KEY CONCEPTS IN ELT

Intelligibility

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Increases in the number of English users in the world and growing acceptance of indigenized varieties of English ('Englishes') have given rise to concerns that speakers of different English dialects will cease being intelligible to each other, resulting in failures in communication, especially in cross-cultural encounters (see Matsuura 2007). 'Intelligibility' is therefore a relevant concept for English language teachers to the extent that they aim to prepare students to communicate successfully with users of various Englishes and in *lingua franca* contexts. However, it is a contested construct which has proved difficult to define and measure (see Derwing and Munro 2005; Kirkpatrick, Deterding, and Wong 2008).

Munro and Derwing (1995) influentially conceptualized intelligibility in relation to comprehensibility and accentedness, as a basis for pronunciation pedagogy. They operationalize intelligibility as 'the extent to which the speaker's intended utterance is actually understood by a listener'; comprehensibility as 'the listener's perception of the degree of difficulty encountered when trying to understand an utterance'; and accentedness as the listener's perception of how different a second language (L2) accent is 'from the variety of English commonly spoken in the community' (ibid.: 291). In this conceptualization, while intelligibility refers to listeners' actual understanding, comprehensibility and accentedness mainly concern listeners' *perceptions*. Consequently, Derwing and Munro (op.cit.) highlight the significance of the linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds from which hearers as well as speakers come.

Jenkins (2000) has referred to the notion of 'accommodation' to explore the dynamic interplay between speakers and hearers, suggesting that L2 users of English strategically make adjustments in their speech which lead to convergence with or divergence from their interlocutors' speech. Therefore, successful interaction may depend not only on the pronunciation teaching L2 speakers of English receive but also on the extent to which English users and learners are prepared to listen to and understand varieties of L2 speech and to 'maintain a positive and receptive attitude' towards doing so (Munro 2008: 211).

While the research pioneered by Derwing and Munro exclusively focused on the experiences of students living in an English-speaking

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country and instruction for them, Jenkins (2000, 2002) placed emphasis on the concept of intelligibility from the perspective of users of English as an international *lingua franca*. Based on her own research, she proposed a set of *lingua franca* core features for intelligibility-based pronunciation teaching, alongside a focus on both productive and receptive accommodation. This work repudiates adherence to native-speaker norms in instructional practices (and thus downplays the notion of accentedness), contending that accentedness and comprehensibility are not correlated; as Levis (2005: 370) puts it, 'communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong'.

Thus, thanks to the burgeoning research spearheaded by Munro and Derwing (op.cit.) in ESL settings and by Jenkins (2000, 2002), Kirkpatrick *et al.* (op.cit.), Matsuura (op.cit.), and Nelson (2011) in relation to English as a lingua franca (ELF) interactions, the paramount importance of ensuring intelligibility (as opposed to approximation to native-speaker models) has been strongly argued for in relation to pronunciation teaching in ELT. The importance of intelligibility began to be highlighted in response to native-speaker oriented concerns about the possible negative effects on intelligibility of the pluricentrism of English (for example Quirk 1985). However, the situation has been reversed in a sense, in that—rather than lack of intelligibility among speakers of different Englishes—what is being emphasized by pronunciation-oriented ELF researchers nowadays is how people with different language backgrounds *achieve* intelligibility through accommodation while retaining their own 'accents' and how they can be trained towards mutual understanding, with a focus on the hearer's responsibility as well as the speaker's (Levis op.cit.; Kirkpatrick *et al.* op.cit.; Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey 2011). This emphasis poses a challenge for teaching and teacher education, requiring the development of new pedagogical knowledge and competencies to teach the pronunciation, listening, and accommodation skills suitable for a world of interlocutor diversity.

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