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The implications of the LFC for the Arab context

Wafa Zoghor

The purpose of this paper is to report on the fieldwork of a current doctoral thesis to investigate the influence of a pronunciation syllabus based on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) in improving the intelligibility and comprehensibility of Arab learners. The paper will introduce a sample of how this syllabus has been designed based on a Contrastive Analysis (CA) between the LFC and the phonology of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It will then present a workable example of how the pronunciation elements of the LFC syllabus can be integrated in adopted textbooks and discuss the classroom practice which the LFC necessitates.

Contrastive Analysis between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the LFC

According to [James \(1980\)](#), CA describes the systems of the phonology of L1 and L2 on the assumption that significant differences between them will constitute major problems for the language learner, and that these should therefore be a major focus of attention for pronunciation teaching. In discussing the value of CA in language teaching, [Fries \(1945\)](#) asserted that the most efficient material is that which is based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the learners' L1.

One of the issues encountered in implementing CA when teaching Arab learners is that there are two main varieties of Arabic in each Arab country: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Non-Standard Arabic (NSA) ([Mahmoud, 2000](#)). While there is considerable uncertainty about the source of L1 transfer, Arab teachers tend to use MSA when comparison with English is needed. It is logical that they should do this for two closely-related reasons:

MSA (a simplified version of Classical Standard Arabic) is the language of the Koran – the holy book of Islam – and is

taught in schools throughout general education in the Arab-speaking world.

MSA is the only official written variety and is also used in mass media in all Arab countries and for all communications of any official nature ([Mahmoud, 2000](#); [Swan & Smith 2001](#)).

For these reasons Arab learners are expected to master, or to some extent to recognize, the phonology of MSA, since they have received instructions on MSA throughout their education. This latter idea is particularly influential in formulating the tendency to transfer from MSA rather than NSA. NSA is acquired naturally and informally with no conscious knowledge of its structure and how it works. MSA, in contrast, is similar to English in that both are learned explicitly in a formal classroom situation ([Mahmoud, 2000](#)). Accordingly, it is possible that Arab learners transfer from MSA in an attempt to use their explicit knowledge in Arabic with learning English.

Pronunciation syllabus based on the LFC for Arab learners

The result of CA has traditionally been referred to as the list of L2 features which are more likely to cause difficulties for learners of a specific L1 and, accordingly, requires a great deal of concentration in classroom teaching ([Walker, 2001a](#)). To work out the contents of this list for Arab learners the suggestions of [Brown \(1992\)](#) in implementing CA have been used. The phonology of MSA was broadly filtered against the inventory of the LFC. The features that should be included are those phonemes which exist in the LFC but not in MSA, in addition to those which are shared in both Arabic and the LFC.

In Table 1, the left-hand column represents the inventory of the core sounds of the LFC ([Jenkins, 2000](#)). This excludes non-core features, for example, 'word stress', 'stress-time rhythm' and 'weak forms'. The column in the middle lists the phonemes of the MSA based on [Swan and Smith \(2001\)](#), [Watson \(2002\)](#), [Avery and Ehrlich \(1992\)](#) and [Kenworthy \(1987\)](#). The column on the right is the result of the CA between the first two columns, and supposedly includes the contents of the pronunciation syllabus for Arab learners.

To enhance the practicality of the above syllabus, it is important that the teacher recognizes that what matters is not strictly whether Arab learners transfer from MSA or NSA, but how to take advantage of learners' phonological background in the first place in learning the inventory we are aiming at. A teacher should not disregard the influence of the learners' NSA variety (and the other varieties which the learner might recognize), as learners' knowledge beyond

Table 1: Contents of the Pronunciation Syllabus for Arab Learners Based on the LFC

The LFC	MSA	Contents of the teaching syllabus
The consonantal inventory		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All sounds except /θ/, /ð/ and dark (or velarized) /h/ (as in 'little') 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The following do not exist in MSA: /p/, /v/, /dʒ/, /g/ and /ŋ/. [p] exists as an allophone to /b/ before voiceless consonants [ŋ] is an allophone to /n/ /l/ is alveolar. Velarized [ɫ] is an allophone of /l/. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> /p/, /v/, /dʒ/, /g/ and /ŋ/.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhotic /r/ rather than the other varieties of /r/. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trilled /r/ (produced by vibrations between the articulator and the place of articulation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhotic /r/
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervocalic [t] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dental /t/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervocalic [t]
Phonetic requirements		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aspiration after /p/, /t/, and /k/. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aspirated [t], and [k] are allophones of /t/ and /k/. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aspiration after /p/, /t/, and /k/.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shortening of vowel sounds before fortis and maintenance of length before lenis consonants. i.e. /i:/ is shorter in 'seat' than in 'seed'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate Vowel length before fortis and lenis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoiding contracted and short forms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arabs tend to avoid contracted and short forms and elisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoiding contracted and short forms.
Consonant clusters		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word initially, word medially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arabic has no clusters of more than two consonants. Cluster does not exist in word-initial position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word initially and medially.
Vowel sounds		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-short contrast /ɜ:/ to be preserved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 short vowels: /ɪ/, /ʊ/, /æ/ 3 long vowels: /u:/, /i:/, /a:/ 2 diphthongs: /eɪ/, /aʊ/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-short contrast /ɜ:/ to be preserved
Vowel quality		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> L2 (consistent) regional qualities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners' regional quality is accepted.
Nuclear stress		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate use of contrastive stress to signal meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nuclear (tonic) stress.

