

## **ELF Pronunciation: Investigating Student Attitudes to the LFC**

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### Abstract

The Lingua Franca Core (LFC) was proposed by Jenkins (2000) after doing research to find out which pronunciation features are important for intelligibility when using English as a lingua franca (ELF). Incorporating the LFC into English classes means focusing on the features which are important and giving flexibility to the features which are not. This allows students to be mutually intelligible when using ELF while also expressing their cultural identities. However, concerns have been expressed that native speakerism is still influencing classroom practices and, in particular, pronunciation teaching may be neglecting important insights from ELF research (Kiczkowiak, 2019). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that student attitudes are often influenced by native speakerism as well (Galloway, 2017). Therefore, this study investigates the attitudes that university students have towards the LFC and towards 'native' English pronunciation in order to understand how best to prepare students for using ELF. After introducing the LFC, the students had discussions before doing some writing for homework. Their writing was analysed and coded, revealing that while they seemed to favour the LFC overall, some preferences for 'native' English were also detected. Therefore, it is recommended that when incorporating the LFC into classes, students are made aware that this does not necessarily prevent them from sounding like a 'native' speaker. After mastering the LFC, students that wish to can focus on the other features, while some students may be happy to be both mutually intelligible and express their cultural identity as they participate in the ELF community.

## Introduction

Kachru's circle analogy (Kachru, 1992) is still often used to show the spread of English, with the inner, outer and expanding circles depicting countries where English is spoken as either a first language, an official language (in post-colonial countries) or as a foreign language. As the number of people using English around the world has continued to increase, different varieties of English have developed in the outer circle (Kirkpatrick, 2010), and more recently attention is being paid to the expanding circle where English is used as a lingua franca for communication between people who speak different mother tongues (Rose & Galloway, 2019; Kiczkowiak, 2019). When English is used as a lingua franca by people from different countries there is great diversity in the way that English is used as it is influenced by different languages and cultures. Therefore, speakers of ELF (English as a lingua franca) communicate with each other in innovative ways which are different from the inner circle as they simultaneously express their cultural identities and accommodate their interlocutor in order to effectively communicate their message (Baker, 2017; Jenkins, 2011; Walker, 2010). A rather nice comparison has been made between using ELF and the custom of giving and receiving tea by Rahman and Chowdhury (2019) who say that tea is served in many different ways all over the world, but as long as the receiver can understand that they are being offered tea, then they can accept the tea, or in other words, as long ELF is mutually intelligible, communication can take place.

Mutual intelligibility is seen as being the main goal in ELF and research in this area was carried out by Jenkins (2000) who did a study into communication between ELF speakers. This study revealed that pronunciation was the most usual cause of misunderstanding. Furthermore, by identifying which pronunciation features caused the misunderstandings, Jenkins was able to make recommendations about which features are important for intelligibility in ELF, and which features are not. The features Jenkins found to be important included consonants, except /θ/ and /ð/ (for example, 'thing' and 'this') as these are often pronounced differently, as well as consonant clusters, vowel length (such as the difference in length between /t/ in ship /i:/ in sheep) and nuclear stress (the main stress in an utterance), whereas the features that were found not to be important included vowel quality (the difference in how they sound), except /ɜ:/, in 'bird' for example, which sometimes caused misunderstandings if pronounced incorrectly, as well as word stress, intonation and connected speech (p. 134 – p. 156). Jenkins referred to these recommendations for pronunciation when using ELF as the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) and she suggested that teachers focus on the features which are important for intelligibility while allowing flexibility

in the features which are not important, thus students can express their cultural identity, by using some elements from their first language, while also being mutually intelligible when communicating with other ELF speakers.

However, despite the diversity in the ways English is being used around the world, there are concerns that English language teaching is still too focused on the inner circle, with native speakerism still heavily influencing classroom practices leading to calls for more efforts to take an ELF approach in the classroom (Rose & Galloway, 2019; Kiczkowiak, 2019; Thir, 2016). In particular, Kiczkowiak (2019) and Thir (2016) feel that pronunciation teaching may be neglecting the important insights from ELF research. Although Japan is a country in the expanding circle and learners of English are more likely to use English as a lingua franca to communicate with other ELF speakers in the outer and expanding circles, research has shown that there are strong attachments to English from the inner circle which influences the attitudes of students studying English at the tertiary level in Japan (Galloway, 2013; Galloway, 2017), which is similar to the findings from studies in other expanding circle countries, such as in China and Taiwan (Ren, Chen & Lin, 2016) as well as in Thailand (Jindapitak, 2015).

