Challenging Native-Speakerism: Embracing the Intelligibility Principle in Pronunciation and Spoken Language Instruction

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In 2005, I coined the terms "Intelligibility Principle" and "Nativeness Principle" to describe 2 approaches to pronunciation teaching and learning. The Intelligibility Principle has since become the dominant way to describe how priorities should be set for pronunciation teaching, whether certain errors are worth the use of precious classroom time, and why native accents should not be considered desirable outcomes of pronunciation learning. In other words, the intelligibility principle "recognizes that communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong, that there is no clear correlation between accent and understanding... and that certain types of pronunciation errors may have a disproportionate role in impairing comprehensibility" (Levis, 2005, p. 370). In this *Expositions*, I argue that the intelligibility principle is desirable, not only for pronunciation teaching and learning, but that it is also appropriate for spoken language more generally, applying to speaking instruction and listening instruction and all of their subparts, including vocabulary, grammar, nonverbal gestures, as well as pronunciation. In this article, I extend what we have learned from the study of intelligibility as regards pronunciation to other aspects of spoken language to show how all aspects of spoken language learning and teaching can benefit from considerations of priorities, teaching practices, and the social nature of language use.

2005年に、私は発音指導及び発音学習に対する二つのアプローチを説明するために、「明瞭性原則」と「母語発音原則」という用語を造った。それ以来、明瞭性原則は、特定の間違いに貴重な授業時間を費やす価値があるかどうか、発音学習においてなぜネイティブの発音を目指すべきではないのかなどの発音指導の優先順位を設定する際に大きな役割を果たしている。すなわち、明瞭性原則は、「外国のアクセントが目立つ、または強い場合でも、コミュニケーションが著しく成功する可能性があることを認めている。なまりと理解の間に明確な相関関係はなく、特定のタイプの発音エラーが理解力を損なうという不釣り合いな役割を果たしている可能性がある」(Levis, 2005, p. 370)。本論文では、明瞭度の原則は発音指導や学習だけでなく、スピーキング及びリスニング指導、語彙、文法、非言語ジェスチャー、発音を含むすべてのサブパートに適用する一般的な話し言葉にも適していることを討論する。さらに、発音に関する明瞭性の研究から学んだことを話し言葉の他の側面にも拡張し、優先順位、教育実践、言語使用の社会的性質を考慮することで、話し言葉の学習と教育のあらゆる側面にどのようなメリットがあるかを示す。

Keywords: comprehensibility; intelligibility principle; nativeness principle; pronunciation; spoken language

Thithis *Expositions* talks about two principles that reflect the teaching of pronunciation specifically, the Nativeness Principle and the Intelligibility Principle. In doing so, I will argue that the Nativeness Principle in teaching pronunciation is in line with native-speakerism in other areas of English Language Teaching. I will also argue that the Intelligibility Principle is superior for the teaching not only of pronunciation but of spoken language more generally because it helps to set realistic priorities, recognize the strengths of all teachers without assuming that nativeness is a desirable qualification, and recognize the social realities of English language use in today's world.

The Nativeness and Intelligibility Principles

In the teaching of pronunciation, the specter of nativeness is always present. Whenever someone begins to speak English, listeners immediately classify speakers as fitting into categories based on nativeness. We once had a German exchange student who lived with us, and her accent was utterly nativelike. We regularly introduced her to friends as our German exchange student, and she would say "Hello" to them. Almost everyone responded the same way, saying something like "You don't sound like you're from Germany!" One day, she became so frustrated that she said to us later, "How can they say that? I just said 'Hello'!" But they could tell, and "Hello" was enough speech to tell them that her accent did not fit what they assumed of German speakers of English.