MSA can assist learning the phonemes being targeted. Some NSA includes phonemes which do not exist in MSA but exist in the LFC. For example, the Arabic of Iraq and the Gulf countries includes the post alveolar affricate /tʃ/ which does not exist in MSA but which is a requirement of the LFC. Similarly, Egyptian and Yemeni Arabic have the velar plosive /g/. In this way, Iraqi, Gulf, Egyptian and Yemeni learners at some points would each have the privilege of not being required to work on some phonemes (such as /tʃ/ and /g/) due to their existence in their NSA variety.

A teacher could think that the diversity between learners' phonology and the MSA might make the previous syllabus unreliable and inappropriate to its learners. It is important, however, to consider that what matters is not how different NSA is from MSA, but from the features of the LFC. For example, in Egyptian dialect, which is widely used to reveal how significant the difference is between its phonology and the phonology of MSA, the sounds which exist in MSA but not in Egyptian dialect are:

1. The voiced dental alveolar (emphatic)¹ fricative /ðˤ/ (represented in Arabic by the letter: ط).
2. The voiceless uvular stop consonant /q/ (represented in Arabic with the letter ق)
3. The voiceless inter-dental fricative /θ/.
4. The voiced inter-dental fricative /ð/.
5. The voiceless palatal stop consonant /ʒ/.

Among the above sounds, the first and second phonemes (/ðˤ/ and /q/) exist neither in the LFC nor in Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). The third and fourth phonemes (/θ/ and /ð/) are non-core features and substituting them with other phonemes (for example /s/ and /z/) is acceptable as it has been proved empirically that this substitution does not cause breakdown in communication (Jenkins 2000). So it is only the last phoneme, /ʒ/, which Egyptian learners are expected to find difficult and will need more instructions in order to produce.

Integrating the LFC syllabus with the textbook

There are two issues to consider in integrating the above inventory on the textbook. Firstly, teaching and learning pronunciation distinguishes between two levels of learning; receptive (listening) and productive (speaking) skills (Hewings, 2004). Secondly, to overcome the problem of

¹ Emphatic consonants are pronounced with the back of the tongue approaching the pharynx.

the shortage of the material of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), the same NS-based textbook can be used in the classroom with necessary modifications on its pronunciation exercises, according to their relevance to the LFC (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2001b; Brown, 1992; Pennington, 1996; Kenworthy, 1987). Those features which are classified as non-core features are dealt with at receptive level only in the sense that they are introduced to learners through listening exercises but learners are not encouraged to produce them. In contrast, learners will be encouraged to produce the core features, and work on these will be reinforced and involve error correction.

The textbook used as an example is *Listen Here* by Clare West (1999). The pronunciation elements of this coursebook are listed in Table 2 below. Indicated in this table is whether these exercises should be taught only at receptive or at both perceptive and productive levels.

Unit	Features	Receptive level	Productive level
2	Word stress	√	x
6	Short vowels <i>/ɒ/, /ʌ/, /e/, /æ/</i>	√	√ Learners' L1 regional varieties are acceptable
11	Consonants <i>/tʃ/, /ʃ/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/</i>	√ Only /θ/, /ð/	√ Only /tʃ/, /ʃ/ and /s/
14	Short/long vowels	√	√
16	Consonant /h/	√	√
18	Intonation and sentence stress	√	Intonation x Sentence stress √
19	Rising and falling intonation	√	x
20	Word stress	√	x
25	Word ending /-s/ & /-ed/	√	√
26	Consonant minimal pairs (including core features)	√	√

Table 2: List of pronunciation exercises in *Listen Here* (by Clare West, 1999).

The LFC and classroom practice

Implementing a syllabus based on the LFC does not simply include the inventory of phonemes mentioned above, but involves the 'methodology' and the overall practice in the classroom (Lee & Ridley, 1999; Tomlinson, 2006; Walker, 2001b).

