

Towards a Conceptualization of Intelligibility of English as an International Language: Historical Definitions and Contemporary Trends

*Hacia una conceptualización de la inteligibilidad del inglés como
lengua internacional: definiciones históricas y tendencias
contemporáneas*

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Abstract

The fact that non-native English speakers have outnumbered native ones demands a shift in regard to pedagogical practices in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Caine, 2008; Rose et al., 2020), especially in relation to pronunciation (Isaacs, 2018; Pennington, 2021), which has traditionally set forth the importance of nativelikeness. Nowadays, the discussion, still open, centers around intelligibility-based pronunciation. The present article presents a review and examination of

what has been defined as intelligibility by the most salient authors along seven decades. Although it has been associated with various other terms such as effectiveness (Catford, 1950), comprehension (Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979), comprehensibility (James, 1998; Munro & Derwing, 1995b; Smith & Nelson, 1985), interpretability (Smith, 1992; Smith & Nelson, 1985), understandability (Kenworthy, 1987), communication (Kenworthy, 1987), and communicativity (James, 1998), there seems to be a consensus that intelligibility is a complex phenomenon that involves production and recognition/reception of oral language. This review intends to aid L2 pronunciation teachers in determining their own stance and standards to be applied in their own pedagogical practices.

Keywords: intelligibility, L2 pronunciation, lingua franca core, English as lingua franca, native speaker norm

Resumen

El hecho que los hablantes no nativos del inglés hayan superado en número a los hablantes nativos ha causado un cambio gradual con respecto a las prácticas pedagógicas adoptadas en la enseñanza del inglés (*English Language Teaching, ELT*) (Caine, 2008; Rose et al., 2020), especialmente aquellas asociadas a la enseñanza de la pronunciación (Isaacs, 2018; Pennington, 2021), la cual se ha centrado, tradicionalmente, en el hablante nativo. Hoy en día, la discusión, la cual aún se encuentra abierta, se enfoca en la pronunciación basada en la inteligibilidad.

Este trabajo presenta una revisión bibliográfica de las definiciones del concepto de inteligibilidad propuestas por los autores más destacados en un periodo de setenta años. Aunque se ha asociado a varios otros términos como eficacia (Catford, 1950), comprensión (Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979), comprensibilidad (James, 1998; Munro & Derwing, 1995b; Smith & Nelson, 1985), interpretabilidad (Smith, 1992; Smith & Nelson, 1985), entendibilidad (Kenworthy, 1987), comunicación (Kenworthy, 1987), y comunicatividad (James, 1998), parece haber cierto consenso en que la inteligibilidad es un fenómeno complejo el cual involucra la producción y reconocimiento/recepción de la lengua en forma oral. Se espera que este trabajo de revisión sirva como ayuda a los profesores de pronunciación de L2 en la toma de decisiones sobre sus propias posturas y estándares que han de utilizar en sus propias prácticas pedagógicas.

Palabras clave: inteligibilidad, pronunciación en L2, lingua franca core, inglés como lingua franca, norma del hablante nativo

Introduction

The fact that English is the language of international communication is beyond question. Speakers from different communities use English to exchange ideas on a daily basis as globalization and informatization have turned this into an essential capacity (Xue & Zuo, 2013). This has caused that today Non-Native Speakers (NNS) outnumber Native Speakers (NS), i.e., native speakers are not the predominant users of the language (Baese-Berk et al., 2020; Candan & İnal, 2020; Wang & Wen, 2023). This has provoked a gradual shift in second and foreign language scholars in regard to approaches in language teaching, especially in relation to pronunciation, which has traditionally set forth the importance of nativelikeness. Although the debate is still open, nowadays there seems to be some consensus that the focus of instruction should be on intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation (Burri, 2015; Afshari & Ketabi, 2016).

The reasons for and the usefulness in addressing intelligibility in the context of L2 English teaching and research are manifold. For instance, intelligibility is essential for communication irrespective of whether the interaction takes place between native or nonnative speakers. Therefore, it should play a major role in the teaching of a second language (Levis, 2018). In this regard, both research and discussions on intelligibility provide us with valuable input to address critical aspects which are to be considered in pronunciation curriculum design. In other words, this helps us determine the priorities in pronunciation teaching. Another reason lies in the fact that intelligibility-related studies may allow us to identify which pronunciation features need to be tackled for a specific community of L2 English speaker. Based on this rationale, we aim to provide a historical review of what has been proposed as a definition of intelligibility through time as well as to discuss existing trends on this issue.

Although other reviews of intelligibility are available, each of them addresses only one dimension of the construct. For example, Cruz (2007) offers a descriptive comparison of definitions of intelligibility up until 2003. Kaur (2018), in turn, focuses on intelligibility within the scope of World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), but does not integrate

L2 pronunciation research. Additionally, neither of these reviews incorporates more recent theoretical developments such as the shift from the Nateness Principle to the Intelligibility Principle or the ideological critiques that now shape intelligibility research. More recent work such as Kang et al. (2025) provides an empirical mapping, but explicitly excludes conceptual discussion. Finally, Jeong and Lindemann (2025) offer a critical ideological review focused specifically on nativeness.

