Native Speakers Model Or English As Lingua Franca Core? An Exploratory Study Investigating Both Issues in Arabic-Speaking Classrooms of English

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Abstract:

This paper is a part of a larger study that was submitted as a Masters dissertation in TESOL. It starts off by giving an overview of the concept and the ongoing debate between supporters of the 'native speakers model' as the model of pronunciation that should be taught to English learners on one side, and those who are against this concept on the other side. Then, it focuses on the phonological proposal by Jenkins as an alternative phonological model which English learners should aim to acquire rather than the traditional native speakers model. Having described this phonological proposal, the paper goes on to highlight a number of issues that may arise when it is applied to Arab learners of English. These issues are mainly a result of the Arabic phonology that may clash with the proposed model, resulting in a lack of intelligibility and less appropriateness as well as collision with learners' needs.

Keywords: Native Speakers Model, English as Lingua Franca Core (ELC), English as Lingua Franca (ELF), English Language Teaching (ELT)

Introduction:

The number of speakers of English has grown dramatically in recent decades, to reach about a billion and half speakers around the world (Crystal, 2000). However, roughly three out of four speakers of English are non-native speakers, which denotes that they outnumber a billion speakers of English as a second or foreign language (Crystal, 2003). As a result, this has brought the concept of native speakers as the model that learners should aim to acquire in ELT classrooms into question. This, therefore, has created intense debates between supporters of adopting a native speaker model in ELT classrooms and those who argue that native speakers should not have 'ownership' of English due to the fact that the majority of communication in English occurs between non-native speakers of English and each other (Nelson, 1995; Kramsch, 1998). This has resulted in the concept of *English as Lingua Franca* (ELF) in which English is used for communication between non-native speakers with each other. However, because English is used by different speakers of different languages, ELF may create a number of challenges related to intelligibility once it is implemented. Thus, this has created the need for a linguistic solution that maintains intelligibility without referring to a native speaker model at the same time. This solution was addressed by Jenkins (2000) who provides *English as Lingua Franca Core* (ELC) as a compromise that could achieve this goal. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on ELC and its advantages in maintaining intelligibility when English is used as ELF in communication. The paper will further argue that, despite its advantages, ELC has drawbacks once it is applied to Arab learners. These drawbacks are related to *Intelligibility, Appropriateness* and *Learners' Needs.* It is important to point out that this paper, however, does not argue for adopting a native speaker mode, but it highlights the issues that are linked to ELC once it is introduced to Arab learners. Therefore, once they are aware of these issues, the decision is in the hands of the learners as to whether they prefer a native speaker model or ELC. In order to do so, this paper will start with a literature review focusing on the reasons behind the shift from the native speaker model of English to the use of ELF. Secondly, the paper will address the concept of ELC and how it assists non-native speakers of English to maintain intelligibility without any references to the native speaker model. Then, the discussion will be about the disadvantages of ELC and how it could impede intelligibility, creating a lack of appropriateness and colliding with the learners' needs once it is applied to Arab learners of English. As a result, this could create the opposite effect of what it aims achieve. Finally, a conclusion and implications of the study will be drawn at the end, providing insights for English teachers of Arab students.

Literature Review:

For the majority of English learners, acquiring a native-speaker-like linguistic competence could be frustrating in many occasions (Jenkins, 1998). However, the issue may go further to take an ethical direction once the native speakers model were to be introduced to learners. This issue is explained by Byram (1997) who argues that once native speakers became the model that English language learners should aim to achieve, this created a power struggle between both native and non-native speakers once they are in contact. In other words, non-native speakers will struggle to match their linguistic competence to reach the standards of native speakers'. Therefore, they will be "linguistically schizophrenic, abandoning one language in order to blend into another linguistic environment, becoming accepted as a native speaker by other native speakers" (Byram, 1997: 11). This, as a result, will also influence their identity as independent individuals with their

own cultural identity to conform to the native speakers' cultural norms (p. 12). Furthermore, adopting a native speaker model could result in giving native speakers teachers of English superiority over the non-native ones, which in many cases results in discrimination against the latter when it comes to job applications (Braine, 2010). In addition, one of the most famous debates focusing on this topic was between Randolph Quirk and Braj Kachru as Pickering (2006) reported. The former argued that either American or British varieties of English should be the model that learners of English should aim to achieve in learning the language. On the other hand, Kachru responded that "it was time to legitimize non-native speaker varieties and recognize the 'paradigm shift' that the increasing use of English as an international language required" (ibid.,1). In other words, Kachru calls for *'English as Lingua Franca'* (ELF) which is defined by linguists in different ways. Conrad & Mauranen (2003: 513) define (ELF) as "a vehicular language spoken by people who do not share a native language". Furthermore, Pickering (2006) also defines it as "talk comprising expanding circle speaker-listener, also described as non-native speakers". In addition, ELF was also illustrated by Firth (1996: 240) as:

> "A contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue no a common (national) culture, and for who English is the chosen foreign language of communication".

