CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES AND THE CHOICE OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION MODELS

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ABSTRACT. *This paper deals with the issue of the choice of pronunciation models for EFL teaching/learning. The paper discusses the types of criteria that have been used throughout the years to justify the choice of a given pronunciation model. The paper also provides a series of recommendations to be followed by teachers who wish to make a more or less informed decision regarding the choice of a given pronunciation model for their students.*

RESUMEN. *El presente artículo trata sobre la elección de modelos de pronunciación para la enseñanza/aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extrajera. El artículo trata los distintos tipos de criterios que han sido usados a lo largo de los años para justificar la elección de un determinado modelo de pronunciación. El artículo proporciona asimismo una serie de recomendaciones para los docentes interesados en realizar una elección lo menos arbitraria posible de un determinado modelo de pronunciación para sus estudiantes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The selection of a pronunciation model for the EFL classroom is a field of much discussion (see e.g. Dziubalska-Kolaczyk & Przedlacka 2005). Throughout the years, different pronunciation models have been suggested for EFL teaching/learning (see e.g. Brown 1989; Jenkins 1998). Although no typology has so far been made, a distinction could be drawn between two types of models: local vs. non-local. The first group of models would consist of those models associated with a specific geographical location (national, regional, local, urban, etc.) where the language is spoken natively. Examples of this group are the classic Received Pronunciation –RP- (also called BBC English), or General American –GA- (also called Network English). Other examples are accents of England like the so-called Estuary English (see e.g. Rosewarne 1997), the standard accent of Scottish English (see e.g. Abercrombie 1956) or Singaporean English (e.g. Brown 1991). The second group would contain those models that do not have a clearly local character but have a supranational (perhaps 'international') character. In this category we could include West's 'minimum adequate' (West 1968), Gimson's 'International English' (Gimson 1978), Bradford's 'essential ingredients' (Bradford 1990), or Modiano's "Mid-Atlantic English" (Modiano 1996), which are supposed to be compromises between different accents. Models such as Jenkins' 'Lingua Franca Core' (Jenkins, 2000), a set of features that are important for intelligibility among non-native speakers of English, also fall into this category.

2. THE CHOICE OF AN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION MODEL: CRITERIA

Although the features of the proposals available in the literature are generally well known (e.g. they are those described in works on the phonetics/phonology of English accents or in reports on the results of analytical –occasionally empirical- research), it is often not explicit or sufficiently clear why a given pronunciation model is chosen by textbook authors, teachers, institutions, etc. Given this, the EFL teacher interested in making a more or less informed decision needs a set of clear criteria to consider and apply in order to arrive at a decision that is not completely arbitrary. The criteria that have been put forward throughout the years are different and they can be described as communicative, geo-cultural, (linguistic)

political, social psychological or linguistic phonetic. The rest of this section deals with these types of criteria in some detail.

2.1. *Communicative criteria*

Communicative criteria in the choice of an English pronunciation model relate to questions like how intelligible speakers could be when using a given model (i.e. if the speaker will be easily understood). Many relevant discussions and studies (e.g. Brown 1989, 1991; Jenkins 2000) place a great importance on the concept of intelligibility though the latter is a very complex phenomenon. The degree of intelligibility may be different, for instance, if we are considering interaction between non-native speakers or between native and non-native speakers. Intelligibility may also depend on the degree of familiarity with accents, as some studies (e.g. Gass and Varonis 1984; Smith and Bisazza 1982; Pihko 1997) have shown. The more familiar speakers are with an accent, the more likely they are to understand their interlocutors. Thus, given its complexity, intelligibility needs to be operationalised and measured very carefully.

Communicative criteria also relate to the chances of exposure to the model students have outside the classroom. In this respect, a given model may have a high communicative value if there are a great number of speakers who use it. This can be measured in terms of the number of speakers (native or non-naïve) who use the model or try to approach it in some way and in terms of its presence in the media (TV, radio, etc.). As a case in point (and taking into account the previous criteria), a common myth about RP is that it is spoken by around 3% of the British population (the actual percentage is not known) but that it is widely understood. If these facts were true, this would mean that students of RP, for instance, would presumably find few native speakers of RP in their encounters in the UK or abroad but at least they would be easily understood by most British citizens.