Unlike the works mentioned above, the present review is historically grounded and provides a cross-paradigmatic synthesis across WE, ELF, and L2 pronunciation research, integrating recent theoretical advances and tracing seven decades of definitional and methodological evolution. In addition, it proposes an updated, unified conceptualization of intelligibility. This combination of historical depth, theoretical currency, and integrative scope cannot be found in previous reviews.

English Language Teaching and Intelligibility

The worldwide predominance of English makes it necessary to emphasize the importance of English Language Teaching (ELT) which is still, by some, thought of as best implemented when it is based upon native speaker norms (Fitria, 2020). This view is grounded in the notion of native-speakerism, which Holliday (2005, p. 6) defined as “an established 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.” From this perspective, native speaker teachers are idealized and positioned as superior with respect to non-native teachers. This native-speaker-centered stance seems to be true for all aspects of ELT, especially pronunciation, a phenomenon that involves the production of sounds of speech, which includes articulation, stress, and intonation.

With the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the current status of English in a globalized world, a new approach to pronunciation teaching has been installed, which does not hold the native speaker norm as the ultimate goal. Instead, it aims to put intelligibility at the forefront of L2 pronunciation attainment (Nguyen, 2020). This new

paradigm in L2 English pronunciation teaching was termed by Levis (2018; 2020) as the Intelligibility Principle.

Even though the Intelligibility Principle has gained more supporters (Kang & Ahn, 2013; Saldiraner, 2020), pronunciation teaching still presents a series of shortcomings such as the lack of inclusion of intelligibility-based pronunciation features in teaching materials as well as syllabus design which still rely on the native speaker norm, specifically on standard British and General American English (Kiczowski, 2019).

Additionally, in spite of the fact that a number of L2 English teachers aim at intelligibility (Nguyen & Newton, 2020; Yagiz, 2018) rather than native-like pronunciation, there are still teachers who resist this change and prefer to aim at the native norm (Bouchioua, 2019). Also, teachers neither have a clear idea of how to incorporate the teaching of pronunciation in their lessons (Yagiz, 2018), nor are they sufficiently confident to teach it (Bai & Yuan, 2018). Regarding this latter point, teachers are of crucial importance as they are in charge of preparing students for effective communication with other speakers in international contexts. Thus, intelligibility is a relevant concept to teachers (Yazan, 2015). However, there is no consensual definition for this construct and its measurement has not been less problematic.

A review of the term through time

One of the first to coin the term intelligibility is Abercrombie back in 1949. In that work, the author refers to the purpose of the teaching of pronunciation to foreign language learners and questions the need for them to acquire perfect pronunciation in the target language (L2), stating that they need nothing other than “comfortably intelligible pronunciation” (Abercrombie, 1949, p. 120). He also asserts that the teaching of pronunciation should not have an unrealistic purpose (such as matching the non-native speaker’s pronunciation to that of a native speaker’s), but one that, in spite of being limited, can be completely achieved. This is attained, partly, by means of the accomplishment of intelligibility. Thus, in accordance with Abercrombie (1949), the teaching of pronunciation should

focus on specific difficulties which the learner faces rather than other more complex aspects such as segmentals and suprasegmentals, which can be addressed later. From this point of view, it is necessary to decide which elements of pronunciation should be considered most salient in order to attain intelligibility. Such elements will be determined by the structure of the target language, whereas those which require dedication on the part of the learner will be determined by the mother tongue.

The ideas proposed by Abercrombie (1949) triggered Catford's reaction (1950), who also contributed in order to define intelligibility. Catford (1950) referred to the cooperative function of human communication. For example, a speaker may request their interlocutor (a hearer) to close a window, who will, in turn, respond to that request, ideally, by means of closing it. In this sense, when the hearer responds to the speaker's utterance appropriately, we can state that the primary function of speech was effective, as the message has been intelligible. Thus, Catford (1950) establishes a connection between the notion of effectiveness and the notion of intelligibility. However, the author warns that effectiveness is not the same as intelligibility, since an utterance may be, or not, effective; yet, it may be, or not, intelligible. Consequently, what Catford (1950) adopts as the notion of intelligibility is that in which the hearer "understands the words, i.e. if his response is appropriate to the linguistic forms of the utterance." (p. 8). Put differently, if an utterance is intelligible, it follows the semantic habits of a linguistic community whose language is in use at that moment.

