Pronunciation in discourse: assessing intelligibility

Lynda Yates
AMEP Research Centre
Jacky Springall and teachers
AMES Vic
Context of the study

• Pronunciation can be invisible on the curriculum and therefore neglected (Macdonald 2002)
• If something is assessed, it is attended to
• Revised CSWE includes assessment of intelligibility
• Tick box:
  - Would you say that this speaker pronounces key utterances intelligibly? Yes/No
Aims of the project

- To compare and explore assessments of intelligibility made by AMEP teachers and by other members of the community
- To explore the factors that teachers and non-teachers perceive as contributing to intelligibility
- To develop guidelines for the assessment of intelligibility in CSWE certificate I
The project design

- Samples of speech from Cert I (exit level) learners
- Excerpts selected and analysed for non-native-like features
- Samples put on CD played and to 21 AMEP teachers and 21 community members (mixed SES, L1 English)
- Samples rated on 4 different measures
- Results presented to groups of teachers to workshop implications for guidelines
- Trial and development of guidelines and associated professional development
What is intelligibility?

• Very tricky concept
• Involves both hearer:
  – Attitude, experience, ability, expertise, hearing, inferencing skills etc.
• And speaker:
  – Pronunciation (including stress, rhythm, intonation, voice quality and sounds), delivery (e.g. hesitations, uncertainty, volume), grammar (or skills in sound symbol relationships if reading)
• And context:
  – Background noise, familiarity of hearer and speaker with topic etc.
• However, alternatives (accuracy, native-like) inappropriate
How do we measure intelligibility?

- Yes/No as in CSWE (Q1)
- Estimates of how much is understood (Q2)
- Estimates of how difficult a speaker is to understand (i.e. listener load) Q3
- Transcription of what is actually said (Q5)
- Study looked at all 4 measures
Assess these speakers for intelligibility

• After you have heard each the sample for each speaker, answer Q1, Q2 and Q3
• After this, you will hear the second sample for speakers 2 and 4
• Write down what you think the speaker is saying after each short utterance
Overall findings

• What were the differences between the AMEP teachers and the non-specialists
• How consistent were the groups?
• What were the differences between ratings for different speakers - What impacts on intelligibility?
• What were the differences between the different measures of intelligibility - How should we assess it?
• Implications and activities for discussion
Differences between AMEP teachers and non-specialists

- AMEP teachers were more lenient in their assessments of intelligibility than non-specialists.
- However, results only significant only for task (Q5) (also for Q2, without outlier).
- That is: AMEP teachers were better than non-specialists at actually transcribing what learners said.
Teachers vary more in their assessments, but less in their ability to actually understand

- More variation among the teachers for Q2 and Q3
- That is: the teachers differed among themselves more than the non-specialists did
- However: More variation among non-specialists in their ability to transcribe what the learners actually said (Q5)
Spread among ESL teachers and non-specialists for Q 2
Spread among AMEP teachers and non-specialists for Q 3
Spread among AMEP teachers and non-specialists for Q 5
Individual listeners varied

- Some teachers regularly assessed low (e.g. 6, 19 & 21)
- Some regularly high (e.g. 4)
- Possible factors:
  - Teaching higher levels (hard markers)
  - Familiarity with language backgrounds
  - No common agreement on:
    - What intelligibility means
    - What threshold of intelligibility is
    - Whose perspective we take when we assess
Conclusions on differences between groups

• Tendency for teachers to be more ‘generous’ than non-teachers
• Tendency for teachers to actually understand more
• Variation between teachers in their estimates and assessments
• Variation between non-specialists in how much they understand
• Differences in assessments of different speakers
Differences between speakers

• Groups tended to agree on most and least intelligible:
  - Speaker 3 most intelligible (18 AMEP, 20 non-specialists - index: 473)
  - Speaker 4 least intelligible (2 AMEP, 3 non-specialists - index: 232)
• But disagreed on others, particularly 1 and 2
What made speakers intelligible or not?

• Why was speaker 3 intelligible?
  - Vietnamese background - familiar?
  - Uses everyday words of one syllable.
  - Most vowels close to standard
  - 19 consonant probs, in initial, final but not medial
  - Context was clear and the vocabulary basic?
  - Rhythm? Sentences? Key words?

• Why was speaker 4 not intelligible?
  - Columbian - less familiar?.
  - Several multisyllabic words; multiple sound problems
  - Sometimes sounds plus stress
  - Uncertainty of delivery?
What kinds of comments did people make?

• Stress, rhythm and emphasis.
• Context to infer meaning.
• Clarity; speed
• Words seem to run into each other;
• Missing word-final consonants (sp2 not sp 4)
• Could not distinguish enough individual key words to make sense of the context.
What impacts on intelligibility?

• No simple answer

Intelligibility affected by multiple factors including:
- How the speaker organises what they say
- What kinds of words they use (how ambitious they are)
- How salient they make key words
- Segmental errors (partic. in multisyllabic words)
- Rhythm/stress difficulties compound segmental errors
- Fluency/speed can interfere if key words are not salient
- Lack of chunks

So what should learners practise?
- Stress and use of appropriate sounds in key words
- Multisyllabic words
- Chunking, and making key words prominent
- Delivery: e.g. slow down, avoid hesitation and uncertainty
- Signposting to provide context
Implications and issues for assessing intelligibility

• What do we mean by intelligibility? How much we can understand? How hard we have to work?
• Intelligible to whom? - ‘a native speaker of average good will’? (Fraser 2000)
• Large range of listener variables influence judgements:
  – Familiarity with accents, motivation of listener, sympathy for learners
• How much needs to be understood to be considered intelligible? - need a shared understanding
• Should we assess:
  – Actual understanding?
  – Estimates of understanding/ listener load?
So how should we assess intelligibility?

- Use tasks where there is communicative need, so learners need to be intelligible?
  - task design - transfer of unknown information

- Are we making judgements on behalf of the community or only for ourselves?
  - shared understanding of level of intelligibility
  - moderation forums

- Impact of ease/difficulty for understanding on assessment of intelligibility
  - concept of “listener load”
  - develop a PD tool to assist assessments
References