change was to modify some of the self-reflection assignment. It was finalized to include three simple short answer style questions. Based on the belief that opportunities for learners to self-reflect is an important component of any well-designed syllabus, the assignment was designed for students to “reflect on aspects of your pronunciation and your progress in the course.” The modified questions were, in order, “*What did you learn about English pronunciation?*”, “*What aspects of your pronunciation did you become more aware of and what do you think you improved?*” followed by “*Which activities were most helpful to you?*” We believe the questions achieve two objectives of this course: they elicit comments in relation to intelligibility, as introduced in lesson one, while at the same time directing students to identify specific sounds or aspects of pronunciation that require attention. As evidence for these reflections, the worksheet suggests the students use their personal audio recordings made throughout the nine-week course in preparation for the Grand Finale.

Lastly, supplementary audio recordings for lesson activities were also created. In order to complete activities in pairs or groups, students were required to enunciate individual sounds such as /r/ and /l/ for the nouns and proper nouns used in the task. If unable to, listeners would misunderstand and the purposes of the activity could not be achieved. To

avoid this situation, a PR coordinator made audio recordings as sample recordings so NNS PR instructors were able to access them and students were able to practice them, whenever necessary. The recordings, which ranged from minimal pair exercises to short dialogues and jigsaw activity answers, also served as a substitute pronunciation model should any NNS instructor feel unable to accurately produce a certain sound. They were read in a natural tone, and an attempt was made to balance clarity of instruction with less-performative sounding, authentic NS voice.

### ***Reflections on this Course***

During regular meetings in 2016, instructors shared information and observations about their classes and exchanged some ideas on class management and effective activities. At the end of the term, it was agreed by all participants that these brief, scheduled meetings were both a useful and necessary addition to the PR course.

Most instructors enjoyed teaching the class using additional materials. For instance, NNS instructors gained confidence teaching pronunciation after introducing the reality of NNS-NNS interactions in English to students and they realized the importance of intelligibility. More specifically, according to one instructor, “Students seemed to understand why NNS instructors teach this PR course at ICU. They were able to realize that, in order to have smooth interactions with interlocutors, the concept of intelligibility is far more important than speaking like NS.” Another NNS instructor commented, “Among materials, audio recordings provided by various accents were helpful for students to expose to and accept various Englishes. Students seemed to enjoy the guessing game of World Englishes.”

In terms of students’ feedback, according to the end-of-survey of 2016, the majority of students considered the practice of /l/ and /r/ helpful. One student commented, “I was happy to communicate in English with other Japanese classmates and complete tricky /l/ and /r/ pronunciation activities. I think most acknowledged the importance of intelligibility through this course.” It seems that students were able to realize the difficulty in enunciating each sound and the importance of making their English understandable. Also, several students indicated that they enjoyed their final assignment; “Grande Finale.” One student wrote, “The step-by-step process (i.e., annotation, practice, memorization, and recitation the English materials) made me confident. At first, I thought it was impossible to memorize a two-minute-long English passage but I made it.”

## **Discussion**

### ***Applications to Teach Pronunciation as an International Language***

In terms of the importance of intelligibility, the notion that native speakers of English are no longer gatekeepers or models of the English language has gained (Jenkins, 2002). It should be noted, however, that students’ beliefs about NS-NNS pronunciation can vary as much as their L2 self-images and learning motivation (Kamhi-Stein, 2004). While it is reasonable to believe that many are unaware of the intelligibility concept, instructors should also be mindful that NS-like pronunciation does represent an ideal for a number of students. In some cases, a student might imagine his future self to be proficient in American English,

while another might focus on Received Pronunciation. PR instructors could address this difference straightforwardly by acknowledging every student's learning goal and, at the same time, emphasizing intelligibility as a base level of achievement. For instance, one instructor addressed the class as follows: "You may imagine yourself speaking with a BBC English accent, or one day sounding like your American homestay family members. If this is your personal goal, then that's great. But for many of you, this is not your goal. So, let's aim to sound intelligible first. Let that be step one. Our syllabus contains the basic elements of pronunciation required for you to be understood."

