4 Appendix: Information sheets

A Defining intelligibility

Intelligibility is a more achievable and desirable goal for most adult learners than trying to reach a native-like pronunciation. After all, many people who speak English as their native language have different accents and may, as adults, change the area or country they live in without changing their accents significantly.

However, intelligibility is a complex concept – we need to be very clear about what we mean when we use it to make assessments. In particular, listening is a creative process, and the person listening to a speaker is an important ingredient in determining whether or not the speaker is considered intelligible.

Intelligibility involves the hearer and speaker, as well as contextual factors:

Hearer factors:

Familiarity with the accent, experience in listening to accents, ability and expertise in understanding different accents, hearing, inferencing skills, attitude to the ethnic group with a similar accent, knowledge of topic etc.

Speaker factors:

Pronunciation (eg stress, rhythm, intonation, voice quality and sounds), delivery (eg hesitations, uncertainty, volume), grammar, sound symbol relationships.

Contextual factors:

Background noise, predictability of language in context. Two people can judge the intelligibility of the same speaker considerably differently.

When we say their utterances are intelligible we may mean that:

- we can understand what they are saying, or
- it is easy to understand them, or
- their accent is not too strong, or
- we understand ‘enough’ of what they are saying.
But how much do we have to understand, or how easy should it be to understand, someone that we judge to be intelligible?

Pronunciation has always been a consideration in assessing our students’ speaking. However, it has only been since the reaccreditation of the CSWE in 2003 that assessment criteria relating to pronunciation have been incorporated into every spoken outcome at levels I to III. This has been done primarily through the notion of intelligibility. While this encourages teachers to give pronunciation the time and attention that it deserves in the classroom, the criterion of intelligibility presents challenges to the assessing teacher.

Criteria used in assessment of intelligibility

CSWE I

Module B LO1  Can provide basic personal information using spoken language
Criterion: uses correct word stress

Module C LO1  Can participate in a short spoken transactional exchange
Module C LO2  Can conduct a short telephone conversation
Module D LO1  Can give a spoken description
Module D LO2  Can tell a short recount
Module E LO1  Can give spoken instructions
Criterion: pronounces key utterances intelligibly

CSWE II

Module A LO2  Can participate in short casual conversation on general topics
Module A LO3  Can negotiate a spoken transaction for goods and services
Module D LO2  Can participate in spoken transaction to obtain information
Module E LO1  Can leave a telephone message
Module E LO2  Can participate in a short conversational discussion
Module F LO1  Can participate in a short conversation involving a recount
Module F LO2  Can participate in a short interaction involving explanation
Criterion: pronounces key utterances intelligibly
CSWE III

Module A LO2  Can provide a spoken explanation

Criterion: pronounces key utterances intelligibly

Module A LO3  Can participate in a discussion

Criterion: pronounces key vocabulary items correctly and uses appropriate stress and intonation patterns

Module C LO2  Can participate in a casual conversation with topic changes
Module D LO2  Can participate in a transactional telephone conversation
Module E LO2  Can negotiate a complex problematic spoken exchange
Module F LO2  Can participate in an interview
Module G LO2  Can deliver a short oral presentation

Criterion: pronounces key utterances intelligibly and uses appropriate rhythm and intonation patterns

Note: pronunciation is assessed in slightly different ways in the various spoken outcomes, but at all levels teachers must assess whether learners can pronounce key utterances intelligibly in the majority of the learning outcomes.