Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation

A proper understanding of intelligibility is at the heart of effective pronunciation teaching, and with it, successful teaching of speaking and listening. Far from being an optional, “add it on if we have time” language feature, pronunciation is essential because of its tremendous impact on speech intelligibility. Pronunciation dramatically affects the ability of language learners to make themselves understood and to understand the speech of others. But not all elements of pronunciation are equally important. Some affect intelligibility a great deal, while others do not. With a strong emphasis on classroom practice and how pronunciation teaching can be more effectively approached in different teaching contexts, this book provides an important resource for pronunciation researchers, with a distinctly practical focus. It shows how intelligibility research informs pronunciation teaching within communicative classrooms, enabling language teachers to incorporate intelligibility findings into their teaching. Professionals interested in oral communication, pronunciation, and speech perception will find this book fascinating.

Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation

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Speakers of different languages regularly connect with each other through oral communication using a lingua franca, either face-to-face or remotely through the Internet. Using a spoken lingua franca for conducting business, gaining an education, or engaging in social interaction has become commonplace, elevating the role of oral language to a position of unprecedented importance in the fabric of life. Accordingly, the teaching of spoken communication skills requires serious reconsideration by a profession that was once satisfied with the idea that students would pick up these skills on their own if they were provided with enough opportunity to hear the language. John M. Levis engages with this reconsideration by placing intelligibility at the center of the matter and by carefully considering what should be taught to help students make their speech intelligible. What, on the surface, may seem to be a straightforward issue is appropriately problematized by Levis, who identifies the issues that impinge on achieving a simple solution. For example, how can norms of intelligibility legitimately be identified in a world in which many different native varieties of a language thrive? How should researchers and educators take into account the fact that much of the oral communication in the world today takes place between nonnative speakers? How can language teachers plan to teach what their students need to develop intelligible speech without overwhelming them with all of the detail of the sound system of the language? Levis argues that the complexity of such issues necessitates an intelligibility-based approach to oral communication. This book outlines this argument based on a thorough treatment of the detail of pronunciation for the contexts in which speakers need to be intelligible. *Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation* addresses crucial questions for teachers of English today and is a most welcome addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.
Author’s Preface

Since finishing my dissertation, no other project besides this book has given me an equivalent level of enjoyment and procrastination. I think it has also taken nearly as long. A book like this could not come about without the inspiration and help of many people. My interest in pronunciation teaching and research came first from Wayne Dickerson, who taught me in my first semester of graduate school, mentored me in teaching pronunciation, and later directed my dissertation. If one person can be said to change the trajectory of a professional life, it was Wayne who changed mine. A second influence was Braj Kachru, whose evangelistic fervor for World Englishes has influenced the way I view English-language teaching. When I was in his class, I was too inexperienced and naïve to understand the implications of what he said. But the seeds he planted finally took root, and it is impossible for me to see English, and its pronunciation, without seeing its ubiquitous contexts of use. Another influence has been Jennifer Jenkins, whose work on pronunciation in lingua franca contexts has continually challenged and inspired my thinking. I still regularly go back to her book, *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000), as I grapple with issues related to intelligibility. In this book, I often critique Jenkins and the reasoning underlying her influential Lingua Franca Core (LFC), but my critiques are those of a true fan. I simply cannot think of pronunciation apart from Jenkins and her work. Although Jenny has not done much in the past decade with pronunciation issues related to English as a lingua franca, her work on pronunciation remains required reading for anyone who is interested in intelligibility.

More recent influences on my thinking, who have been even more central to what I have written in this book, are Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro. Their work on intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness rightly dominates research on L2 pronunciation, and provides a way for me to try to explain how pronunciation impacts the understanding of speech. Although I am not equivalent to them as
a researcher, their support, friendship, and willingness to help have much to do with any success I have had. They encouraged and supported my development of the Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching conference, the Journal of Second Language Pronunciation, and a hundred smaller undertakings. Needless to say, my mistakes in this book should not be laid at their feet; they simply demonstrate that I remain an imperfect student.

In addition to these, there are too many people to name who have encouraged me to finish this book, and from whom I have learned so much, but the following must be mentioned: Judy Gilbert (who praised my first TESOL presentation in 1992 and took me out for coffee to talk afterwards), Ron Thomson, Jennifer Foote, Pavel Trofimovich, Dorothy Chun, Anne Wichmann, Sinem Sonsaat, Alif Silpa-chai, Kimberly LeVelle, Carol Chapelle, Alene Moyer, Marnie Reed, Shannon McCrocklin, Monica Richards, Ghinwa Alameen, Manman Qian, Edna Lima, Mary O’Brien, and Beth Zielinski.

I am also deeply grateful to my in-laws, Burt and Jackie Muller, who have been endlessly interested in my career and the things that I have to talk about. If I am half as interested in others as they have been, I will find that my life was well worth living. And finally, I would not be in the career I am without my wife, Greta. She encouraged me to leave my first career as a supermarket manager, then helped me see ESL (English as a second language) as a possible path, then joined me on that path. I now have a partner who is interested in many of the same things I am, and with whom I can talk shop. And because she is usually more perceptive than I am, this book shows the marks of her influence throughout.
Abbreviations

AOA    age of arrival
AWL    Academic Word List
BE     British English
CEFR   Common European Framework of Reference
CLT    communicative language teaching
CV     consonant/vowel
DSL    Dutch as a second language
EIL    English as an international language
EKB    Early Korean English bilingual
ELF    English as a lingua franca
ESL    English as a second language
ESOL   English for speakers of other languages
FL     functional load
FTA    foreign teaching assistant
GA     General American
HP     high proficiency
IP     intermediate proficiency
ITA    international teaching assistant
LFC    Lingua Franca Core
LKB    late Korean English bilingual
LOR    length of residence
NNS    nonnative speaker
NS     native speaker
NTA    native teaching assistant
RA     research assistant
RP     received pronunciation
SE     Singapore English
TA     teaching assistant
TESOL  teaching English to speakers of other languages
TL     target language
TOEFL  test of English as a foreign language
VOT    voice onset time
VP     verb phrase