A second contribution made by Catford (1950) is related to the requirements which need to be met in order for intelligibility to take place. The first of these requirements is in relation to the speaker's selection of phonological, morphological, and syntactic elements. Then, the speaker must use such elements appropriately. That is, their execution must be performed in such a way that it is as close as possible to the norm established in the linguistic community in which the speaker is taking part. This stage is followed by the transmission of sounds by means of the physical medium. Here, the hearer perceives auditorily and processes the

language sounds in order to associate them to a mental image. Then, the hearer identifies the linguistic forms which they perceive in order to react in accordance with the semantic norms of the linguistic community in which they are. This final stage is what Catford (1950) calls the interpretation stage.

Another contribution made by Catford to the conceptualization of intelligibility is the notion of “threshold of intelligibility” (1950, p. 13). This idea refers to the degree of exposure a listener has had with respect to the linguistic habits used by a specific speaker. Thus, a listener who is highly familiar with the linguistic features used by that speaker is said to have a low threshold of intelligibility, which increases the degree of intelligibility of the speaker. For example, a foreign language teacher who is familiar with the pronunciation features used by their students, which may differ from the native norm in the L2, will have a low threshold of intelligibility. That is to say, the teacher will be able to understand their students better than other listeners who have not been exposed to their speech.

Catford’s contributions (1950) provide an ampler scope to describe and debate what intelligibility entails. Interestingly, he elicits the importance of the listener (perception phonology) as well as sociolinguistic, syntactical, morphological, and pragmatic features. We agree that all these features are undoubtedly present in language production; however, we believe that such an ample spectrum does not favor a more precise definition of the term, which is our interest in this work.

Later, other more explicitly formulated definitions of intelligibility emerged. One of them rose from an empirical study on intercultural communication carried out by Smith and Rafiqzad (1979), in which a difference between two independent constructs was made. These were known as intelligibility and comprehension, and were operationalized by the two authors. Intelligibility was defined as a listener’s “capacity for understanding a word or words when spoken/read in the context of a sentence being spoken/read at natural speed” (Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979, p. 371). In practical terms, for the sake of their study, the authors

operationalized the construct as the listener's capacity to understand words and complete a cloze exercise which was done by a total of 1,386 participants from various linguistic backgrounds.

As for comprehension, the authors stated "we feel comprehension involves a great deal more than intelligibility; however, we realize that the greater the comprehension of the context material, the more likely intelligibility will occur" (Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979, p. 371). Unfortunately, the authors did not provide further details on what this sentence entails. However, one of the authors would later make a clearer difference between these two concepts.

In order to elucidate what intelligibility involves, Smith and Nelson (1985) conducted a bibliographic review of 163 academic papers related to the intelligibility of English in international contexts which served as a basis for a number of ideas which had a great impact on later work. Therefore, we present the authors' ideas in more detail in the six points that follow.

1) What speaking community should be intelligible to what listening community and the naturalness of unintelligibility. This first point proposed by Smith and Nelson (1985) supports the idea that a supposed universality of the intelligibility of English is not correct, as there have always been dialectal varieties which are not mutually intelligible (this applies, of course, to many other widely spoken languages with numerous dialectal varieties such as Spanish or German). According to these authors, this is a natural phenomenon; therefore, a speaker should be concerned about being intelligible only to listeners who are potential interlocutors. This belief is similar to Ekong's proposal (1982), who claimed that a linguistic variety shared by a community should be intelligible to those speakers with whom there is a will to establish a common social function. This happens, for instance, when speakers whose mother tongue (L1) is not English intend to establish communication with each other by means of using English. This type of communicative, intercultural and interlinguistic relationship which takes place in international contexts is known as "English as an International Language" (EIL) (Smith & Via, 1982; Pennycook,

2017). Hence, it is worth mentioning that the vast amount of research on intelligibility that is available is based on the English language as it enjoys the status of *lingua franca* (Nickerson, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2005).

2) Who should determine whether a speaker's English is intelligible or not. This second idea (Smith & Nelson, 1985) states that native speakers are not to be the judges of what should be considered intelligible or unintelligible. This is based on the argument that, in the EIL context, non-native speakers of English are those who should decide on the threshold of intelligibility, as there is an increasing number of interactions which are carried out in English among non-native speakers.

The increase in the number of non-native speakers involves a decrease in the degree of influence exerted by native speakers from predominantly English-speaking countries (Maley, 2010) from the so-called inner circle (Kachru, 1985). Regarding this point, other authors are more categorical, such as Widdowson (1994), who asserted that control over how English develops worldwide is neither a prerogative of inner circle native speakers nor any others'.

3) The myth of the native speaker as the most intelligible language user. This third aspect of interest (Smith & Nelson, 1985) points out that native speakers are not necessarily more intelligible than non-native speakers. An example of this is shown in the results of a previous study by Smith and Rafiqzad (1979), in which speech samples from English L2 speakers from five Asian countries were recorded. Then, the degree of intelligibility of the speakers was determined by a total number of 1,386 listeners. In this study, the degree of intelligibility was obtained by means of calculating the percentage of correctly transcribed words. Before the study took place, it was expected that a native speaker would be as intelligible as a non-native speaker whose L1 was not the same as the listener's. Nevertheless, the results revealed that, in fact, native speakers were always found to be among the least intelligible speakers in the study.