This anecdote more generally reflects the importance of the Nativeness Principle in how we judge the speech of others. Nativeness is our implicit standard for spoken language achievement, serving not only as a standard for pronunciation, but also as a measure by which oral proficiency is evaluated, and as a social signal of whether the speaker can be considered an insider or outsider in speaking the language. Even in the world of English as a Lingua Franca, with its multiple inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle accents (Kachru, 1992), a small minority of prestige inner circle accents (especially Standard Southern British and General American) continue to be prestigious among English language learners and teachers. This is evidence of what I called the Nativeness Principle (Levis, 2005), an approach to L2 English pronunciation in which the detailed description of these prestige accents determines the features that should be taught and learned.

The need to describe the features of the language that should be learned is basic to any language-teaching endeavor. All languages have lexical, syntactic, and phonological features that are important for teachers to prioritize and for learners to know about so that they can use the new language to serve their communicative needs. The Nativeness Principle, however, takes pronunciation learning beyond a sufficient understanding of phonological features to an assumption that any achievement short of sounding like a native speaker represents failure. In this respect, the Nativeness Principle represents an ELT gate-keeping measure that can be used to quickly judge whether someone is an authoritative speaker of English.

Not achieving nativelikeness in pronunciation is the norm for language learners. Indeed, for adult learners of a language, nativelike pronunciation is incredibly rare. Even though pronunciation learning continues to be possible throughout life (Flege, 1995), the kind of acquisition that is evident in children becomes more difficult with time (Piske, MacKay & Flege, 2000). But for teachers of English, the Nativeness Principle has higher stakes. It not only determines curricular and pedagogical goals, but its assumptions can determine whether teachers are considered valid and authoritative speakers of the language, even to themselves (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Golombek & Jordan, 2005). One of my students told me that when her (non-native) teacher pronounced something wrongly, she decided that the teacher should never be trusted as a model of the spoken language. This immediate and permanent judgment would never have been made of a native speaker of the language, who would have been given a pass for their pronunciation differences from a native standard.

The Nativeness Principle is the primary pronunciation-oriented aspect of a larger issue in English Language Teaching (ELT), that of native-speakerism. Holliday (2006, p. 385), describes native-speakerism as a "pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology." Despite the widely-known fact that most global interactions in English take place between L2 speakers who share only English as language of communication, native norms and expectations continue to influence what most teachers and learners consider to be correct English pronunciation.

Just as there are alternatives to the ideology of native-speakerism in ELT, there are also alternatives to the Nativeness Principle in pronunciation teaching, specifically, the Intelligibility Principle (Levis, 2005). The Intelligibility Principle is based on a different goal for the teaching and learning of spoken language than the Nativeness Principle. Whereas the Nativeness Principle has a standard of adherence to all aspects of the phonological system, the Intelligibility Principle has a standard of being understood and understanding others. While the Nativeness Principle is especially suited to pronunciation, the Intelligibility Principle applies to all aspects of spoken language.

This Exposition will expand upon the value of moving away from the assumptions of the Nativeness Principle and adhering to the assumptions of the Intelligibility Principle, not only for pronunciation but for all aspects of spoken language. As important as pronunciation is in speaking and listening, it is only one part of intelligibility. While the Nativeness Principle is very much centered on the teaching of pronunciation, the Intelligibility Principle provides a global framework for approaching the teaching of spoken language that is in line with communicative goals. As a result, the Intelligibility Principle is not only likely to be more successful, but it is more able to recognize the strengths of all teachers.

Native-Speakerism and Pronunciation Teaching

Being a native speaker of a language brings with it assumed values and deeply-held ideologies about what is normal and what is deficient in the speaking of a language, and, correspondingly, in those who speak the language. Although being a native speaker of a language is never an earned accomplishment, assumptions about the normality and superiority of nativeness do not apply only to the language but rather expand beyond the language itself to include social and professional advantages. In languages

with many dialects, nativeness is associated with different varieties of the language, but one of the varieties is usually seen as the best, and this evaluation may bring with it extra advantages that apply to assumed expertise having to do with the culture associated with the language. For example, in the United States, General American (GA) is seen as carrying advantages over Southern US English in many (but not all) contexts of speaking. GA speakers are seen as better models of how to speak English, and they may have advantages in getting jobs or having their opinions taken seriously.

