

Speaking English as a Lingua Franca with a Spanish Accent. Desirability vs. Reality

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Introduction

The expansion of English as a global language (Crystal, 1997) is dramatically changing the foreign vs. native dichotomy that has prevailed until very recently. The fact that native speakers of English are outnumbered by non-natives (Brown, 1991; Phillipson, 1992; Graddol, 1997, 2006; Gnutzmann, 2000; Jenkins, 2008) and emerging second language varieties of English can threaten intelligibility, has triggered off a reaction (Widdowson, 1997; Pow, 2002; Jenkins, 2000, 2006, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2006, etc.) in an attempt to tackle a possible danger of fragmentation, promoting a quick and drastic action. Such action involves a) the de-prioritization of the classic (British-American) models and the concurrent idea of language ownership, b) the incorporation of other varieties and standards of English, and c) the non-rejection of other non-English accents provided they do not interfere with intelligibility –a key concept underlying a LF core as proposed by Jenkins (2000, 2006). This paper explores the reactions that Spanish business people have towards such a proposal. In particular we are interested in knowing their opinion as to which linguistic factors impinge on international intelligibility; their learning difficulties from a Spanish perspective; in which way such difficulties have a reflection in Jenkins' LFC model; the respondents' reactions towards the learning of a mixed model of English as a better and more functional option within a global perspective and, finally, their reactions towards accommodating their speech habits to this new model.

Methodology

A ten-item closed questionnaire consisting of four options was administered to 50 businessmen in the Murcia region (Spain) of which 34 were men and 16 women. Their age range was from 30 to 55 years and their level of English was deemed to be between low intermediate and intermediate. Four people intervened for the piloting of the questionnaire (two men and two women) which was e-mailed to 100 people, being the response rate 53% (3% was discarded for the sake of simplicity). Internal consistency

reliability was measured by the Cronbach Alpha, yielding a coefficient for the ten items = .78. A Pearson X² test revealed non-significant differences between men and women.

Results

One of the tenets of the ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) movement is that native speakers are but a minority as compared with the number of non-native speakers who use English as a foreign or second language as pointed above. In the case of our respondents, 28% had contacts with native speakers of English, the same percentage as those who replied they had stable commercial relations with both natives and non-natives. Non-natives for whom English is a second language came next (24%), and 20% answered that their relations were exclusively with non-natives for whom English was a foreign language.

Item 2 focused on intelligibility from a listener's standpoint. Of the four options given, 36% acknowledged they had problems understanding some vowels (we did not specify any), whereas 32% blamed the intonation used as their main stumbling block. The pronunciation of certain consonants was chosen by only 12%, and 20% ticked the wrong stress placement option as their main cause for their lack of understanding.

Item 3 delved into the intelligibility issue, this time from a speaker's perspective. In parallel with the previous item, 42% consider the way they pronounce English vowels (Spanish-like, making no length differences) to be the main feature that impairs intelligibility. Consonant deletion comes second (30%). With a similar percentage to item 2, wrong word stressing is considered by 22% as the main cause for disruption in intelligibility; and unlike the role played by intonation in the previous item, only a modest 6% see this suprasegmental as the main obstacle to their being understood.

Item 4 focused on successful intelligibility. More than half of the respondents (58%) consider that, despite all, successful interaction is achieved thanks to the interlocutors' familiarity with a specific context. Far fewer (18%) are those who see in the respondents' use of non-native English the main reason for mutual understanding. The use of similar words occurring in the languages of the interactants comes third (12%), and knowledge of the linguistic habits of their interlocutors is chosen by just 10%.

Jenkins points out (2000:207) that as a LF the learning task of English should be eased (see also Brown, 1991:41). In item 5, we presented to our participants four possible areas of difficulty to choose from: three referred to segmental and one to suprasegmental features. A fairly large percentage (44%) signalled word-final consonant clusters as their main stumbling block –not surprisingly, since Spanish disallows anything but single consonants at the end of a word (Monroy, 2007). Those for whom nuclear accent placement (i.e. tonicity) constitutes their main area of difficulty scored relatively lower (26%). Vowel distinction in terms of length appears third (18%). One would expect a higher percentage here considering that vowel length ranks top in item 3 as the main area inhibiting intelligibility. Finally, aspiration of voiceless plosives was chosen by 12% of the sample.

Following Jenkins' idea of making the learning task of ELF easy, we asked our respondents what aspects would be, in their opinion, least necessary to learn in a lingua franca situation. Of the four options presented in item 6, 38% opted for intonation, 28% for vowel length (thus contradicting their view expressed in items 2 and 3 about the role of this feature), 26% seemed not to bother much with vowel quality (supposedly, the use of the vowel quality found in their own language would do), and only 8% would do away with word stress.

As to whether it would be a good idea to teach a model of English specifically oriented towards international communication as a lingua franca (item 7), more than half of the respondents (54%) leaned towards either British or American English, rejecting other varieties of English –mostly those varieties of English spoken as an L2. 24% considered it unnecessary since any English variant would serve such a purpose; 10% saw it a positive move to set up an international variant of English which would obviate all those aspects of English that interfere with intelligibility, and a mere 8% considered the best solution to set up a variant whose core features would be what all varieties of English have in common (Crystal's idea underlying his WSSE model, 1997:138). These results run counter to Jenkins' claim that normative models (RP-GA) are not the only –nor probably the best– option (Jenkins, 2000).

Item 8 revolved around the idea of learning a LFC variety as a better option than learning one of the classic models. Here opinions range from those who adhere to RP and GA either because they are more prestigious varieties (36%) or because they can practice their English in situ (28%), and those who would accept a LFC without question (24%). Ranking last (12%) are those who decline learning anything but British or American English on the grounds that these are the varieties learned by their European or Asian associates.

Item 9 impinges on the model issue, focusing on the learning period as a variable that would make them learn this variety rather than RP or GA (supposedly, the learning time would be shorter in the case of a LFC since it would leave aside those aspects that do not interfere seriously with intelligibility). Opinions were fairly evenly divided here. While 30% answered in the affirmative, there was a draw (24%) between options c) and d) (it is not a realistic model, and stability would not be guaranteed, respectively). At a very short distance (22%) stand those who consider that the new variant should be given a chance as long as a real possibility existed to study and learn it.

Finally, in item 10 respondents were asked whether they would make an effort to accommodate their speech to those features which characterise the LFC. 34% were positive about it, thinking that it would be worth the trouble; and, again, there was a draw (26%) between those who answered affirmatively provided that it might mean an improvement in terms of intelligibility with respect to the normative models, and those who did not see the need of spending time learning another variety of English.

Conclusions

The results show that intelligibility is a key issue for the respondents. They seem concerned with areas that hinder mutual understanding in the international scene (notably vowels –vowel length– intonation and consonant deletion finally in a word), although more than half of the respondents concur in managing to interact successfully with foreign non-native speakers of English thanks to their familiarity with a specific context. These data confirm Jenkins' claim that vowel length and nuclear (tonic) stress should be part of a LFC syllabus, but they do not support her view that word final consonant clusters and word stress should not be.

Moreover, more than half of the sample (54% –59% men and 44% women) stick to the normative models on the grounds that they are prestigious varieties spoken by business people in Europe, and are spoken in places they can visit to consolidate their linguistic knowledge. However, they are open to a LFC syllabus if it means spending less time learning it than learning other varieties of English. In any case, 60% would make an effort to accommodate their speech to those using a LFC model, particularly if this fosters international intelligibility more than the normative models.

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