In another study, Smith (1988) obtained similar results with the participation of three groups of speakers: a) native speakers, b) non-native

speakers, and c) a mixed group. The results proved that being a native speaker is not a decisive factor when it comes to matters of intelligibility, as both the group of non-native speakers and the group of mixed speakers obtained the same levels of intelligibility.

4) The interactional nature of intelligibility between a speaker and a listener. This dimension considered by Smith and Nelson (1985) is related to the interaction between the speaker and the listener, which they conceive of as a bidirectional phenomenon. From this viewpoint, the responsibility of achieving intelligibility does not only fall on the speaker's capacity to accurately produce the L2 sounds, nor does it only fall on the listener's capacity to perceive them. On the contrary, intelligibility is the outcome achieved by both parties together (see also Dimova, 2017). Nonetheless, there is no consensus in the literature about this issue, as some authors attribute this responsibility to either party. For instance, Fayer and Krasinski (1987) claim that intelligibility is based upon actions taken by the listener, for it is the listener who judges what has been understood and what has not. Conversely, Lindemann (2002) points out that it is common practice to place the burden of making oneself understood on the speaker and, on this premise, non-native speakers are generally labeled as difficult to understand. This idea is in accordance with the findings obtained in a study by Golombek and Jordan (2005), in which two learners in an English pronunciation course were interviewed. More precisely, the research indicated that one of the participants supported the idea that "nonnatives are responsible for being intelligible" (p. 522).

5) The degree of familiarity as a determining factor for the achievement of intelligibility. The fifth point (Smith & Nelson, 1985) suggests that there is a close relationship between the degree of familiarity with an accent and the degree of intelligibility which is achieved, so that a higher degree of familiarity is associated to a higher degree of intelligibility. This had already been proposed by Catford (1950), when he postulated the existence of a threshold of intelligibility. In this sense, a study conducted by Gass and Varonis (1984) explored the effect of different types of familiarity on the comprehension of English speech produced by non-native speakers. The

types of familiarity which were examined in the study included a) familiarity with the topic, b) familiarity with non-native speakers whose L1 is different, c) familiarity with non-native speakers whose L1 is the same, and d) familiarity with a specific speaker. As can be seen, conditions “b” and “c” are in direct relation with the listener’s degree of familiarity with regard to the speaker’s accent. In this respect, the results of the study revealed some general findings. First, it was concluded that, in broad terms, the degree of familiarity with non-native pronunciation does not facilitate comprehension. On the other hand, the degree of familiarity with a non-native accent facilitates the comprehension of another speaker whose L1 is the same.

6) The listener’s expectations in relation to the degree of intelligibility that can be achieved when being exposed to a particular speaker. This claim (Smith & Nelson, 1985) mentions that when a listener expects to understand a certain speaker, they are more likely to find that speaker intelligible. In this respect, the preconceived ideas and attitudes that listeners may have about speakers would play an important role in the achievement of communication. In relation to this point, Rubin (1992) carried out a study in which 62 US university students were asked to judge how broad the accent of a native English speaker from Ohio was. The results indicated that the listeners perceived a broader accent when the speaker’s voice was accompanied by a picture of a woman of Chinese origin than when it was accompanied by a picture of a Caucasian woman.

Besides all these ideas exposed above, the authors put forward the idea that intelligibility can be better defined if it is clearly distinguished from what they refer to as comprehensibility and interpretability, to which we agree.

Smith and Nelson’s (1985) main contribution lies in their distinction between these three concepts: intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. It was not until the publication of such an article that a clear difference among these constructs was established, which, until that

time, were used synonymously, causing confusion among scholars (Bayyurt, 2018).

To Smith and Nelson (1985), intelligibility is nothing other than word recognition, being understood as words which are phonologically decoded by the listener and which are in accordance with those which the speaker intended to transmit. Regarding comprehensibility, the authors conceive it as the perception of meaning at word or utterance level, and describe interpretability as the pragmatic meaning contained in a word or utterance. According to the authors, the most serious communication breakdowns occur when there are difficulties at the comprehensibility and interpretability levels, but these are not necessarily as serious when there is a breakdown at the intelligibility level.

Later on, Smith (1992) provided further details about these three constructs and established that these operate on a continuum in which intelligibility represents the most superficial degree of comprehension, while interpretability represents the deepest level.

As mentioned above, Smith and Nelson (1985) regard intelligibility as the recognition of words or utterances at the phonological-lexical level. As such, this constitutes the minimal unit of comprehension on the continuum which they proposed. In order to determine intelligibility levels, Smith and Nelson (1985) made use of an instrument known as the cloze procedure, in which every n^{th} word is deleted from a text. Then, a group of listeners is asked to listen to a recording with the full form of the text and fill in the blanks with the missing words. This type of exercise was taken from experimental psychology and served as a tool to evaluate text readability (Klare, Sinaiko, & Stolurow, 1972; Taylor, 1953). Additionally, the cloze procedure has been used in a large number of studies in which the intelligibility of different individuals has been measured (Chung & Bong, 2021; Gooskens & van Heuven, 2017; Matsuura, 2007; Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979).