Nativeness can thus be socially complicated within different countries and cultures. Davies (2014) critically examined how the colonial history affected how new varieties of French and English developed in their colonies. In countries in which French was a dominant colonial language (e.g., Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire), standard French, as spoken in Paris and its environs, became the model of how French was to be spoken. In colonies in which English was the colonial language (e.g., India, Nigeria), nativized varieties were given room to develop even though the prestige varieties were still seen as superior. These different approaches resulted in different attitudes toward the colonial language. In French-speaking colonies, fewer Indigenous writers used French because French remained the vehicle of a colonialized identity that writers felt could not truly communicate the nuances of African life. In Davies's terminology, they never became native users of French. In colonies where English was dominant, writers much more frequently became native users who used distinctively colonial English varieties, and they felt fully comfortable using English to create literature that reflected their indigenous experiences. In other words, French remained a colonial language while English became a new indigenous code.

In Japan, the concept of "native speaker" is complicated in a different way in that the concept can be expressed by different words expressed using different writing systems. The katakana word is typically associated with native speakers of English who teach English in Japan, but the kanji word is associated with native speakers of Japanese (Hashimoto, 2018). In both cases, the terms involve an "inseparable relationship between, people, language, and place" (Hashimoto, 2018, p. 61). This distinction in terminology has also been used to encourage nationalism and to separate those who are Japanese from those who are not (Hashimoto, 2018). It has also been used to discriminate against native speakers of English who teach English in Japan (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018) by treating "them [native speakers of English] as instruments rather than people" (Hashimoto, 2018, p. 62).

Intelligibility - A Principle for Language Teaching

The power of the Nativeness Principle and of native-speakerism comes from hidden assumptions about not only what is best but also what is normal. This means that the Nativeness Principle can only be overcome by questioning its assumptions and providing a different way of thinking about language learning and teaching. This different way of thinking is seen in the Intelligibility Principle. Both the nativeness and intelligibility principles affect how we conceive of the goals of language teaching and learning, the techniques and activities we employ, the topics we teach, the questions of who can be a legitimate teacher, and the social reasons for using an additional language. In all respects, both principles give different answers to the questions they raise.

The nativeness principle, and the assumptions of native-speakerism more generally, "constrain and enable what people say and do, and in the process, are also transformed and/or reshaped by agentive processes" (Bouchard, 2017, p. 328). They set forth the native speaker of the language as the pinnacle of achievement, despite the fact that native speakers rarely have to achieve anything to reach the pinnacle. In baseball terms, native speakers were born on 3rd base and think this makes them superior to anyone who does not start with their advantages. For pronunciation, native speakers, by definition, have native pronunciation. They perceive and produce with ease, and their intuitive understanding of the phonology and phonetics of their native language allows them, even without training, to notice small deviations from what is expected and to classify these deviations into whether they reflect different native dialects, pathological difficulties, or foreign-accented speech. Native speakers are, in other words, superior accent detectors. They are so good at this task that they can even detect accented speech when the speech is filtered to mask the sounds being used, and afterwards played backwards (Munro et al., 2010). In addition, nativeness confers the same blessing of intuitive understanding on the use of vocabulary, syntax (Coppieters, 1987), and pragmatics, as well as the ability to freely use the language to convey complex meanings without conscious attention to the structures of the language. The ultimate goal of language learning and teaching, according to the assumptions of the nativeness principle, is for teachers and learners to achieve the pinnacle of native achievement and to continue to pass on its standards to others whose goal is to communicate with native speakers.