In addition, it would be beneficial to introduce students to typical sounds produced by NNS. For instance, Mexican people are more likely to have difficulty to pronounce /t/ and /p/ in English at the beginning of words as Spanish speakers do not aspirate these sounds in their native language (Folse, 2006). These pronunciation differences and general knowledge of the variety of English will make students more aware of intelligibility.

So far, this paper has focused on the reasons and objectives for emphasizing intelligibility: the high probability of NNS-NNS interactions, the concept of World Englishes, the pragmatism of simply aiming to be understood, and the reduced learning burden of not having to master a NS-like delivery. So what, then, is necessary to sound intelligible? Does the student have no responsibility other than to speak naturally, unconcerned about L1 interference, ready to negotiate the meaning of their utterances in real time? It could be argued that this approach would impede fluency development and language proficiency. The solution to this may be in the PR syllabus. Much as a grammar course might focus on common errors rather than teaching grammar in its entirety, the aspects of pronunciation taught here are designed solely to enhance intelligibility. Jenkins (2000) determined the essential sounds needed for speakers to be understood were most consonants, appropriate consonant cluster simplification, vowel length distinction, and nuclear stress. The current PR syllabus addresses contrastive stress and intonation, pauses and rhythm, consonants /b/, /p/, /v/, /f/, /th/ (as in thin), /th/ (as in the), and distinctions between vowel sounds. This plan is consistent with Jenkins' four essential elements to some extent. However, an additional review of this matter in the syllabus would be in order, so as to ensure consistency with Jenkins' findings.

## Conclusion

The change brought by the concept of "intelligibility" is still a debatable issue. However, looking at the real world, it is highly probable that NNS would have more English interactions with NNS than with NS. As the results, educators need to take a new step or consider adjustment to their teaching of English pronunciation. To respond this current situation, the ELA program has already taken positive actions in response to this situation. The first lesson of this PR course mainly focused on intelligibility and comprehensibility in NNS-NNS interactions. Students have an opportunity to realize that they are more likely to use English with NNS of English. Also, they learn the importance of making their English understood by interlocutors at any given time in any given situation.

At the time of writing, November 2017, the authors of this paper have not received conclusive feedback from the current PR teachers with regard to the changes and additions outlined here. At the end of the current academic year, we will participate in a follow-up

meeting and help assess which additions were effective, and what tasks or instructions require improvement. From these supplementary audio materials and small changes discussed in this paper, again, the priority here would be to introduce and remind students of the concept of World Englishes and to more promote acceptance of the broad range of NNS English. Throughout the ELA program, English classes including PR are taught by NNS and NS of English, each of whom retains an accent of some kind. From these experiences in their everyday life and knowledge, hopefully, students would be able to disregard their long-rooted preconceptions toward English spoken by NS and accept the idea of a variety of “Englishes” and to speak their English intelligibly.

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## Appendix A

### A Recording Script

Imagine you're at a football match in London, then a hotel in Istanbul... now you're in a taxi in Mumbai, a café in Sydney, and finally back on your college campus in Mitaka. From scene to scene, you would've encountered a variety of English accents. After all, it's estimated that over 1.5 billion people around the world speak it as their first or second language. So, as an English language learner, it is important to focus on communicating *intelligibly*.

## Appendix B

### Complete List of Archived PR Course NS and NNS Accents

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Native Speakers	Non-Native Speakers
Alberta, Canada Allophone Montreal, Canada Newcastle, Australia New Zealand Manchester, England Southwestern Ontario, Canada Yorkshire, England	Cairo, Egypt Central Kiribati China Nagano, Japan Northern Laos Madang Province, Papua New Guinea Philippines Southern Mali Tanzania Tokyo, Japan

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