Abstract

Osimk, Ruth. 2007. Aspiration, [θ]/[ð] and /r/ in ELF – a psycholinguistic pilot study on three aspects of Lingua Franca Core (LFC). MA thesis, University of Vienna.¹

This first part of this thesis discusses psycholinguistic and some acoustic-phonetic literature carried out on factors influencing intelligibility, especially regarding non-native speakers of English. Relating the findings of these studies to English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication, four basic assumptions were found to be problematic. These concern NS approximation as primary goal in pronunciation teaching, the NS as the most suitable judge of which factors influence the intelligibility of NNS as well as the a-priori assumptions that accentedness equals poor intelligibility and that NNS-communication is per se less successful than communication between native speakers. The pilot study in the second part of the thesis examines the importance of the pronunciation of three phonological features (aspiration, and variations of /r/ and [θ]/[ð]) for intelligibility in NNS-NNS communication. The aim was to approach these aspects which Jenkins (2000) included in the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) from a psycholinguistic point of view, using the dictation method and to relate the results to Jenkins' findings. Four groups of NNS (with L1s German, French, Italian, Spanish) listened to words (isolated and in syntactic co-text) which included the three features. The results for pronunciation variations of [θ]/[ð] agreed with Jenkins’ findings (it only hinders intelligibility if pronounced [s]/[z]). Regarding different realisations of /r/, the results diverged from Jenkins’ assumption that rhotic pronunciations aids intelligibility more than non-rhotic. All listener groups recognised the words which contained a non-rhotic realisation of /r/ more often than those which contained a rhotic pronunciation of /r/. Additionally, all groups apart from the French listeners found words pronounced with uvular /r/ more difficult to recognise than the other variations.

Additionally, even though both item- and listener related factors influenced the intelligibility scores, item-related factors seemed to contribute to it more consistently. The results of the pilot study suggest that familiarity with particular substitutions of the foreign languages sometimes, but not consistently, eases intelligibility. Syntactic co-text was clearly advantageous for intelligibility. All listener groups scored significantly higher and gave different responses when listening to words presented in syntactic co-text than in isolation. Apart from the problems associated with the realisations of [θ]/[ð] as [s]/[z] and uvular /r/, all other variations, standard and non-standard, were well understood. These results contribute to research on which factors influence intelligibility in ELF-interactions and can be applied to pronunciation teaching.

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