Another definitions is addressed by House (1999, cited in Jenkins, 2007), who pointed out that ELF is the language used "between members of two or more different lingua cultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue" (p. 74). On the other hand, there are linguists who include speakers from inner and outer circles in the definition of ELF (Seidlhofer, 2004). In other words:

> "ELF is not limited to members of the expanding circle, and those who also speak English internationally, whether they come from an inner or outer circle country, are not excluded from ELF communication" (Jenkins, 2007: 2).

Having provided an overview of ELF and its definitions and usage amongst non-native speakers of English rather than the native speaker model, the issue of pronunciation and which phonological model it should be based on remains challenging. Therefore, ELC by Jenkins (2000) was proposed to overcome any challenges related to intelligibility.

ELC: What is it? And how can it help?

Jenkins (2000) notes that miscommunication often occurs between non-native speakers when they communicate with each other in English. The reason for this, as she argues, is their different phonological background as they transfer their first language (L1) phonology into English. For instance, Bansal (1990, cited in Jenkins, 2000) maintains that when English is used as lingua franca in India amongst individuals who do not share the same first language, there seems to be serious miscommunication between them because of their different pronunciation which is "likely to affect the intelligibility" (ibid., 27). Moreover, Deterding (2005) studied a number of Singaporean students and their understanding of a British English variety (Estuary English). He reported that there were certain sounds such as glottalisation, and some vowels caused problems to intelligibility. In addition, Jenkins (2002: 88) exemplifies the lack of intelligibility because of the L1 phonology transfer by a Korean speaker who informed his friends that he failed his driving test. However, he pronounced the verb *'failed'* as ['peɪld]. Jenkins explains that this

happened because of the substitution of /p/ for /f/ in Korean, which caused confusion for his listeners and thus lack of intelligibility. This will also be heard in other words, such as 'wife' being pronounced as 'wipe'; 'finish' as 'pinish' and 'coffee' pronounced as 'copy' (p. 88). From the studies mentioned above, it seems that miscommunication is likely to occur when speakers transfer their first language phonology into English. Therefore, Jenkins (2000) suggested *English as Lingua Franca Core* (ELC) proposal, which is "a set of core phonological features that will result in maximum intelligibility in ELF interaction" (Pickering, 2006: 223). The aim of her proposal "was primarily to identify those segmental and suprasegmental features that obstruct the intelligibility of pronunciation in ELF interaction when pronounced with L1 influence" (Jenkins, 2007: 22). Therefore, Jenkins' proposal would provide a compromise that seems to solve the problem of English learners' pronunciation. It is divided into two main parts: core features of pronunciation and non-core features. In the former, she argues that there are certain sounds and pronunciation features that cannot be compromised which are crucial for intelligibility and thus have to be taught. For instance, most consonants in English except /ð/ and /θ/, "which do not occur in the majority of the world's languages", are necessary to achieve intelligibility (ibid., 122). Sounds such as /t/ in words like *'water'* and *'letter',* for instance, should be taught, rather than the General American flapped [r] (Jenkins, 2002). Moreover, when it comes to vowels, the quantity of a vowel such as recognizing the difference between short vowels in words like *'live'* and long vowels in words like *'leave'* is another aspect of pronunciation that has a high priority in Jenkins' proposal.

On the other hand, she argues in the second part of her proposal that there are other aspects of pronunciation that learners do not have to achieve and thus should not be focused on. For instance, as mentioned above, consonants such as /ð/ and /θ/should not be taught because they do not exist in most languages (ibid., 122) and they are "not necessary for intelligible EIL pronunciation" (Jenkins, 2000: 138). This concept has its origins in Brown and Yule's work (1983), who pointed out that learners should not spend time and effort learning these two sounds as long as they are not crucial for intelligibility. Furthermore, when it comes to vowels, the use of the whole vowels rather than the schwa in words like *'to'*, *'from'* and *'do'* does not seem to be a significant barrier to intelligibility and thus should not be focused as Jenkins seems to assert. Moreover, the vowel quality, as she argues, does not seem to be a barrier to intelligibility. For instance, the near-high near-back vowel /ʊ/ and the low-mid back unrounded vowel /ʌ/ in pronouncing the word *'bus'* as [bʊs] or [bʌs] do not seem to be crucial as long as their quantity is maintained (Jenkins, 2002). Another aspect of pronunciation which should not be focused on as Jenkins' proposal suggests is assimilating certain sounds in connected speech, "so that /red peɪnt/ ('red paint') becomes /reb peɪint/" (Jenkins, 2002: 90). Finally, *'Word stress'* in which "the rules are highly complex, containing manifold exceptions and differences among L1 varieties and according to syntactic context" as well as *'intonation'* are other examples of aspects of pronunciation that learners do not have to acquire as Jenkins argues (1998: 123; 2000: 151).

