

Teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students in the era of English as an international language: Models, goals, and intelligibility revisited

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues of pronunciation models, goals, and intelligibility in teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students in the era of English as an international language, and makes some pedagogical suggestions as to what pronunciation skills are necessary for international communication. First, I justify the use of some “standard” varieties of English pronunciation as the appropriate models for Japanese students despite some recent arguments against it. Then, I suggest that the intelligibility goal rather than the nativeness goal should be promoted in pronunciation instruction. By situating Japanese English users in the context of English as an international language, I suggest that pronunciation intelligibility required for Japanese students should take into account their future interactions not only with native speakers but also nonnative speakers of English. By reviewing some literature on intelligibility in nonnative-nonnative interactions as well as in native-nonnative interactions, I propose a tentative list of pronunciation priorities for Japanese learners of English necessary for international intelligibility. Furthermore, I recommend that students be exposed to diverse English accents in order to develop their receptive competence to understand them. Lastly, I stress the importance of developing students’ skills to adjust their pronunciation to their interlocutors in actual communicative situations.

Keywords: English as an international language, World Englishes, pronunciation models, goals, intelligibility

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the issues of pronunciation models, goals, and intelligibility in teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students in

the era of English as an international language (EIL), and to make some pedagogical suggestions as to what pronunciation skills are necessary for Japanese speakers of English in international communication. Recently, English has been increasingly used as a means of communication outside English-speaking countries not only between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English¹ but also between nonnative speakers of English in the world. This situation is often referred to as English as a lingua franca (ELF) and influencing Japanese learners/users of English (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2020). This changing role of English in Japan is reflected in the increasing number of assistant language teachers (ALTs) from diverse linguistic backgrounds in Japanese schools (The Japan Exchange & Teaching Programme, 2020), foreign visitors to Japan communicating with Japanese people in English, and Japanese businessmen interacting with other nonnative English speakers in business negotiations. In light of this changing role of English in Japan, it is high time to reexamine how English pronunciation should be instructed in the Japanese English classroom.

2. The changing role of English and World Englishes

One of the most influential models for understanding the changing role of English in the world is the one proposed by Kachru (1985). His three-circle model of World Englishes categorizes English users in the world into three groups depending on how English functions in the respective regions: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle comprises traditional English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where English is the native language of the majority of the population. The Outer Circle consists of those countries where English is used as a lingua franca among speakers of different languages within their own countries or regions. The Outer Circle countries include such countries as India, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Nigeria, all with a colonial history. The Expanding Circle consists of many countries in the world, including Japan, where traditionally English is studied as a foreign language in the classroom, and is not normally used as a means of communication in people's daily life. The last situation is traditionally referred to English as a

foreign language (EFL). Although Kachru's model itself has received some criticisms (e.g., Schneider, 2007), it provides us with a general framework for looking at different varieties of English in the world often termed World Englishes. Now with the spread of English in various international scenes, such as in international business, science, and the Internet, English is increasingly serving as a lingua franca among people from all the three Circles.

From the point of English pronunciation, the picture is further complicated. First, within each "national variety" in the Inner Circle, there are many regional and social varieties of accents. For example, England has varieties of accents such as BBC pronunciation or Received Pronunciation (RP)², Cockney, Midlands, Northern, and West Country Accents (Wells, 1982). Secondly, within each variety in the Outer Circle such as Indian English, there are many variations (Sailaja, 2009). Lastly, in the Expanding Circle, variations in English pronunciation are numerous among speakers depending not only on their native languages but also other factors such as their proficiency levels, models adopted, goals aimed at, instruction received, available resources, overseas experience and the national language policy. These variations in English pronunciation become of paramount importance in discussing models, goals, and intelligibility for pronunciation instruction for Japanese students in the subsequent sections.

3. Pronunciation models for Japanese EFL students

Each language has its own sound system with its phonemes, allophones, syllable structure, and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Whenever students study a foreign language, they need a model to imitate in order to learn its pronunciation. A model or models can serve as reference points for the target language pronunciation. As discussed in the previous section, English has many varieties of accents. Which English accent or accents are appropriate as pronunciation models for Japanese EFL students?

Regarding the choice of a pronunciation model, Walker (2010, pp. 19-22) presents an interesting argument from the viewpoint of ELF, especially in reference to Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core (LFC), a set of English pronunciation

features supposedly crucial for intelligibility in nonnative-nonnative interactions (see Section 4.2 for a critical review of the LFC). I will review Walker's argument below to consider an appropriate pronunciation model for Japanese students.

Walker maintains that the ideal model for English pronunciation in the ELF context must fulfill the following three conditions: (1) Mutual intelligibility: The model must be intelligible to listeners regardless of the speakers' L1 backgrounds; (2) Identity: The learners "should be able to retain their identities through their accents" (p. 20) if they want to; (3) Teachability: The pronunciation syllabus contents should be teachable. The author examines the following three approaches to teaching English pronunciation in terms of the three conditions: Approach 1 – "Use a standard native-speaker accent" as a model.; Approach 2 – "Use a single world standard for pronunciation" as a model.; Approach 3 – An ELF approach based on the LFC.