In the study by Jenkins (2000) there were some Japanese participants who communicated with other speakers from the expanding circle. Communication problems arose when a Japanese participant said /ba:d/ instead of /bɜ:d/ (p. 146), and also when a Japanese participant said /gleɪ/ instead of /greɪ/ (p. 82). However, in the latter case the Japanese participant noticed and then repronounced it, which is an example of accommodation as it enabled the interlocutor to understand. Jenkins states that students who are not fluent in English often rely on bottom-up listening skills rather than top-down listening skills meaning that they might not be able to understand from the context if an important phoneme is pronounced differently. This suggests the importance of segmentals (individual phonemes) when teaching pronunciation, rather than recent trends which suggest giving priority to suprasegmentals (the way phonemes behave together, such as connected speech). Considering these points, I felt that incorporating the LFC into university English classes in Japan would help prepare students to use ELF. However, since native speakerism has been shown to have a big influence, it is important to consider the attitudes of the learners in order for the implementation to be as smooth and effective as possible. Therefore, I felt that it would be beneficial to raise awareness about the LFC with some university students in Japan in order for them to be able to reflect on the relevance of such an approach to

pronunciation and then express their opinions about its implications for English teaching in Japan.

### **Research Questions**

- 1 What kind of attitudes do students have towards ‘native’ English pronunciation?
- 2 What kind of attitudes do students have towards the LFC?

### **Methods**

This study took place at a university in Tokyo and twenty-four students participated over the first and the second terms of their first year. They were all taking an intermediate level English for academic purposes course. In the first term they were introduced to the phonemic chart as well as Kachru’s circle analogy and the concept of ELF. In the second term they were gradually introduced to some of the pronunciation features which are important for intelligibility according to the LFC, as well as some of the features which are not important (as this was necessary to aid understanding in the next stage). Then, after reviewing the pronunciation features over several weeks, they were introduced to the LFC in one lesson, then in the following lesson they reviewed the LFC before having a discussion. Finally, they needed to do some writing for homework in which they answered the same questions they had answered in their discussions. All the students agreed for their writing to be analysed and used in this study. Their writing was split into answers for each question before being coded and grouped for general opinions and themes as recommended by Dörnyei (2007).

### **Results**

#### **What do you think about Jennifer Jenkin’s research on ELF pronunciation?**

The students were all positive about the LFC, indicating that it was relevant and useful for them. While it is important to consider that they may have felt like they needed to write something positive for this question, as their teacher had introduced them to the LFC, and it is therefore felt that the next few questions are perhaps more revealing of their complex attitudes, there are still some interesting insights from this question, even if they are overly positive.

The students wrote that the LFC was “*important*”, “*helpful*”, “*effective*” and “*convincing*”. In particular, it was noted that it was “*very useful for people in the expanding circle*” because it gave them the “*minimum standard of pronunciation*” for “*communication*”

with people who have different mother tongues". Also, it was pointed out that "most Japanese people learn English as an ELF" and the research showed them "they don't need to pronounce English perfectly" as "the important thing about English in ELF is not the exact grammar and pronunciation of English spoken by native English speakers, but the ability to convey what you want to tell others". Therefore, by concentrating on the "essential features" such as "consonants, the length of vowels, and nuclear stress" they can "focus on communicating what we want to say without worrying too much about English pronunciation". Interestingly two students mentioned that they had been told different things at school, with one student saying "I was taught by my teacher that word stress is one of the crucial parts of communication" and the other student saying her teacher spent time trying to teach "the difference between vowels sounds" but "hearing the difference was too difficult for me and Jennifer Jenkin's research shows that this feature is not important for intelligibility".

**Do you think it's important for Japanese students to learn all the pronunciation features used by native speakers?**

The second question seemed to be more revealing in showing their complex attitudes. While fourteen students disagreed with this statement, showing approval for the LFC, ten students agreed revealing some preferences for inner circle English. However, it should be noted that five of the students who thought Japanese students should learn all the features wrote that they needed to learn them receptively, so they could understand native speakers, rather than learn how to produce them themselves.

**Table 1. Students should learn all pronunciation features used by native speakers**

Agree	Disagree	N
10	14	24

From the ten students that wrote that they thought Japanese students should learn all the pronunciation features, one student mentioned the need to learn "real" pronunciation and another student mentioned the need to learn "correct" pronunciation. One student wrote that "The purpose of learning English is to communicate with foreigners" and "If we speak in the way unique to Japan, it cannot be used as ELF" and another student wrote that "in order for English as ELF to function, it is necessary to treat English spoken by native speakers as a