In 2008 I carried out fieldwork in one of the countries of the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) as part of my doctoral thesis. The fieldwork involved 25 upper-elementary Listening and Speaking students aged from 18 to 22 who were studying at a private higher education institute. During the fieldwork the following points were taken into account in the teaching of the syllabus I had established:

Improving learners' awareness of the landscape of English

Derwing (2006) demonstrated that focusing on production exercises is not the only effective means of improving pronunciation, since perception activities can also help learners to improve their pronunciation. In the present study, classroom time has been carefully devoted in initial stages to a discussion of students' perceptions and attitudes towards pronunciation in ELT. The importance of this practice was emphasized by Brown (1992) and Kenworthy (1987). In response to this, I arranged a seminar in October 2008 in the institute where the syllabus was being implemented to widen learners' recognition of the existence of different non-native speaker (NNS) varieties in order to improve their tolerance toward these varieties (and to their own), and switch their attention towards more important issues than native-like pronunciation in lingua franca settings: mainly speech intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Exposure to a wide range of NNS varieties of English

NNSs of several varieties from Kachru's (1985) concentric circles (the *outer* and *expanding* circles) were recorded. These were introduced in the ELF pronunciation classroom along with the course CD, which is NS-based. These recordings were not simply replications of the scripts already performed by the native speakers of *Listen Here*. The speakers were given the same topics in the textbook, but asked to reproduce them in their own way. This required the speakers to modify the vocabulary and grammar of their speech. The significance of this is that international English is not only a matter of pronunciation, but also of grammar (Willis, 1999, cited in Timmis, 2002) and lexis (Meierkord, 2005). In addition, a selection of samples of communication among NNSs included in Kirkpatrick (2007) were selectively introduced as some samples might be beyond the learners' levels of English.

Exposure to several NNS varieties, despite being helpful in implementing the LFC, should be handled carefully even

when introduced only at receptive level. These varieties can possibly include non-core features which we encourage learners not to acquire. While receptive skill is intended to help learners to improve their listening ability and develop discrimination skills, Hewings (2004) demonstrated that this provides a foundation for pronunciation improvement in their own speech. For this reason, the teacher has to consider the frequency of introducing specific varieties and show control over how the input occurs in the classroom. The teacher should also take advantage of such situations to bring to learners' attention the differences between the non-core phonemes used by the NNS in class and the core features they are aiming at.

Individual (self) assessment

This is particularly significant in the case of Arab learners and maybe in similar settings where learners have significant regional differences in their phonology. Learners were recorded before exposure to the syllabus based on the LFC. Individual evaluation for learners could shed some light on some individual problems. This could indicate the areas of phonology on which learners need more guidance in addition to general ones, such as initial and medial consonant clusters, and long/short vowel distinction. Learners also had the chance to listen to their recordings, assess their improvement and recognize where they stand from mastering the required core features.

Error correction

Learners' errors should not be reviewed according to how different their pronunciation is from the NSs' but to the LFC. For example, a learner has been corrected in cases where 'live' was pronounced as [li:v] instead of [lɪv], but it was accepted when the vowel in 'go' was pronounced with a different quality (rather like a shorter /i:/).

Pronunciation exercises

The exercises used in the ELF classroom are very similar to those normally used in teaching the pronunciation elements of the traditional syllabus based on RP and/or GA. Samples of this material are provided by Hewings (2004), Avery and Ehrlich (1992) and Celce-Murcia (1996). The basic difference is that these exercises have been rethought, filtered and carefully chosen according to their relevance to the contents of the LFC: pronunciation exercises that encourage and reinforce core features were introduced to learners, while those which encourage non-core features were avoided. When the latter types of exercises introduced to class through the learners' coursebook (for example 'word

stress' and 'rising and falling intonation' in the case of *Listen Here* – Table 2 above), they were introduced receptively, without instructions that aim at encouraging learners to produce them.

It is recommended to bring the similarities between the LFC and their L1 to learners' attention. This might orient their attention towards what they are able to do, and lead them value positively their L1 knowledge (Walker, 2001b). A good sample of such exercises is presented below:

Box 1 Student handout

Vowel

- Examples: job give good car
- Underline the vowel sounds in these words:
fall learn way road
- Does your language have the same vowel sound?
Give example words:

Consonant:

- Exercise: my top work this
- Underline the consonant sounds in these words:
shoe rob good leave
- Does your language have the same consonant sounds? Give example words:

Consonant clusters:

- Examples: black drop trip queen
- Underline the consonant clusters in these words:
space play climb strong
- Does your language have the same consonant clusters? Give example words:

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(From Hewing, 2004:24)

Conclusion

By carrying out CA between the LFC and the phonology of the MSA, a pronunciation syllabus for Arab learners has been established. Applying this syllabus in classroom teaching necessitates filtering existing material for teaching pronunciation against the contents of the LFC. It has been suggested that the wide range of varieties that exists in Arabic is not likely to cause a negative impact on implementing the new syllabus. It has also been suggested that more important than any differences that might exist between MSA and NSA is whether these differences fall into core or non-core features of the LFC.

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