Walker explains that all the three approaches fulfil the first condition of mutual intelligibility. As for the first approach, he claims that learners cannot fulfill the condition of identity through a single standard accent such as General American (GA) and BBC pronunciation. "Even if they were to achieve full competence in a particular native-speaker accent, this would be at the expense of their right to express their identity through their accent" (p. 20). Furthermore, the author states that some areas of the native speaker model, such as intonation, stress, rhythm, are not readily teachable. This is the approach which Japanese EFL learners and teachers usually adopt. I will present my counterarguments against Walker's at the end of this section.

Walker discusses the second approach based on Crystal's (2003) proposal of World Standard Spoken English (WSSE). According to this approach, the speakers have a choice between their own accent to "express their own national identity" and another world standard variety which can "guarantee international intelligibility" depending on the context of communication (p. 188). This approach seems to fulfill the conditions of both intelligibility and identity. However, Walker comments by referring to Crystal's statement that American English seems "the most influential in the development of WSSE" (p. 21) and that this native-speaker base goes against

the second identity condition. Furthermore, “since WSSE has not yet been described, it fails to satisfy the teachability criterion” (p. 21). I would like to point out that the second approach is applicable mainly to speakers in the Outer Circle countries such as India where English is traditionally used mainly for intranational purposes. For this reason, this approach seems inappropriate for the Japanese EFL context.

Walker argues that the third approach of using the LFC fulfills all the three conditions of intelligibility, identity, and teachability, and therefore recommends it as the ideal approach. The speakers who master the LFC features are claimed to be intelligible in nonnative-nonnative interaction. According to the author, the LFC features also leave “a lot of space for speakers to retain their local accents and hence express their individual identities” (p. 21). Furthermore, he suggests that high levels of pronunciation competence in most of the LFC features can be achieved through classroom instruction.

I will examine if the third approach of using the LFC is appropriate for the Japanese EFL context here. First, the LFC features still need to be corroborated further by looking at different L1 combinations, especially between Japanese speakers and other language speakers (see Section 4.2 for more details). Secondly, the LFC excludes the intelligibility issue in native-nonnative interaction (Dauer, 2005). Japanese learners of English are expected to communicate not only with nonnative speakers of English from the Outer and Expanding Circles but also with native speakers of English from the Inner Circle. Therefore, focusing only on the LFC features will not be sufficient to guarantee intelligibility in their future English communication. Most importantly, students still need an English pronunciation model to listen to in the EFL context even if some pronunciation features are more important than others for mutual intelligibility. For these reasons, the LFC approach is not appropriate for the Japanese EFL context.

In the following section I will argue that Approach 1 is actually more suitable for Japanese students despite Walker’s argument against it. Choosing some “standard”³ native varieties of English widely understood throughout the world such as GA and BBC pronunciation as models in the Japanese EFL context can be justified for the following reasons. First, if Japanese students acquire reasonable approximations of

the core features of such models, their pronunciation would be intelligible throughout the world regardless of whether they are communicating with people from the Inner, Outer, or Expanding Circles. Japanese-accented English is natural and perfectly acceptable in international communication as long as it is intelligible. Moreover, it should be noted that L1-influenced accents in English in the Expanding Circle do not function in the same way as English accents in the Outer Circle, which may serve as an expression of ethnic, cultural, or national identity. In other words, the identity condition seems to be overplayed in Walker's argument when it is applied to the EFL settings.

Another justification for using some “standard” native English varieties is the availability of pronunciation materials and resources. These varieties have been fully described and can serve as good reference points for Japanese students. Furthermore, many of the pronunciation resources available in Japan are either in GA or BBC pronunciation with the former predominantly used in elementary, junior and senior high school materials. For example, most dictionaries list both GA and BBC pronunciation transcriptions of lexical items, and many electronic and online dictionaries allow students to listen to both GA and BBC pronunciation of words. English textbooks approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) still use GA-type pronunciation predominantly for audio recordings.

According to the MEXT New Course of Study, Japanese English teachers are advised to use English as a means of instruction in principle. From the point of pronunciation acquisition, since Japanese English teachers become an important source for students' pronunciation models in terms of the amount of their English exposure, it is desirable for teachers to have acquired reasonable approximations of the core sound features of the “standard” varieties of English. This does not mean that teachers should sound native-like, but their pronunciation should be clearly intelligible and communicative (see Section 5.2 for a discussion on pronunciation priorities for Japanese students).

4. Pronunciation intelligibility

4.1 Intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness

In Japan, there has been an increasing focus on the development of English communication skills as the goal for English education in the recent decades. Since the MEXT issued “Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication” in 2011, the development of oral communication skills as a means of international or global communication has been one of the important objectives for English education in Japan. This is also reflected in the MEXT New Course of Study for the subject of English promulgated in 2017 and 2018.