The intelligibility principle is also a principle for language teaching and learning. Intelligibility includes both actual understanding and ease of understanding, two levels that are called intelligibility and comprehensibility by Munro and Derwing (1995). Actual understanding includes, in the terms used by Smith and Nelson (1985), the ability to decode the words that are spoken, to understand the messages being communicated, and to correctly infer the underlying intentions of the communication. Comprehensibility, on the other hand, is a measure of how easily understandable speech is. The intelligibility principle thus sets forth a goal of communicative effectiveness that may differ according to the purposes of the interaction. Speakers and listeners of the language have a common goal, which is to understand what each other is saying and to be understood. While native speakers of the language clearly have a head start on these goals in comparison to those learning it as an additional language, this advantage is limited. Their status as native speakers does not guarantee that they will be able to be intelligible or comprehensible to their interlocutors. Achieving intelligibility is a skill that sometimes requires only word-level understanding, but in many cases, requires more sophisticated use of the language.

Even though I am a pronunciation teacher and many of my comments about nativeness and native-speakerism focus on pronunciation, I argue that the Intelligibility Principle is not just an approach to pronunciation teaching but rather a way to understand the teaching and learning of spoken language more generally. Pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and other aspects of language knowledge are ways to achieve communication in the L2. Intelligibility should be understood as a general principle for language learning and teaching, as expressed in Figure 1 (from Levis, 2020, p. 317). In the Figure, all of the outer circles include features of language, but not everything that can be classified within those features is essential to intelligible speech. One can speak effectively and understand others without a lexicon of 80,000 words (indeed, most native speakers don't have this level), or an understanding of all spoken grammatical features, just as one can understand and be understood with a noticeable accent. Similarly, the figure indicates that what is true of pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax is also true of the many other aspects of spoken language, including aspects such as pragmatics, gestures, and fluency. What matters for any area of language is to understand and be understood and to have strategies to ensure that when the inevitable struggles occur, a language user can negotiate understanding through a well-developed strategic competence.

Figure 1
Intelligibility as a Principle for Language Learning
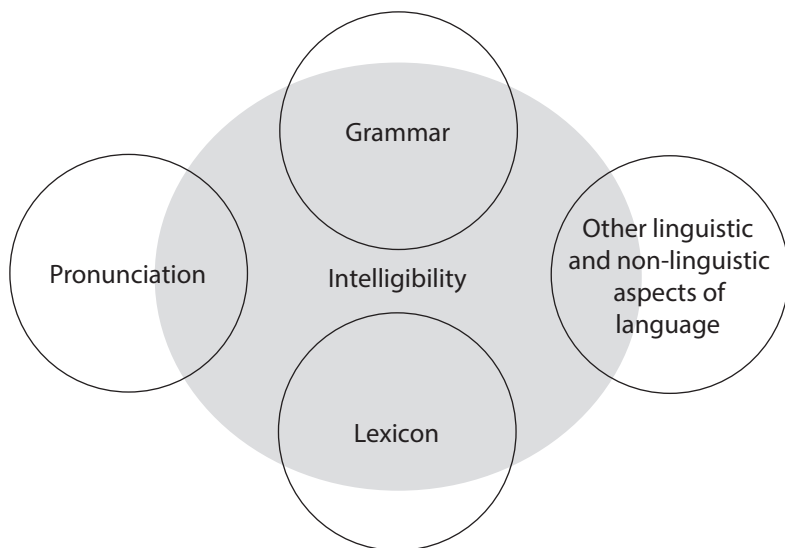
The Centrality of Priorities

The Nativeness Principle is ultimately incomplete and is fraught with internal contradictions about learning and teaching priorities (Bouchard, 2017). This is partly because good enough pronunciation is both necessary for intelligibility but also of minor importance. For pronunciation, the principle assumes that achieving excellent (i.e., native-like) pronunciation will ultimately lead to success in spoken communication. This is simply not the case for two reasons. First, there is compelling evidence that accentedness does not equal intelligibility. Speakers whose accentedness is very non-native can nonetheless be fully intelligible (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Second, there is also no evidence that intelligible and comprehensible speech is the result of "good pronunciation". Pronunciation is only one aspect of spoken language abilities, but understanding is not guaranteed, except at the most basic level, by native pronunciation.