As defined by Smith and Nelson (1985), comprehensibility involves grasping the ideas contained at word or utterance level. In other words, it

entails that a listener should be in condition to paraphrase the content of such words or utterance. The authors also indicate that comprehensibility corresponds to what is referred to as locutionary force. This force is the result of a locutionary act, according to speech act theory by Austin (1962, p. 108), which “is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense,” in Austin’s own words. According to Allwood (1977), this is formed by the conventional content or information that an utterance has.

Finally, as regarded by Smith and Nelson (1985), interpretability is the intentional or pragmatic meaning behind a word or an utterance. Adopting a similar approach to how they treated comprehensibility, the authors drew a parallel with the theory developed by Austin (1962), and related the concept of interpretability with the illocutionary force which corresponds to the speech act executed by means of an utterance (Holtgraves & Ashley, 2001). On the intelligibility continuum, Smith and Nelson (1985) claim that interpretability is at the extreme which represents the highest level of complexity regarding understanding. On the other hand, Kachru (2008) states that interpretability is a construction attributed to verbal actions that take place between interlocutors in a context of social interaction. In this respect, the author emphasizes the sociocultural aspects in which the interaction occurs, as linguistic and social conventions are necessary between the interlocutors, so that they can give meaning to their utterances and actions.

A few years later, Kenworthy (1987) put forward two different constructs rather than the three proposed by Smith and Nelson (1985). These were referred to as intelligibility and communication. On the one hand, intelligibility, which can be used as a synonym for understandability, is defined as “being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation” (p. 13). In operational terms, the author claims that the larger the number of words that a listener can understand, the higher the degree of intelligibility that can be attributed to the speaker. On the other hand, communication refers to the capacity to understand a speaker’s intention.

It is worth mentioning that this author implies that it is the listener who is to be held responsible for identifying the speaker's intention. For this to happen, the listener must make every effort to achieve their goal and must use all of the information they know about the context, the speaker, and other aspects related to the communicative situation. As can be seen, Kenworthy (1987) views intelligibility as something similar to the concept adopted by Smith and Nelson (1985), while her concept of communication is similar to that of interpretability.

Up until this point in time, there seemed to be a certain consensus on the number of dimensions and definitions of intelligibility. In spite of this, Munro and Derwing (1995a, 2020, 2022) introduced three significant innovations. The first one consisted of ceasing to conceive of intelligibility as a three-layer spectrum as thought of by Smith and Nelson (1985). Instead, Munro and Derwing (1995a, p. 76; 2022, p. 9) defined intelligibility as "the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by the listener." The second innovation is related to the definition of comprehensibility. Unlike Smith and Nelson (1985), Munro and Derwing (1995a, p. 291) defined comprehensibility as "Listeners' perceptions of difficulty in understanding particular utterances." One last innovation introduced by these authors involves the inclusion of the concept of foreign accent, understood as how close the pronunciation of an utterance approaches that of a native speaker.

Another definition of the term intelligibility was offered by Bamgbose (1998). For this author, the concept is described as "A complex of factors comprising recognizing an expression, knowing its meaning, and knowing what that meaning signifies in the sociocultural context" (p. 11). This definition is similar to the whole continuum defined by Smith and Nelson (1985), since each of the components contained in it are equivalent to intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability offered by such authors.

Another important issue proposed by Bamgbose (1998) is related to the distinction of two terms which he referred to as 'intra-variety intelligibility'

and ‘inter-variety intelligibility’. The former is understood as the intelligibility between the members of a single community. The latter, on the other hand, refers to the intelligibility between members of different communities. With the aim of making communication effective, as well as performing other important functions such as education, technology, and literature, Bamgbose (1998) regards intra-variety intelligibility as a matter of greater importance, while difficulties which arise in connection to inter-variety intelligibility are less alarming (p. 11).

Another author who approached the phenomenon of intelligibility was James (1998), whose work proposed three different concepts: comprehensibility, intelligibility, and communicativity. Firstly, the author regards comprehensibility as an umbrella term which covers all the different features that allow access to content, and not just to form. Secondly, intelligibility, as the author claims, refers to “[T]he accessibility of the basic, literal meaning, the propositional contents encoded in an utterance” (James, 1998, p. 212). As a result, this usage of the term intelligibility happens to be similar to what Smith and Nelson (1985) defined as comprehensibility. However, unlike other authors like Smith and Nelson (1985) or Bamgbose (1998), James (1998) claims that intelligibility can be affected not only by errors at the phonological level, but also by those made at the grammatical or lexical levels. Additionally, he states that the presence of a foreign accent represents an obstacle for intelligibility, which is aggravated when there is background noise. Finally, communicativity is related to accessing “pragmatic forces, implicatures and connotations” (James, 1998, p. 216) and is equivalent to the notion of interpretability proposed by Smith and Nelson (1985).