With this current situation in mind, it can be said that the purpose of pronunciation instruction in the Japanese EFL context is to facilitate Japanese English speakers’ communication not only with traditional native speakers of English in the Inner Circle but also with people from the Outer and Expanding Circles. In that case, what kinds of pronunciation skills are necessary for Japanese speakers to carry out such interactions effectively? Before we can answer this question, it is important to distinguish three related but separate concepts of pronunciation: intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness (Derwing and Munro 2015).

According to the researchers, intelligibility refers to the extent to which the listener actually understands the speaker’s uttered words and phrases (For a review of different definitions of intelligibility, see Thomson, 2018). Comprehensibility refers to the listener’s perceived overall difficulty and ease with the speaker’s utterance. It follows that intelligibility can be subsumed under comprehensibility. Finally, accentedness refers to the degree to which the speaker’s accent differs from the target language pronunciation. Derwing and Munro (2015) report some research findings showing that unintelligible and incomprehensible utterances are always heavily accented, but not always vice versa. That is, some heavily accented speech can be intelligible and comprehensible. According to Levis (2018), differences in pronunciation “are more likely to cause a loss of intelligibility if they are beyond the range of expected variation” (p. 13). He also implies that this is also true in native-native interactions when the two varieties of their L1 English accents vary

considerably.

In the Japanese EFL context, then, the main purpose of pronunciation instruction should be first and foremost to help students become more intelligible and comprehensible in their English use in various communicative situations, not to erase or reduce their Japanese accent. Since Japanese speakers are expected to have increasingly more chances to use English to communicate with people from the Outer and Expanding Circles, the issue of intelligibility for Japanese speakers should be reconsidered from this viewpoint. Levis's (2005) World Englishes Speaker-Listener Intelligibility Matrix (Figure 1) provides a useful framework for this purpose. Since Japanese speakers of English belong to the Expanding Circle, all the five darkened squares with EC in the matrix figure are relevant. These five

Figure1

World Englishes Speaker-Listener Intelligibility Matrix (Adapted from Levis, 2005: p. 373)

		LISTENER		
		Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle
SPEAKER	Inner Circle	IC-IC (NS-NS)	1. IC-OC	IC-EC (NS-NNS)
	Outer Circle	2. OC-IC	3. OC-OC	4. OC-EC
	Expanding Circle	EC-IC (NNS-NS)	5. EC-OC	EC-EC (NNS-NNS)

squares actually indicate three kinds of communication pairs for the Japanese in terms of the three Circles: (1) Japanese speakers interacting with people from the Inner Circle countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, (2) Japanese speakers interacting with people from the Outer Circle countries such as India and Singapore, and (3) Japanese speakers interacting with people from the Expanding Circle countries such as Korea and China. In all the three situations, the Japanese speaker needs to act both as speaker and as listener. These three

communicative situations which Japanese speakers of English would face provide us with the necessary contexts in which the intelligibility of the Japanese speakers' pronunciation is considered.

4.2 Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core and its implications for Japanese learners of English

Traditionally, intelligibility in English pronunciation has been discussed from the viewpoint of native speakers norms, that is, in terms of how well native English speakers can comprehend nonnative English speakers' utterances. Several researchers proposed the core features of English pronunciation which are essential for intelligibility in English pronunciation (e.g., Gilbert, 2006, as cited in Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Zielinski, 2008). Jenkins (2000) cogently argued for a need to rethink intelligibility in communication between nonnative English speakers in the era of English as a lingua franca. Based on spoken data collected from interactions between nonnative speakers of English, Jenkins reported that the most important source for communication breakdowns in her data was pronunciation problems. Then, she proposed a limited set of English pronunciation features called the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), supposedly essential for international intelligibility in the ELF context. In the following section, I will examine each of the five types of LFC features (Jenkins, 2000, p. 159) in an attempt to see what possible pedagogical implications the LFC has for Japanese learners of English.

4.2.1 LFC 1: Consonants

According to the LFC, all the English consonants and contrasts except for /θ/ and /ð/ must be acquired. This means all the English consonants and contrasts problematic for Japanese students, except for /θ/ and /ð/, must still be mastered for international intelligibility. Furthermore, the LFC suggests the use of [t] for international intelligibility rather than the flap variant [ɾ] for intervocalic /t/ frequently used by North Americans. This suggestion might lessen the Japanese learners' burden of acquiring this allophonic variation. Lastly, the LFC allows most substitutions for the dark [ɪ] used for /ɪ/ in preconsontal and final positions (e.g.,

help, tell). This suggestion is probably derived from the fact that many speakers who use the clear /l/ instead of the dark /l/ due to their L1 influence are perfectly intelligible to other English speakers. However, this L1 sound substitution does not apply to Japanese speakers, whose typical L1 substitution is a type of flap plus a vowel. Therefore, Japanese students are still encouraged to acquire a lateral in this position, regardless of whether it is velarized or not.