Evidence for this second reason is found in Jenkins' (2000) groundbreaking study of intelligibility in NNS-NNS communication in English. She found that loss of intelligibility was influenced not only by pronunciation but also by errors in syntax and vocabulary. Of these, pronunciation was the most frequent

trigger of unintelligible speech (about 67% of all instances), but syntax and vocabulary also regularly caused loss of intelligibility, indicating that a focus on pronunciation overly limits what learners need to achieve intelligible speech. Furthermore, in Jenkins' study, unintelligibility was defined narrowly, by obvious difficulties in understanding words. Her methodology thus flagged only the most obvious losses of intelligibility (i.e., when individual words were not understood). Other aspects of intelligibility, such as struggling to understand a message or to interpret intent, were not targeted in her study. Nor were struggles with comprehensibility, in which listeners worked harder to process speech. Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012) demonstrated correlations between holistic comprehensibility ratings and pronunciation, lexico-grammatical features of L2 speech, fluency, and construction of spoken discourse. This indicates that comprehensibility is not simply a matter of basic structural components of spoken language (pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax) but also of how easily one puts structural components together in unplanned speech (fluency) and the ways in which messages are constructed (discourse features). Jenkins hints that comprehensibility was also a factor in the NNS-NNS interactions when she indicates that interacting with speakers of different L1s led to both more accurate pronunciation and greater struggles in understanding. This reflects another important aspect of the Intelligibility Principle, that of the importance of listening. The Nativeness Principle emphasizes production while the Intelligibility Principle recognizes that listening is a critical skill, especially in learning to listen to a wide variety of other speakers, both native and non-native.

Who Is a Language Teacher?

Even though "there is no cultural, professional, pedagogic, or economic excuse for defining a teacher's professional worth purely and narrowly in terms of their speakerhood" (Holliday, 2015, p. 16), adherence to the Nativeness Principle does precisely that. It presents a picture of who should teach spoken language: a native speaker, preferably one who commands one of the prestigious pronunciation models and can speak fluently and accurately. Under the Nativeness Principle, non-native teachers find their worth being valued in terms of an implicit and hidden comparison to native speakers (Bouchard, 2017). In such a comparison, non-native teachers may be acceptable if they are fluent and automatic in their speaking and native-like in their pronunciation, but the nativeness principle assumes them to be questionable models no matter their expertise. Thus the native/nonnative dichotomy is fundamental to "the politics of labeling in the field of TESOL,

in which non-native status is assumed to be inferior" (Hashimoto, 2018, p. 62). For pronunciation teaching, the Nativeness Principle does not assume the worst aspects of Holliday's description of native-speakerism, in which native speakers represent Western culture and ELT methodology more generally, but this does not change the damage wrought by the assumption that non-native teachers are questionable spoken language teachers, that their speaking and pronunciation represent something that will be caught like a cold. In reality, a teacher's nativeness is not a vaccine against language errors, nor is non-nativeness a disease that is contagious.

The Intelligibility Principle, on the other hand, has a different answer to who can be an effective teacher of spoken language. The primary qualification includes expertise, both as a language teacher, and in teaching speech and pronunciation, including the ability to diagnose challenges, set priorities, and provide helpful feedback. Nativeness is neither a sufficient nor necessary qualification. Indeed, non-native teachers may even be better models and teachers because of their experience and skills in learning the L2 (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Murphy, 2014). One of the reasons that native and nonnative teachers can both be equally effective is that effectiveness is dependent on expertise not nativeness. In a study by Levis et al. (2016) of two relatively inexperienced pronunciation teachers, one native and one nonnative, there was no advantage to nativeness in terms of learner improvement. In addition, learners in the two classes rated both teachers as equally excellent. The study was undertaken to test whether learners taught the same content by a native and a nonnative teacher who were otherwise well-matched (in gender, age, training, and enthusiasm) would differ in improvement. Unsurprisingly, there was no difference due to teacher L1.