2.2. *Geo-cultural criteria*

Geo-cultural criteria refer to geographical and/or cultural proximity between students of EFL and territories where English is a native language. This may explain partially why General American has traditionally been the preferred pronunciation model in South America and RP the one in Europe (Gimson 1978) and also why American English seems to be gaining ground in Europe. The influence of mass media and popular culture, the chances of travelling to the territories, the frequency of exchanges (academic, tourism-related, commercial, political, etc.) may influence the preference for models associated with a specific territory in certain teachers/students.

2.3. *Criteria to do with linguistic policies*

The criteria connected to linguistic policies refer to the attitude of local education authorities or administration regarding the learning of a foreign language. In many cases such as Spain (see e.g. Mompeán 2004), national curricula are too general and simply refer to English pronunciation as if variation did not exist in the language. In these cases, according to von Schon (1987), it may be a good idea to look at the practice of peers (what other teachers in the same national school system teach or in the same geopolitical area like, e.g. the EU). Taking peers practices into account might be recommendable if we consider, as von Schon does, that there is "great value in consistency" (p. 26). Von Schon suggests the situation of students being confused "… if they got American English the first year, British English the second year, and Indian English the third year" (ibid).

2.4. *Social Psychological criteria*

Social psychological criteria relate to teachers and learners' views (their wishes, expectations, ideas, etc.), which may become crucial in the choice of a given pronunciation model.

Teachers, for instance, may wish to choose a model that is respected by the academic community or is prestigious among native and/or non-native speakers. They may also wish to choose a target model whose stereotypical speakers are evaluated positively on a given set of parameters. As a case in point, a reason for choosing RP could be that its stereotypical speaker is perceived as competent, reliable, educated, and confident (see e.g. Giles 1970; Giles *et al.* 1990).

As far as students are concerned, an aspect to consider is what students think about learning a native model. Do students want to try to imitate a native model? Or do they want to speak the foreign language with their own national flavour? Although opinions may vary, research with students as diverse as Austrians (e.g. Dalton-Puffer *et al.* 1997; Smith and Dalton 2000) or Japanese (e.g. Chiba *et al.* 1995) reveals that EFL students tend to show more positive attitudes towards accents like RP or GA than towards non-native accents of English. In other words, research reveals the low status that non-native accents have among their users (the local variety is often viewed negatively) and the overall preference for native accents. Given this, we may wonder what type of accent students want to learn. As a case in point, Mompeán (2004) found out that 71% of Spanish English language/linguistic university students wished to learn a British accent (71%), by which they implicitly or explicitly generally meant an accent from England, while the rest wished to learn an American accent (17%) or an Irish accent (12%). The study also revealed that the preference for a British accent was generally related to the belief that such an accent excels in purity, correctness, and beauty over other accents. The results also indicated that some students want to learn an American accent because of the political, economic, commercial, and cultural power of the United States in the world, or simply because they had some cultural affinity with the country. Cultural affinity was also the main reason why a few students wanted to learn an Irish pronunciation.

2.5. *Pedagogical criteria*

Pedagogical criteria relate to the availability of teaching/learning materials that contain the target model and the availability of teachers (native or non-native) that exemplify or can imitate the model accent to some extent. In this respect, Macauley (1988) claimed that it was somewhat paradoxical that RP should be so frequently proposed as an English pronunciation model in many countries when many (if not most) EFL teachers do not themselves speak RP. This, according to Macauley, might lead to the unsatisfactory situation where many teachers would be either forced to modify their speech in the direction of RP or ask students to pronounce in a way they themselves do not. In addition, the availability of the candidate models in CDs, tapes, textbook materials, etc. is a powerful pedagogical criterion. Teachers, for instance, may eventually reject a model they are thinking of if they do not find sufficient or suitable materials to exemplify it with. In contrast, teachers might end up teaching a given model because it's the only one they find in textbooks they are interested in.