4.2.2 LFC 2: Allophonic features

What Jenkins terms “phonetic requirements” in the LFC refers to those allophonic features in English she found important for international intelligibility. The LFC includes aspiration after the voiceless stops in stressed syllable-initial position (e.g., *pay, take, cut*) among the core features. Her inclusion of this feature in the LFC is presumably based on the English spoken by those speakers who use unaspirated voiceless stops for the English voiceless stops, which are likely to be perceived as the voiced counterparts /b, d, g/ in English by native speakers of English. This does not seem to apply to Japanese learners of English. The voice onset time for the voiceless stops in prevocalic position in Japanese is not as long as that for the English counterparts (Harada 2007, as cited in Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Shimizu, 1996), but their voiceless stops are still perceived as voiceless (Munro, Derwing and Saito, 2013; as cited in Derwing and Munro, 2015). For this reason, this is not a priority feature for Japanese learners of English.

Another core allophonic feature included in the LFC is the differential effect of voiceless and voiced consonants on the length of the preceding vowels. That is, vowels become shorter before voiceless consonants than before voiced consonants, a phenomenon called pre-fortis clipping (Carley and Mees, 2020). For example, the vowel in *height* /haɪt/ is shorter than that in *hide* /haɪd/. Native speakers of English use vowel length in recognizing if the final consonant is voiceless or voiced (Carley and Mees, 2020). It is interesting to note that this native English allophonic feature is also reported to be an important feature for mutual intelligibility in communication between nonnative English speakers. Since Japanese learners of English are not normally aware of this allophonic feature, it should be brought to their attention as

a possible target feature for international intelligibility through instruction. The problem is whether this allophonic feature is readily teachable since it is not indicated by phonetic symbols in dictionaries, and Japanese English teachers themselves are not usually aware of this allophonic variation and may not use pre-fortis clipping in their own English pronunciation.

4.2.3 LFC 3: Consonant clusters

According to the LFC, initial consonant clusters should not be simplified for international intelligibility, but medial and final clusters can be simplified only in accordance with L1 rules of consonant cluster reduction. In other words, L2 students must follow the native speaker norms in this aspect of the target phonology even in the ELF context for intelligibility. Since Japanese lacks consonant clusters altogether phonologically, except for the clusters of consonants followed by the glide /j/, Japanese learners of English modify the target consonant clusters by inserting a vowel between consonants in a cluster: e.g., *drive* → [doraibu]; *stress* → [sutoresu]. Jenkins explains that epenthesis is a less serious deviation affecting intelligibility than consonant deletion in that consonants are recoverable in epenthesis. However, epenthesis would probably affect comfortable intelligibility, especially when it is combined with other errors such as stress placed on an epenthetic vowel (e.g., *dress* → [dóresu]). Therefore, this issue of vocalic addition should be treated as a priority for Japanese students.

4.2.4 LFC 4: Vowels

According to the LFC, as long as vowel length contrasts are kept, learners can use “their preferred vowel qualities” (p. 145). As part of her justification for this LFC suggestion, Jenkins refers to some observation that vowel quantity is reasonably stable across L1 varieties of English, whereas vowel quality is not. This justification should be interpreted with due caution. In such English varieties as GA and BBC pronunciation, the importance of quantity over quality in vowel distinctions is not clear-cut since the traditional long and short vowels such as /i:/ and /ɪ/, and /u:/ and /ʊ/ differ not only in duration but also in quality, and some traditional “short vowels”

or checked vowels such as /æ/ (e.g., *bad*) and /ɑ/ (e.g., *hot*) are relatively long in GA (Carley and Mees, 2020), and additionally, the vowel length greatly varies depending on the phonetic environment as observed in pre-fortis clipping.

If we apply this LFC proposal regarding English vowels to the Japanese learners' acquisition of English vowels, Japanese speakers of English do not need to distinguish the following vowel contrasts /i:/ vs. /ɪ/, /u:/ vs. /ʊ/, and /eɪ/ vs. /e/ in terms of quality, but only in terms of length. Jenkins makes an exception in the LFC and includes the vowel /ɜ:/ in BBC pronunciation or /ɜː/ in GA (e.g., *bird*) as an important vowel. In her data, there was a case in which the open /ɑ:/ was substituted by a Japanese speaker, which caused a communication breakdown. The difference between /ɑ:/ and /ɜ:/ lies in quality, not in length.

According to the LFC, apart from this, Japanese learners could use “their preferred vowel qualities” (p. 145), most likely, one of the five Japanese vowels. Seemingly, this might alleviate Japanese students' burden of learning many vowel phonemes in English. However, this would actually cause students to pronounce contrastive vowel units differing from each other only in quality in English as the same sounds. For example, /æ/-/ʌ/ (e.g., *lack* vs. *luck*); /ɔ:/-/oo/ (e.g., *bought* vs. *boat*) would not be distinguished by Japanese learners. The former contrast is included among the contrasts with high functional load and was suggested as a priority contrast to teach (Brown, 1991; Catford, 1987; as cited in Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Lack of these contrasts on the part of Japanese speakers may still cause a problem with their comfortable intelligibility even in the ELF context.