Contemporary trends on intelligibility

Traditionally, the pronunciation model adopted to teach English has been associated to accents spoken in countries which are part of Kachru’s (1985, 1992) ‘inner circle’ in what he terms the three concentric circles. The ‘inner circle’ consists of countries where English is spoken as a L1 (i.e. The United Kingdom, The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). The

'outer circle' comprises countries where English is spoken as a second language (ESL). Finally, the 'expanding circle' includes countries where English is used as a foreign language (EFL).

In the context of globalization and instant communication around the world, especially for speakers from the 'expanding circle', English is considered now as the world's lingua franca (ELF). Timmis (2002) advises that eighty percent of all conversations in English are between nonnative speakers and Crystal (2008) estimates that around 2 billion people are able to communicate in English. Crystal (2003) also claims that approximately a fourth of all the users of English are native speakers; thus, most interactions in English take place among non-native speakers of the language (Baese-Berk et al., 2020; Seidlhofer, 2005). In this respect, Piccardo (2016, p. 6) states:

a new sensibility has been emerging in the applied linguists' scholarly community when it comes to re-evaluating the traditional idea of the 'native speaker' as a model or perception of the norm in pronunciation. This is especially visible in English considering the movement towards 'global Englishes' or 'English as a Lingua Franca', but similar considerations have been applied to all languages.

The above implies that intelligibility replaces the native-like yardstick to measure NNs performance.

In line with the aforementioned, Jenkins (2000) made her own contribution in relation to research on the aspects that would facilitate intelligibility in EIL contexts. The author captured her findings in the proposal of a variety of English which would serve as a pronunciation model in such contexts, which she calls the Lingua Franca Core (LFC). The LFC is a model which, unlike those which are based on English native speaker pronunciation accents such as General American (GA) or Received Pronunciation (RP), lacks stigma and is socio-politically correct (Monroy Casas, 2008), as well as gives L2 English speakers the same sociolinguistic status as those who speak English as their L1 (Jenkins, 2005). This proposal includes a reduced list of those aspects which, according to the author and based on her own

research, are easier to teach as well as learn (Dauer, 2005) and safeguard intelligibility in EIL contexts (Jenkins, 2002).

The LFC is divided into two groups: core items, which are those which normally cause communication breakdowns, and non-core items, which are considered variants and do not cause communication breakdowns (Barreiro Bilbao, 2008). The core items include the preservation of all consonant phoneme contrasts, except for /θ/ and /ð/ which can be substituted by /f/ and /v/ respectively, the aspiration of initial voiceless plosives /p t k/ in stressed syllables, the distinction between long and short vowel phonemes (e.g., cooed vs. could, /u:/ vs. /ʊ/, or seat vs. sit, /i:/ vs. /ɪ/), among others (Dauer, 2005). In contrast, non-core items include vowel quality, weak forms of grammatical words, placement of lexical stress, among other aspects (Jenkins, 2002).

Some studies have provided empirical evidence that support the features proposed by the LFC. For example, Rahimi and Ruzrokh (2016) compared the effectiveness of a LFC-based syllabus and a NS-based syllabus (British English). In that study, two groups of participants took part. An experimental group was instructed using the LFC-based syllabus (n = 28), whereas the control group was taught using the NS-based syllabus (n = 28). All the participants were students from a high school in Iran. The results from recognition as well as production aspects of intelligibility indicated that the LFC-based syllabus group obtained higher levels of intelligibility.

Another study which supports the LFC was carried out by Zoghbor (2018), who examined the intelligibility of 50 learners of English (L1 Arabic) who were evaluated by 18 judges (non-Arabic-speaking). The findings of the study supported the majority of the core features of the LFC, save for the quality of the long “nurse” vowel /ɜ:/, rhoticity /r/, and word stress in words containing more than two syllables. A third example of research that provides evidence in favor of the LFC was conducted by Jeong and Thorén (2018), who studied the substitution of English /θ/ by /s/ in the speech of a L1 German speaker of English. The recordings produced by the speaker were listened to and transcribed by 29 listeners. The results indicated that