Another pedagogical criterion that can be considered is how difficult the model may seem to be to students. This may well be too subjective a criterion to measure, but it has been suggested as a criterion in the literature (e.g. Brown 1989). The personal experience of the author reveals that some Spanish students, for instance, find rhotic accents easier than non-rhotic accents. A related aspect is considering how difficult it may be to teach, which may

make sense if we consider that there may be certain aspects of pronunciation that are hard to teach. As a case in point, Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core takes this criterion into account as it supposedly "drastically simplifies the pedagogic task by removing from the syllabus many time-consuming items which are… *unteachable*" –emphasis added- (Jenkins 2000: 160).

2.6. *Linguistic/phonetic criteria*

The linguistic/phonetic criteria deal with issues like the functional load of certain elements of accents (number and frequency of minimal pairs, phonemes and their combinations, etc.), degree of equivalence of features between the L1 and L2, etc. Brown (1991) is famous for discussing these criteria to some extent. Teachers might reject a model that has many contrasts (e.g. between long and short vowels) that have a low functional load. Also, Abercrombie' suggestion that it would make much more sense to teach Scottish English pronunciation as an EFL teaching model as opposed to RP since the former has fewer diphthongs and closer orthographic links than the latter is based on functional phonetic or phonological criteria (see e.g. Abercrombie 1956: 55).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the issue of the choice of models for pronunciation teaching in the EFL classroom, personal preferences are often too subjective and it may well be worth, in an attempt to make a more or less informed decision, to analyse several criteria, which need to be made explicit and operationalised. Where possible teachers should also read empirical research related to this issue and/or conduct some research themselves. In any case, 'consumers' of pronunciation models should bear in mind that the choice of a given pronunciation model for EFL teaching/learning will always be context-dependent. There is no single 'best' model that can be used in all teaching/learning contexts. This situation led Brown (1989) to recommend a polymodel approach, where a different pronunciation model is appropriate for each ELT situation, since each situation differs in its linguistic background, the desires and needs of its speakers, etc. In any case, there are several aspects that can be generalised to any geographical and educational context.

First, whatever the chosen model, teachers should justify their choice and discuss the potential advantages/disadvantages of the model with their students, discuss popular beliefs about 'correctness', 'formality', 'modernity' etc. of the potential models, and clearly state that the model chosen is simply a reference point, rather than a 'model' supposed to be 'correct' or 'best' (particularly if the model chosen coincides with a native accent of English)

Second, teachers should strive to make the degree of attainment that will be required of their students explicit. The degree depends on the specific situational context, students' needs, degree requirements, etc. In this respect, the degree of attainment should always be one that most (if not all) students in a class can reach (in any case obviously never a near-native accent, with the possible exception of teacher pronunciation training in certain contexts).

Third, it is recommendable to draw attention to the similarities and differences between the model chosen and accents the teacher knows students are interested in. For instance, if an American accent (e.g. GA) were chosen as model, comparisons should be made when possible or appropriate between the model or reference accent and other models (e.g. a British model like RP) that act then as models for comparison.

Fourth, out of the many aspects that can be studied in a given pronunciation syllabus, some priority should be given to aspects that empirical research shows are important for

intelligibility or provide a positive personal image of the speaker –if sociolinguistic or social psychological research provides information in this respect-. Priority should also be given to aspects that are particularly easy to teach/learn since work on pronunciation is often hard for many students and it is essential to build student confidence.

Finally, it is always recommendable to regularly expose students to varieties other than the reference model. Choosing a given pronunciation model should never mean being against diversity: exposure to different accents in teaching materials is more than acceptable as long as the core elements are observed. Similarly, in the assessment of production, only those phonetic/phonological aspects that are common to most models should be taken into account so that no student will ever complain that the teacher is asking him/her to produce something that is not a characteristic of the accent the student tries to imitate (if the latter does not coincide with the pronunciation model chosen by the teacher).

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