4.2.5 LFC 5: Non-segmental features

The two non-segmental features listed among the LFC priorities are (a) grouping words into thought groups (e.g., *To pass the exam, / I studied the textbook, / but the questions were not from the textbook.*) and (b) placing tonic stress, the most prominent stress in a thought group to highlight important information. In the example sentence above, tonic stress normally falls on the last content word in the first and second thought groups (*exam, textbook*) but in the third thought group, the word “*not*” is likely to receive tonic stress for contrastive meaning. According to

Jenkins, misplaced tonic stress, especially contrastive stress led to miscommunication (p.153). It should be noted that these two non-segmental features have been also reported to be important in native and non-native interactions (see Section 5.2) .

4.3 Some general criticisms raised about the LFC

Jenkins's LFC provided a new paradigm to reconsider the intelligibility of the pronunciation of students of English in the era of English as an international language. However, it has also received some criticisms and given rise to controversy among L2 pronunciation researchers since it was published in 2000. First, as Dauer (2005) pointed out, the data collected by Jenkins on which the LFC is based were limited in terms of combinations of different L1 speakers of English. She noted that many of the pronunciation errors were derived from the learners' L1 transfer or influence. Therefore, the priority features in the LFC may not work for all the possible combinations since the intelligibility issue is a two-way process involving both the speaker and the listener (see my discussion on aspiration in Section 4.2.2).

Secondly, the data were collected from high intermediate and low advanced students. Therefore, it is quite possible that the participants might have already acquired some important and more easily learnable pronunciation features such as lexical stress, the lack of which could have resulted in communication breakdowns (Sekiya 2015).

Dauer further criticized the LFC for not giving enough attention to suprasegmental features including lexical stress. Most importantly, the author raises the question of why the LFC excluded native-nonnative interaction since native-nonnative interaction is also common in international settings. This last point is important for Japanese users of English, who also communicate with native speakers of English.

Despite these criticisms, the LFC has made significant contributions to the understanding of intelligibility in pronunciation in pointing out a need to study intelligibility in nonnative-nonnative interactions although specific features proposed in the LFC need to be examined and corroborated in further research.

5. Pronunciation goals and priorities of instruction for Japanese students

5.1 The nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle

Foremost, it is imperative to make a clear distinction between models and goals for pronunciation instruction (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). As mentioned earlier, a model for pronunciation refers to the reference points of pronunciation which learners can use to acquire a new sound system in their target L2. In the previous section, I justified using some “standard” native English accents widely understood throughout the world such as GA and BBC pronunciation as the pronunciation models for Japanese EFL students. On the other hand, goals for pronunciation learning and teaching refer to what learners should aim for in their pronunciation learning and what teachers should aim for in their pronunciation instruction.

What goal should the pronunciation instruction of Japanese students aim for? To consider the issue of pronunciation goals Levis’s (2005) distinction between two types of orientation to pronunciation learning and instruction should be of use (Derwing and Munro, 2015): (a) the Nativeness Principle and (b) the Intelligibility Principle. According to the Nativeness Principle, the goal of pronunciation instruction is for students to approximate the target pronunciation system as closely as possible so that they can sound natelike in their L2. On the other hand, the primary goal of pronunciation instruction based on the Intelligibility Principle is for learners to acquire intelligible pronunciation so that students can communicate in the L2 effectively. As suggested previously, one of the goals for English education in Japan is to help students to be able to use English communicatively in international settings. Therefore, in the Japanese EFL context, the Intelligibility Principle should be adopted and promoted: the primary goal for pronunciation instruction should be for students to be intelligible in their L2 English.

5.2 Pronunciation priorities for Japanese students

As previously suggested, since Japanese learners of English are expected to communicate not only with native English speakers but also with English speakers from the Outer and Expanding Circles in the era of English as an international language, the priority pronunciation features for Japanese students for international

intelligibility need to take these probable future contexts of communication into consideration. I will propose a tentative list of priority pronunciation features for Japanese students of English below by incorporating some of the priority features suggested by Jenkin's LFC for intelligibility in nonnative-nonnative interactions (see Section 4.2) as well as some priority features suggested by researchers on intelligibility in native-nonnative interactions.

- (1) Thought grouping: Grouping words in an utterance into meaningful units is mentioned as a priority in both nonnative-native interaction (e.g., Gilbert, 2001, as cited in Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2014; Murphy, 2013, 2017) and in the LFC (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010) (see Section 4.2 for examples). Therefore, this should be considered high on the priority list for Japanese learners of English.
- (2) The number of syllables: This feature is listed among the priority features suggested by Gilbert (2001; as cited in Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010). Furthermore, Jenkins's LFC priority of consonant clusters is related to English syllable structure. As noted in Section 4.2, Japanese students have difficulty with consonant clusters and closed syllables and have a tendency to insert a vowel in a cluster or add a vowel to final consonants. These syllable-related errors may result in loss of comfortable intelligibility. Therefore, this issue should be addressed in pronunciation instruction for Japanese students.
- (3) Lexical stress: Lexical stress is suggested as an important factor influencing intelligibility by pronunciation researchers on native-nonnative interactions (e.g., Dauer 2005, Zielinski, 2008; Levis, 2018). Therefore, lexical stress should be included among the priorities for Japanese students although this feature is not listed as a priority in the LFC (see Section 4.3 for a discussion on why it is still premature to exclude this feature from the priorities in the LFC).
- (4) Accurate production of stressed syllables in content words: Content words carry a high information load in one utterance. Therefore, the intelligibility of such words is considered to be crucial for the listener to comprehend the utterance. Zielinski (2008) explains that native speakers of English depend on both the lexical stress patterns and the sounds in the stressed syllables for