*kind of ideal model and to unify the form of pronunciation*". However, one student wrote that *"Certainly, it is important to learn all the features of the pronunciation, but I think it is too difficult for many Japanese students to master them"* and five students wrote that it was important to learn all the features receptively to avoid misunderstandings when they communicate with native speakers, with one of them writing *"I don't think Japanese students need to be able to use all the pronunciation when they speak. However, I'm sure it's important for them to understand such pronunciation when they listen to native speakers because we can't ask them to stop speaking fluently."*

From the fourteen students that thought that it was not necessary to learn all the pronunciation features, it was written that *"there is pronunciation which native speakers can speak but people whose mother tongues are not English cannot speak"* and *"there are numerous accents among native speakers, so it is impossible to learn all the pronunciation characteristics"*. One student wrote that the way Japanese people *"speak English is similar to their way to speak Japanese"* but *"native speaker can understand what we say"* and that their purpose was *"to be able to communicate with people all over the world in English"* so *"they only need to make others understand what they speak"*. One student admitted that *"speaking English fluently is extremely cool"* but also stated that *"being able to make ourselves understood in English is the most important for Japanese students"*. It was also written that *"what is important is not how it sounds but its intelligibility"* and that not having to use all the pronunciation features *"encourages"* them to speak English. However, it was pointed out that this *"doesn't mean you can neglect pronunciation"* as *"it is necessary to study some pronunciation in order to convey one's opinion accurately"* and that it was possible to *"communicate with those whose mother tongues are different if we are able to correctly use consonants, nuclear stress and long and short vowels"*.

### **What do you think about your English pronunciation?**

This question revealed a tendency to lack confidence in their own pronunciation as nearly all of the students wrote negative comments, describing their own pronunciation as *"bad"*, *"not good at all"* and *"too poor to make others understand"*. Comparisons with native speakers were made, such as stating that their pronunciation was *"very different"* and *"worse than"* native speaker pronunciation. One student wrote *"I am not very confident in my English pronunciation, and I often find it difficult to convey my intentions"* and another student wrote *"I think my English pronunciation is poor because I have difficulty in distinguishing between consonants like 'b' and 'v'"*. It was also stated by one student that *"I*

will always remember how embarrassing it was when I went to study abroad, where my pronunciation was far worse than that of my European peers”. However, one student seemed more positive than the others, writing “My English pronunciation is not great, but I am satisfied. When I try to communicate with native English speaker, I can tell what I want to say, so my pronunciation is enough to use English”.

### Would you like to sound like a native speaker?

This question was particularly revealing as eleven students wrote they would like to sound like a native speaker clearly showing preferences for inner circle English whereas four students said that it was not necessary to sound like a native speaker, five wrote they would like to improve their pronunciation (but did not specify that they would like to sound like a native speaker) and four did not write about their own pronunciation (but were positive about the LFC).

**Table 2. Sounding like a native speaker**

I would like to sound like a native speaker.	It is not necessary to sound like a native speaker.	I would like to improve my pronunciation.	Did not mention their own pronunciation.	N
11	4	5	4	24

The students that wanted to sound like a native speaker wrote that sounding like a native speaker would be “*very useful in this global society*” as it would be “*easy to convey ideas*” and they would be able to “*communicate more smoothly*” which would lead to “*more opportunities to interact with foreign people*”. Furthermore, three students stated that sounding like a native speaker would be “*cool*”. However, one student wrote “*I’d like to sound like a native speaker, but since ELF and native-speaking English are no different in function, and what’s important is to be understood, I don’t feel the need to speak like a native speaker*” (so this student was not counted as wanting to sound like a native speaker) while another student wrote that “*Though I admire those who can speak as if they were a native speaker, I think it isn’t necessary for me to speak like a native speaker because the context will make up for the imperfection of pronunciation if it isn’t very bad*”.

### What kind of English pronunciation do you think schools and universities in Japan should teach?

While nine students thought schools and universities in Japan should teach native pronunciation, thirteen thought they should teach the LFC and two of them did not state that either should be taught. This shows that although there are some preferences for inner circle English, the majority felt that the LFC was more relevant for students in Japan.

**Table 3. Recommendations for Pronunciation Teaching in Japan**

Native English pronunciation	Lingua Franca Core	Other	N
9	13	2	24

From the nine students that thought that schools and universities in Japan should teach native pronunciation, two of them wrote that British or American English should be taught, with one writing this as *“because the population of people who speak American or British English is large”* and the other writing that it was *“because these pronunciations are often used in English conversation”*. It was also written that *“schools should hire native teachers to teach native speaker pronunciation”* and *“schools and universities should teach all the pronunciation features because even if we couldn't use them, they could be the basis for knowledge of the English language and the culture associated with it”*. Two students wrote that it was important to learn native speaker pronunciation for listening with one student writing *“they should get used to listening to native English to understand what native speakers say”* and the other student writing *“if you haven't heard it, it will be difficult to listen to a native speaker's talk”*. Another student wrote *“I think Japanese schools and universities should focus on pronunciation that is not found in Japan, such as “th” or “r”. If you are not accustomed to such pronunciation, you will not be able to pronounce it properly when speaking in practice”*.