Thus, ELC can be summarised as having 'core features' of pronunciation that cannot be compromised, which implies that native speakers' norms have to be the model and thus learners have to aim to acquire this. On the other hand, there are 'non-core features' that can be substituted to suit the L1 phonology of a particular linguistic context where English is taught, as Jenkins (2007: 26) argues. Hence, native speakers norms in this case seem to be unnecessary to be taught to learners.

Shortcomings of ELC:

Although Jenkins' ELC proposal seems to be useful in many contexts, it may have some challenges in the Arab context, for a number of reasons. Needless to say, these reasons come from the second part of Jenkins' proposal that she calls 'the non-core features' which may collide with the Arabic phonology, and thus can be divided into two categories; *Intelligibility* and *Appropriateness*. A further drawback related to the *Learners' Needs*, which is not necessarily linked to Arab learners, will be discussed below.

   1- *Intelligibility*:

Intelligibility is the backbone of ELC and its main goal. However, the nature of some of the 'none-core features' of ELC is likely to impede intelligibility once it is introduced to Arab learners because of a number of reasons. Firstly, in term of vowels, Jenkins' proposal seems to pay more attention to the difference between short and long vowels or, in other words, the vowel quantity. However, as Arabic speakers, Arab learners may be able to master the vowel quantity in words like '*live'* or '*leave'* but contrary to Jenkins' argument about the unnecessary mature of vowel quality, problems may occur in the short vowels regardless of their quantity. For example, the mid front vowels like /e/ or /ɛ/ exist in all varieties of English as Davenport and Hannahs (2010) maintain but they do not exist in Arabic. As a result, Arab learners tend to change the position of these vowels to a higher level and thus it is heard as [i] which is the closest representative of mid front vowels in Arabic. Consequently, words such as '*sex'* and '*pen'* would be pronounced as '*six'* and '*pin'* by Arab learners. Therefore, if ELC was to be introduced as a local variety in order to "suit the local communication needs" (Jenkins, 2007: 26) in the Arabic-speaking context, some barriers to intelligibility when Arab learners communicate with other speakers may emerge. Interestingly, Jenkins herself states that once English was based on a local norm, "there is a danger that their [English learners] accents will move further and further apart until a stage is reached where pronunciation presents a serious obstacle to lingua franca communication". (Jenkins, 2006: 35). This shows that adopting the ELC may lead to a point where speakers develop their own variety of English in order to suit their "local communication needs" (Jenkins, 2007: 26) to a variety that may not be understood by speakers from other languages. Thus, if an Arabic variety of English were to be implemented backed by ELC, English may lose its effect as a lingua franca when they are in contact with other speakers from different languages and hence, less intelligibility. Lack of intelligibility, however, is not linked to English speakers of different languages but it could also occur between speakers of the same language when they communicate in English. This was reported in Van Wijngaarden's study (2002) that looked at research about a number of Dutch speakers and found that they had difficulties in understanding each other when they communicated in English. On the other hand, when they were in communication with native speakers, intelligibility and comprehension were higher. In the case of Arab learners, a similar result may, or may not, occur when they communicate in a local variety of English based on Arabic. Therefore, further research is required to explore whether intelligibility is maintained or impeded when Arab learners communicate with each other in English.