comprehending the words.

- (5) Tonic stress: Tonic stress or prominence refers to the most prominent stress in a thought group to highlight important information. This feature is mentioned as a priority in the native-nonnative interaction (Gilbert 2001, 2006 as cited in Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2014; Murphy, 2013, 2017) as well as in Jenkins's LFC (see Section 4.2 for an example). Therefore, it should be considered high on the priority list.
- (6) Many of the English consonants, contrasts, or consonant-vowel combinations problematic for Japanese students, except for /θ/ and /ð/, should be included among segmental priorities: /f/, /v/, /r/, /l/, /s/ and /z/ before a high front vowel. Besides /θ/ and /ð/, the /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ distinction, the combination of /jɪ/ or /ji:/ would be considered unimportant for intelligibility because of the low functional load and low frequency (see Catford, 1987; as cited in Celce-Murcia et al., 2010 for the criteria of frequency of occurrence and relative functional load). Otherwise, they can safely use the Japanese counterparts of the English consonants without causing any intelligibility problem.
- (7) The following English vowel contrasts difficult for Japanese students should be included among the priorities based on functional load: /æ/-/ʌ/, /ʌ/-/ɑ/, /oʊ/-/ɔ:/, /ɑ:r/-/ɜ:r/ (/ɑ:/-/ɜ:/).

These suggestions are only tentative. More research is needed to corroborate these suggested priority features by analyzing data in specific communicative situations between Japanese English speakers and English speakers from the three Circles.

Japanese EFL teachers are advised to keep the suggested priorities in mind in pronunciation instruction. Furthermore, since Japanese English teachers' spoken English becomes an important source of English pronunciation for their students to listen to, it is desirable for the teachers to acquire reasonable approximations of these features.

6. Japanese students' attitudes toward English pronunciation:

A questionnaire survey

In light of the above discussion on models, goals, and priorities for pronunciation

instruction, Sekiya (2015) conducted a questionnaire survey to find out how Japanese students themselves feel about English pronunciation. I will introduce the summary of the findings in this section.

The survey data were collected from 519 Japanese university students taking English as their major foreign language in the faculty of foreign languages at a private Japanese university. The two main objectives of this survey were to find out what pronunciation models the students chose, and what their pronunciation goals were. The survey also included some items to find out their experience with and attitudes toward English pronunciation. The following are specific survey question items and the respondents' answers with percentages.

- (1) Do you think pronunciation is important in speaking English (conversations, speeches, presentations, etc.)? (N=519)
 - a. Very important: 44 %
 - b. Important: 33%
 - c. Somewhat important: 22%
 - d. Not very important: 1%
 - e. Unimportant: 0%
- (2) What English pronunciation model or models have you used? (N=519)
(Note that respondents were allowed to check more than one item for this question. See the third item c.)
 - a. Standard North American English in the US and Canada (only): 59%
 - b. Standard British English (only): 7.5%
 - c. Those who checked both Standard North American English and British English: 14.8%
 - d. Other native English varieties: 3%
 - e. Japanese speakers' English: 3%
 - f. No particular pronunciation model: 12.7%
- (3) What goal have you been aiming for in your pronunciation learning? (N=519)
 - a. Approximation of standard North American English: 81%
 - b. Approximation of standard British English: 12%
 - c. Approximation of other varieties of English: 0%

- d. Japanese English is fine as long as it is intelligible: 6%
 - e. Other: 1%
- (4) Have you had any experience in which your interlocuter could not understand you because of your pronunciation? (N=519)
- a. Yes: 65%
 - b. No: 35%
- (5) If there are any tips as to how to improve your English pronunciation, do you want to know them? (N=519)
- a. Yes: 98%
 - b. No: 2%

As for the first research question on pronunciation models, the majority of the respondents chose a standard native-speaker model as their pronunciation model. The highest number of respondents chose Standard North American English pronunciation. This tendency probably reflects the current English education in Japan which uses predominantly North American pronunciation materials and resources as noted previously. This result concurs with the results of other studies investigating the choice of pronunciation models by students in EFL contexts (Szypra-Kozłowska, 2015). She reports that not only in her study but in other studies in Europe (e.g., Henderson et al., 2012; Janica et al., 2005; as cited in Szypra-Kozłowska, 2015) the majority of respondents chose one of the two “standard” accents, i.e., BBC pronunciation or GA with the former being clearly preferred to the latter in all European studies. It is interesting to note that in European EFL settings, BBC pronunciation is preferred to GA.