From the thirteen students that thought schools and universities in Japan should teach ELF pronunciation, six of the students mentioned the features, with one student writing *“I think schools should teach confusing consonant differences such as ‘l’ and ‘r’ because these are often thought as the same pronunciation in Japanese”* while another student wrote that currently there is not enough time spent on nuclear stress, and therefore recommending that *“schools should spend more time on it”*. Three students mentioned about communication,



with one writing that *“Native-like pronunciation is sometimes difficult to listen and understand for people whose mother language is not English because it is too fluent. To communicate with foreign people in English, clear and accurate way of speaking is much more important than beautiful one”*. Another student raised the issue of students hesitating to speak English because of their pronunciation, writing that *“it appears to me that many Japanese English learner are being shy to speak fluent English”* because they *“fear that they can’t speak like native speakers”* and that *“Schools should teach them that they don’t need to speak like so, and what is important is a communication skill.”* Another student wrote that *“Although schools and universities in Japan should teach all the pronunciation, they should especially focus on important features. This helps students study English speaking skills efficiently.”*

There were two students which were not counted as stating that native pronunciation or the LFC should be taught. One of them wrote that *“I don’t think that all pronunciation features should be taught in schools. Because they are difficult to learn by teaching them and they can learn naturally when you go there”* while another student suggested that instead of teaching pronunciation *“schools should actively create opportunities to interact with foreigners”*.

### **Discussion**

Although overall this study has shown positive attitudes towards the LFC, with students showing awareness that the LFC can help them to be intelligible when they use ELF, it has also revealed some preferences for native English pronunciation. In particular, when it came to their own pronunciation, nearly half of the students admitted that they would like to sound like a native speaker. However, when the questions were more general, the LFC gained more support. While ten of them agreed that Japanese students should learn all the pronunciation features used by native speakers (although five of them indicated this only needed to be receptively) fourteen disagreed showing approval for the LFC. Furthermore, when asked what kind of pronunciation should be taught at schools and universities in Japan, only nine of them suggested native pronunciation should be taught whereas thirteen suggested that the LFC should be taught. However, it should be noted that even when students were being positive about the LFC, and were arguing its case from a practical point of view, they often still showed signs of native speakerism in their outlook, such as the commonly held belief that sounding like a native speaker is *“cool”*.

Certainly, it is important to be aware that some students do have preferences for inner circle English, particularly in relation to how they would ideally like to sound. Therefore, while it is important to make students aware that ELF is not an inferior form of English, and it can be used to express their cultural identity as well as for communication, it is also important to mention that taking an ELF approach to pronunciation in the classroom does not necessarily prevent them from acquiring a native speaker accent if that is their goal. According to Jenkins (2000), the LFC prioritises the features which are important for intelligibility when using ELF and suggests that students should master these first. Jenkins then suggests that students should be able to listen to a range of different non-native English accents. After that she suggests they could learn the other pronunciation features native speakers use. While she suggests they only learn them receptively for listening to native speakers, they could also try to produce them if they wish. However, it would be important to make them aware that some features, such as connected speech, might actually make them unintelligible in ELF contexts. Then finally Jenkins suggests that they could listen to a range of regional native speaker accents to further develop their receptive repertoire.

Therefore, since university students in Japan are likely to use ELF in the future, and in this study the majority of students did seem to favour the LFC as it is more realistic and useful for them despite the appeal of having a native speaker accent (and it would not necessarily prevent them from acquiring a native speaker accent if that is their wish anyway), it is felt that it may be appropriate to implement the LFC in English classes at the tertiary level in Japan. For teachers that wish to do so, it is felt that some of the activities which focus on the pronunciation features important for intelligibility that have been suggested by Walker (2010) would be suitable for them to start incorporating the LFC into their lessons. These include activities such as drilling and minimal pairs which focus on consonants, consonant clusters and vowel length as well as activities which help students to identify the nuclear stress such as listening to a conversation and marking where they hear the nuclear stress in each utterance.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to find out the attitudes of the students at a Japanese university towards native English pronunciation and the LFC. While some preferences were shown to native English pronunciation, indicating the influence of native speakerism particularly when it came to how they would ideally like to sound, overall positive attitudes towards the LFC were shown. Although it should be acknowledged that this was only a small study, and

further research should be carried out to further understand their attitudes, it is felt that the results show that it may be appropriate to incorporate the LFC into university English classes in Japan.

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