2- *Appropriateness*:

The other challenge that appears from ELC is that although 'word stress' and 'intonation' may not be crucial for intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000: 150-51), a lack of appropriateness when Arab learners communicate in English may occur. The reason comes from the word stress and intonation of Arabic, which are different from the ones in English, when learners transfer them into English. Thomas-Ruzic and Thompson-Panos (1980, cited in Adelman and Lusting, 1981) explain that when Arabic speakers transfer the Arabic phonology into English, their sounds may appear aggressive to an English-Speaking listener because every word in Arabic is accented. Moreover, when it comes to intonation, Thomas-Ruzic and Thompson-Panos argue that the flat intonation of Arabic in declarative sentences may sound like a lack of interests, while the intonation in information-seeking questions may sound accusing. As a result, lack of appropriateness may occur if Arab learners are to adopt Jenkins' ELC and transferred their L1 intonation and word stress into English. Therefore, this may be a barrier towards relationship building when communicating with other speakers, which is the second function of learning a language as Brown and Yule (1983) argue.

3- *Learners' Needs:*

There are other major issues -not necessarily linked to Arab learners- that would appear from adopting Jenkins' ELC relating to the learners themselves and their requirement to learn English. The first issue of ELC in relation to learners' needs is the absence of a live model of the language because it is "nobody's mother tongue" as Rajagopalan (2004: 111) states. Kuo (2006: 215) states "SLA researchers seek to enable L2 learners to achieve target-like performance by means of noticing the gap and attending to linguistics signals which can be unattended to in comprehension". This 'target-like performance', however, does not exist if Jenkins' ELC were to be implemented. The second issue is linked to the learners' attitudes toward the nature of the language that they want to learn, whether it is based on a native speaker model or a local variety supported by ELC. In contradiction to Jenkins's argument (2007) that English learners have the desire to show their identity and local accent when they speak English, some empirical research was conducted by Timmis (2002) and Kuo (2007) has shown the opposite in which most of the learners (in their studies) showed a desire to acquire a native speaker model. Interestingly, Jenkins (2005) herself interviewed 8 teachers of English and asked them about their attitudes toward their own accent and identity appearing in their English. Four of them felt negatively about it, and three were positive. On the other hand, when they were asked about their attitude toward native speakers norms, the majority of the participants, including those who were positive about their identity appearing during communication showed a desire to acquire a native speaker model. Therefore, the claim that learners show a desire to maintain their identity when they communicate in English is over-generalised and thus each learner's attitude may be different from another. On the other hand, if the learners were taught in a variety of English that they did not want to learn, they would have what Lippi-Green (1997) called "the listener attitude" in which Smith and Nelson (1985, cited in Pickering, 2006: 225) maintain that "a listener who expects to understand a speaker will be more likely to find that speaker comprehensible than one who does not". What supports this concept is the study conducted by Lindemann (2002) who studied a number of North American English speakers toward Korean speakers of English. The findings showed that those who had had a negative attitude towards Koreans did not manage to understand their speech. As a result:

"this suggests that listeners may react negatively to certain accents (and thus claim to find them unintelligible) even when we would expect that the features of those accents themselves do not directly impede intelligibility" (Lindemann, cited in Pickering, 2006: 226).

Therefore, further research about Arab learners to explore their attitude to both a local variety of English based on Arabic and backed by ELC, or a variety of a native speaker of English is required.

Conclusion:

This paper has highlighted a number of issues related to teaching English pronunciation to Arab learners. It focuses on the long-debated concept of the native speaker model to be used by English learners and how this concept has been challenged, resulting in the emergence of ELC as an alternative model. On the other hand, despite its advantages, ELC may be challenged if it were to be introduced to Arab learners. Thus, because *intelligibility* is the backbone of ELC, further research about Arab learners is required to investigate whether intelligibility will be maintained or impeded once ELC is introduced to Arab learners. If it is maintained, *appropriateness* is the other area that has to be achieved too, which may create another challenge to introducing ELC to Arab learners. Needless to say, Arab *learners' needs* in terms of which variety of English they want to learn is essential for their learning process too. Two implications can be drawn from this paper. First, despite the ongoing debates about whether the native speakers model should be the target that learners should aim to achieve, or ELC as an alternative to this model, this decision should be made by the learners themselves rather than being imposed on them by teachers or educators. Learners' needs should be high priority and this can be achieved by discussing this issue with the learners. Secondly, English teachers have to be aware of essentialising the concept of 'native speakers', as there are different varieties of English spoken by native speakers. Thus, a clearer definition of who a native speaker is, and what variety of English should be taught is another issue that has to be discussed with the learners. Hence, this paper provides fruitful grounds for researchers interested in the field who are willing to conduct further studies about Arab learners of English especially in the field of teaching pronunciation.

About the author:

Muneer Alqahtani is a PhD student at the School of Education, Durham University. He studied his MA in TESOL at Durham University in 2010 and that was the starting point for his research interests. He is interested in researching issues related to intercultural communication, and English phonetics and phonology

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