As for the second research question of pronunciation goal, the majority of the respondents chose some approximation of a standard native variety of English as their pronunciation goal. It is interesting to note that only 6% of the respondents felt that no more than intelligibility was necessary for their pronunciation goal. Despite my intelligibility argument as the goal for Japanese EFL students, the majority of the respondents desired more than just intelligibility in pronunciation learning. This result may be attributed to the fact that the respondents were English majors.

Another plausible explanation is that the term “goal” might have been interpreted as their “wish” rather than their realistic goals. In either case, teachers must be careful not to downplay some students’ goal to sound natively like because such comments as “You don’t need to learn these sound features because you are already intelligible.” can be condescending and demotivating to some students. Instead, teachers should think of ways to help students to set realistic goals based on their communicative needs and desires. Conducting this kind of survey with their own students may be helpful to that end.

7. Development of receptive competence to understand English speakers with different accents

As indicated in Levis’s (2005) World Englishes Speaker-Listener Intelligibility Matrix (see Figure 1 in Section 4.1), Japanese speakers of English will be expected to communicate with English speakers not only from the Inner Circle but also from the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle in the age of English as an international language. In such communication, Japanese speakers of English have to assume both the role of the speaker and that of the listener. Up to now, I have discussed pronunciation from the viewpoint of the speaker. In addition to acquiring intelligible pronunciation, Japanese learners of English need to develop receptive competence to understand English speakers with diverse English accents. Setter and Jenkins (2005) voiced a great need for resources and materials to train English teachers and students in listening to different English accents. Derwing, Rossitier, and Munro’s (2002) experimental study indicates that accent familiarity, especially with some explicit instruction, makes a difference in the listener’s ability to comprehend the “accented” speaker’s utterance. Their study also suggests that those instructed in a particular accent were more willing to listen and “more confident about interacting with people with accents” (p. 254).

In order to fulfill the aforementioned need for resources and materials to learn about different varieties of English, a team of researchers from Kanda University of International Studies and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies have collaborated to create a web-based material called “KANDA-TUFS World Englishes Modules,”⁴

mainly targeted at the Japanese audience (Sekiya, Yazu, & Murphy, 2015). These modules consist of 40 dialogues based on 40 different language functions in common everyday situations such as asking for advice, giving directions, and thanking in different varieties of English. As of March 2021, the dialogues in ten varieties of English have been created: American English, British English, Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, Irish English, Indian English, Singaporean English, Philippine English, and Malaysian English. As can be seen, the first six varieties are from the Inner Circle, and the last four varieties are from the Outer Circle. The dialogues are role-played by people from the respective countries. They are annotated with explanatory notes on pronunciation and vocabulary so that viewers can understand the characteristics of the different varieties of English. Twenty out of the 40 dialogues have basically the same lines across the different English varieties so that users can compare the pronunciation features of different varieties with annotated explanatory notes on them.

Students can use this resource in various ways: e.g., to practice the pronunciation of a particular variety of English as their own model or to get acclimated to certain varieties of English or to compare the similarities and differences between their familiar varieties and unfamiliar varieties. It is hoped that through the use of this resource, Japanese students as well as teachers, will come to recognize and value the diversity of English varieties and the plurality of norms and will be more willing to communicate with speakers with different accents.

8. Ability to adjust one's own English pronunciation in communication

As mentioned previously, pronunciation intelligibility is a two-way process involving both the listener and the speaker. When the listener finds their interlocutor's pronunciation of a certain word or phrase unintelligible, they may attempt to clarify the meaning by asking the interlocutor some questions. This may prompt the speaker to adjust the pronunciation of a word, phrase, or whole utterance so as to make their utterance more intelligible to the listener. Jenkins (2000) suggests that the concept of convergence as proposed in Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles and Coupland, 1991; as cited in Jenkins, 2000) is relevant in the

context of EIL. According to this theory, convergence refers to adjusting one's speech to the interlocutor's so as to make their speech more comprehensible as well as to be liked. Jenkins states that this "includes the ability to adjust towards a more standard form of pronunciation" (p. 21). This would probably mean that the speaker incorporates more priority features for international intelligibility. This accommodation skill is also essential for Japanese speakers of English to achieve mutual intelligibility and understanding in international settings.