Social Aspects of Language Use

Perhaps the most limiting aspect of a focus on nativeness is its focus on language form and correctness (competence in Chomskyan terms) rather than language use. In other words, the Nativeness Principle is performative, whereas the Intelligibility Principle is communicative. A focus on nativeness, in other words, has no obvious or necessary connection to social contexts. Intelligibility, which assumes language use in social context, does. Nativeness also assumes a target that is ultimately out of reach for almost all language learners, especially when it comes to pronunciation, where L2 users can at best pass as native in limited contexts. Piller (2002), in a study of bilingual couples in Germany, found that the L2 speaker of the couple could often pass as native in service encounters (e.g., in a shop), which for some L2 speakers

became a kind of game they played. Their passing as native was often more successful if they were skilled at employing dialect-specific discourse markers from a nearby dialect area. This social consciousness was one of the two key features of L2 speakers (along with a cognitive approach to pronunciation) whose pronunciation was especially skilled (Moyer, 2014).

The power of social factors in pronunciation is also seen in a study of American women married to Norwegians and living in Norway. Lybeck (2002) explained that the development of social networks in Norway is particularly difficult for outsiders. Women whose extended families helped provide a social network for them showed more Norwegian-like pronunciation of /r/ (a distinctive sound in Norwegian), while those who struggled to establish social networks did not show the same use of Norwegian /r/. In one interesting case, a woman whose social network was initially strong converged on a Norwegian /r/ pronunciation, but when her marriage started to struggle, she began to use an American English /r/ to reflect her divergence from the social network that she had had.

A focus on nativeness does not promote convergence in communication, especially when speaking to those for whom nativeness is also an unrealistic goal. Jenkins (2000) argues that most interactions in English around the world take place between L2 speakers of English who do not share a common language outside of English. They use English because the social context and their communicative goals require it. Jenkins (2000) also points out that speakers, when they are cooperative in task completion with those who have different accents in English, tend to converge on a pronunciation they believe will be more intelligible.

The social power of accent, and of native-speakerism more generally, can be seen in research by Gluszek and Dovidio (2010), in which learners believe that their lack of native pronunciation is the source of the discrimination and social stigma that they experience. This stigma is often left unquestioned, but it is a powerful force limiting the development of an L2 identity and a sense of belonging to their new culture (Miller, 2003). Obviously, these feelings of stigma have some reality. Pronunciation is the most obvious marker of being an outsider in social contexts, and Lippi-Green (2011) and Munro (2003) have convincingly demonstrated that accented speech provokes discriminatory attitudes and behavior. However, this does not mean that nativeness is an appropriate way to understand the world. Rather, like other negatively-charged *-isms* (e.g., racism, sexism), native-speakerism reflects a faulty view of the world in which some people are granted power and prestige based not on merit but birth.

Nor is it the case that nativeness in pronunciation or any other aspect of language is necessary for communication. Clarke and Garrett (2004), in a groundbreaking study of listeners' ability to adjust to unfamiliar accents, found that native listeners adjusted to unfamiliar accents with as little as one minute of exposure. Further research has shown that exposure to multiple speakers with similar accents results in quicker adjustments with new speakers with the same accents and new unfamiliar accents. Baese-Berk, Bradlow and Wright (2013) showed that more extensive experience with accented speech generalized not only to new speakers with the same accents but even to those with new accents, suggesting that in some contexts (e.g., university lectures), providing training for native listeners may be helpful in overcoming the initial challenges in negotiating accented speech (Kang & Moran, 2019).

To conclude, social awareness is central to the development of L2 pronunciation skills and has little to do with nativeness in pronunciation or in other aspects of language. Learning an L2 should have the goal of intercultural communication, and an ideology of native-speakerism gets in the way of this more important goal in language learning (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2017). Levis and Moyer (2014) summarize the issues this way:

> L2 pronunciation is a deeply personal and inherently social phenomenon; it is an integral part of communicative fluency and at the same time reflects our sense of self. L2 pronunciation also reaches beyond the speaker, since listeners judge accent in relationship to supposed social and personal traits. In other words, accents come to symbolize much more than traditional notions of native and non-native speakers. (p. 275)

Acknowledgments

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