the error rate of the /θ/-/s/ substitution was 22.4%, concluding that this did not cause a major breakdown of intelligibility. The emergence of any theoretical innovation may be subject to difficulties or the scrutiny of other scholars, and the LFC proposed by Jenkins (2000, 2002) is no exception to this. In the first place, the author acknowledges that the acceptance of her proposal is limited (Deterding & Mohamad, 2016; Jenkins, 2007), and, as she herself states “There is still, among many, and possibly most, N[on]N[ative]S[speaker] English teachers (N[ative] S[peaker]s too), a staunch belief in the primacy of N[ative]S[peaker] English and the need to approximate it as closely as possible” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 196). Besides this, the LFC entails a series of pedagogical limitations. First, not all EFL teachers have the necessary expertise or confidence to teach pronunciation (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The implementation of the LFC as a pronunciation teaching model would increase such limitations. Additionally, there is a paucity of textbooks and teaching materials based on the LFC that would facilitate the teachers’ role (Deterding, 2011). Conversely, it is necessary to consider the heterogeneity of the learners’ phonological systems which may exist in a learning context (Zoghbor, 2011). Finally, the teaching of pronunciation based on the LFC should embrace linguistic tolerance towards speakers from all contexts (Berns, 2008).

In spite of the difficulties that the LFC has experienced, we believe that Jenkins’ work (2000) set forth the value of the NNS teacher, and does away with the idea that ‘native speaker teacher is best’ (Kachru, 1985; Phillipson, 1992). The author claims that since NNS teachers have themselves been language learners, they have the advantage of dealing more effectively with their learners’ difficulties since they are aware of interlanguage issues.

Later, authors such as Uzun (2022), Fishero et al. (2023), and Korpál and Sobkowiak (2020) have been interested in investigating whether non-native speakers of a L2 are more intelligible when the listeners are also non-native speakers of that L2. This idea was first explored and systematized in a study conducted by Bent and Bradlow (2003), who operationalized it through two hypotheses. The first one asserts that there

is a higher degree of intelligibility when both the speaker and the listener of a L2 share the same L1. This hypothesis was termed the ‘matched interlanguage intelligibility benefit’. A second possibility may occur when a speaker and a listener do not share the same L1. This hypothesis was referred to as the ‘mismatched interlanguage intelligibility benefit’.

Another contribution to the conceptualization of intelligibility, which was introduced earlier, was made by Levis (2005, 2020), who identified two opposing principles: the Nativeness Principle and the Intelligibility Principle. The author explains that the ultimate aim of the Nativeness Principle is to achieve native-like pronunciation in the L2. According to Levis (2005, 2020), this is an impractical objective as it is extremely difficult to attain. On the other hand, the intelligibility principle promotes mutual communication and understanding between speakers in spite of any foreign accent features that may be present.

Later, Kirkpatrick (2007) identified three ELT models: an exonormative model, an endonormative model, and a lingua franca model (Mozaheb & Monfared, 2020). The exonormative model is associated to inner circle linguistic varieties and culture. That is, it conceives varieties such as Received Pronunciation (RP), or General American as the target accents for EFL learners. The endonormative model, on the other hand, relates to varieties in outer circle countries. Finally, the lingua franca model aims to allow for effective communication among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Regarding the choice of an exonormative model, Kirkpatrick (2007) offers a series of advantages and disadvantages. In favor of such a model, the author points out that native speaker models enjoy the status of being prestigious and legitimate. Additionally, there is a plethora of resources such as reference books and materials involving the idea of a standardized form of the language, which is often used in language testing as the reference norm. In this sense, the author claims that the native speaker model is ‘codified’. However, the choice of this model also implies some drawbacks such as the employment of many native speakers around the

globe who hold no other teaching qualifications than the sole status of being native speakers. This has a direct impact on the quality of the training to learners apart from the detriment of local non-native English teachers, whose professional qualifications and capacities are considered inferior.

Choosing an endonormative model also involves positive and negative aspects. As teachers of this model are themselves speakers of it, a sense of legitimacy, self-confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment emerges among the teaching community. The adoption of a local teacher and linguistic variety involves pedagogical, financial, and cultural benefits for the community as well as setting a standard which is highly achievable to students. Nevertheless, endonormative models are not normally codified. In other words, there are no coursebooks or other written learning resources which students may use as a reference.

Finally, Kirkpatrick (2007) presents the lingua franca model as an approach with several advantages. For example, teachers and learners would have to deal with a model which they both may attain rather than aim for the native speaker norm, putting communication at the forefront. Additionally, it detaches the interlocutors from pragmatic and cultural rules which are commonly associated to inner circle countries. Instead, the lingua franca model encourages respect for the learner's own cultural and pragmatic norms.

Discussion and conclusion

The main aim of this article was to provide a synopsis and an examination of more than seven decades of the discussion of what has been understood by intelligibility. As observed, the term has been associated with various other terms such as effectiveness, comprehension, comprehensibility, interpretability, understandability, communication, and communicativity. However, intelligibility per se has been defined as that in which the hearer "understands the words, i.e., if their response is appropriate to the linguistic forms of the utterance" (Catford, 1950, p. 8). For Smith and Rafiqzad (1979, p. 371), it is the listener's "capacity for understanding a

word or words when spoken/read in the context of a sentence being spoken/read at natural speed.”