The best way for students to cultivate this accommodation skill is through having ample opportunity to use English in actual communication with different speakers of English with diverse accents. It requires teachers to be resourceful to create these opportunities in the Japanese EFL classroom. Some possible ideas are as follows: (a) Have students interact with ALTs or teachers with different English accents; (b) Invite foreign residents of the community who can speak English to the classroom as guest speakers; (c) Invite exchange students to the classroom as guest speakers; (d) Connect your students with students overseas via Zoom or Skype and have them interact with each other on certain topics in English. I have tried the second, third, and fourth in my own English classes at the college level with some success. The key to success in these sessions seems to be adequate preparation on the part of students before the sessions: e.g., students generating possible questions for interviews or discussions with the teacher's assistance and students practicing communication strategies such as asking clarification questions and follow-up questions, and reflecting on their communication experience after the task. With some ingenuity these interactional opportunities can be incorporated into the Japanese EFL classroom at any level. By engaging in real communication with English speakers, students will naturally experience communication breakdowns and repairs, and negotiation of meaning. These experiences will eventually lead to their communicative confidence and willingness to communicate with English speakers of diverse backgrounds. In future research, such interactional data should be collected from the EFL classroom to find out what kind of pronunciation features of Japanese students lead to unintelligibility resulting in communication breakdowns, and what kind of pronunciation adjustments are made during such interactions.

Another important issue related to pronunciation adjustment is Japanese teachers' use of English in the classroom. As mentioned in Section 3, the MEXT New Course of Study suggests that English be used as a means of instruction in the classroom. Just as in other types of communication, what matters most is if the interlocutors, in this case the students, can understand the teacher's English utterances. In Section 5.2 I suggested that teachers should master at least the suggested priority features in English pronunciation. Some English teachers have probably acquired more than the priority features and have approximated many pronunciation features of the target model. What teachers must heed is that their "fluent" English pronunciation is not necessarily easy for students to comprehend. To make their speech more comprehensible, teachers must learn to adjust their English pronunciation in a number of ways depending on the levels and needs of their students. For example, thought groups can be shorter with longer pauses between the units: e.g., *To do this exercise, / you must look at the charts/ on page 5/ and page 9/, and compare the differences*. Furthermore, content words can be enunciated and stressed more than usual so as to highlight the important information. Intentionally avoiding various sound changes observed in connected speech such as linking, assimilation, and deletion can actually help students' comprehension of words. Ideally, teachers should be able to vary their pronunciation based on the students' levels of understanding and previous instruction on connected speech. This ability to adjust their English pronunciation is important not only in Japanese EFL teachers' teacher talk but also in native English teachers' teacher talk. Giving an effective teacher talk is an important part of teaching competence. Therefore, training teachers in their skills to adjust their English pronunciation in their teacher talk should be incorporated in the teacher education curriculum.

9. Summary and concluding remarks

This paper reconsidered the issues of the pronunciation models, goals, and intelligibility in teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students from the point of English as an international language. I have justified the use of some "standard" English varieties such as GA as the suitable models for Japanese students even in

the era of English as an international language. However, I have argued for the intelligibility goal rather than the nativeness goal as the pedagogical principle in pronunciation instruction in the Japanese EFL classroom. For the goal of intelligibility, teachers must prioritize those features which influence the intelligibility of the pronunciation of Japanese students in their interaction with both native and nonnative speakers from the three Circles of World Englishes. I have proposed a tentative list of such features as pronunciation priorities for Japanese learners of English. The suggested priorities should be further examined based on empirical data of Japanese students' actual use of English in communication. I have also suggested the use of the Web-based material, KANDA-TUFS World Englishes Modules to expose students to different varieties of English. The purpose is to develop students' receptive competence to understand various English accents as well as to promote the diversity and plurality of norms among Japanese students of English. Lastly, I stressed the importance of developing both students' and teachers' accommodation skill to adjust their English pronunciation to the interlocutors in real communicative situations.

In conclusion, it is hoped that Japanese teachers of English will explore the issues and recommendations presented here in their own practice of teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students. Furthermore, a discussion of these issues and the specific pedagogical techniques to address them should be incorporated into the teacher education curriculum for both pre-service and in-service teachers of English.

Notes

¹ The traditional dichotomy of native versus nonnative English speakers has been often rejected in capturing the current state of English use in the world. Jenkins (2000), for example, suggested replacing the term 'native speaker' with 'monolingual English speaker,' substituting 'bilingual English speaker' "for both those 'native speakers' who speak another language fluently and for 'nonnative speakers' who speak English fluently" (p. 9), and using the term 'non-bilingual English speaker' for many L2 English speakers whose proficiency is limited to certain communicative purposes. However, in this article, I will use native and nonnative speakers of English for the sake of the audience's familiarity of the terms.

² Many researchers nowadays regard the term "Received Pronunciation," abbreviated as "RP" as

outdated, having some negative connotations associated with social class and elitism (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). Some of the alternative terms suggested are BBC pronunciation, Standard Southern English, and General British (Carley, Mees, and Collins, 2018). In this article, following Roach (2009), I use BBC pronunciation to refer to the accents used by educated English speakers in England.

- ³ I use the term “standard” English accents with quotation marks to mean widely used and recognized English accents often adopted in textbooks for teaching, not accents designated by authorities such as governments.
- ⁴ KANDA-TUFS World Englishes Modules have been designed using the platform developed for Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Language Modules with many languages in the world. <http://www.coelang.tufs.ac.jp/mt/>

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