A more straightforward definition is rendered by Smith and Nelson (1985, p. 334), as “intelligibility: words/utterance recognition”; Kenworthy (1987, p. 13) claims that intelligibility is “being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation.” For Munro and Derwing (1995a, p. 76; 2022, p. 9) it is “the extent to which a speaker’s message is actually understood by the listener”, and for Bamgbose (1998, p. 11) the concept is described as “A complex of factors comprising recognizing an expression, knowing its meaning, and knowing what that meaning signifies in the sociocultural context.” In general terms, there seems to be a consensus that intelligibility is a complex phenomenon that involves production and recognition/reception of oral language.

From all the definitions of intelligibility reviewed in this work, the two which seem to be the most useful ones are those offered by Smith and Nelson (1985) and Derwing and Munro (1995a). These definitions have been cited in numerous works for decades. However, both definitions present shortcomings in their operationalization, specifically, in how intelligibility is measured. For instance, Derwing and Munro (1995a) used the transcription of sentences to measure intelligibility. That is, participants were required to write down each word they heard in an utterance. Nevertheless, this may be problematic as a speaker’s message may perfectly be understood without having to be able to recognize each and every word in a message. Another technique commonly used to measure intelligibility is the cloze procedure. Nevertheless, Munro (2012) cautioned that this instrument may lead to distorted results if the listener misses a word which has a heavy semantic load. Similarly, missing several words would still allow access to the meaning of the word or utterance. Other methods which have been used to measure intelligibility are described by Munro and Derwing (2015). These include other types of tasks such as focused interviews of listeners, sentence verification, summaries, and comprehension questions, all of which extend beyond a mere count of correctly transcribed words.

Considering the fact that the Intelligibility Principle is replacing the native-norm gauge to measure NNS's performance, undoubtedly, Jenkins' LFC (2000) is a contribution of paramount importance in setting new standards for pronunciation teaching and learning in order to facilitate communication among non-native speakers in international contexts as well as in confronting native-speakerism and its effects.

In spite of the evidence that gives credit to the LFC, there is still need for more empirical research as LFC features have not been thoroughly examined (Barrera-Pardo, 2022). Additionally, such empirical studies should be conducted using appropriate methodology and a large number of data in order to be able to make generalizable claims. A possible example of a study of such features may involve the voiced stop series in English. The LFC requires the consonants /b/, /d/, /g/ to be produced as stops (Jenkins, 2000). However, Spanish speakers normally pronounce this set as approximants in intervocalic contexts ([β], [ð], [ɣ]) (Colina, 2020). This process, which is common to many varieties of Spanish, is known as spirantization. It would be interesting to examine whether the transfer of this phenomenon has an impact on the intelligibility of L1 Spanish speakers of L2 English in contexts in which they interact with other non-native speakers of English.

We also support the idea that there are some pedagogical issues and limitations which still need to be addressed, such as the elaboration of pronunciation teaching materials which highlight intelligibility (Levis & Sonsaat, 2016). In this regard, the codification of this type of resources is essential for the adoption of the lingua franca model proposed by Kirkpatrick (2007). Additionally, L2 pronunciation teacher development and confidence should also be taken care of, especially those whose English is not their L1. This can be achieved by strengthening professional training, enhancing pedagogical resources, implementing mentoring and peer support with experienced L2 pronunciation instructors, and bridging the gap between research and teaching practices. These, we think, are key aspects in order to boost intelligibility in international contexts.

On examining the definitions of intelligibility presented in this work, we argue that, in spite of being broadly used and widely accepted, this construct is to be redefined and updated including elements which are now absent. For example, the current definitions do not make it explicit that intelligibility is not only the speaker's responsibility, but rather, a bidirectional activity. Additionally, it does not consider elements which occur in real-life communication such as the negotiation of meaning, as well as the use of repair strategies such as clarification, confirmation, and rephrasing. Finally, intelligibility has been conceived as a listening outcome which is reflected in the mere percentage of successfully recognized words, rather than a process which involves a listener's active cognitive effort decoding the acoustic cues produced by a speaker.

A redefined conceptualization of intelligibility entails the need for new ways of operationalizing this construct. In this sense, the measurement of intelligibility should also encompass methods that allow researchers to collect not only quantitative, but also qualitative data that shed light on the critical aspects of L2 pronunciation that hinder communication. We contend that methodological approaches such as listener interviews, stimulated recall protocols, and the analysis of interactional repair would certainly provide new and valuable insights into such critical aspects, as they can inform scholars as well as pronunciation instructors on the elements that either facilitate or constrain understanding.

Finally, we would like to emphasize the importance of L1-feature studies and their potential impact on intelligibility. Such studies can systematically identify which elements from a speaker's L1 are the most critical for intelligibility. We believe that even though a great deal of L1-transfer-related research has been done on L2 pronunciation, only a small number of studies have focused on exploring the effect of L1 transfer on intelligibility. For example, the transfer of Spanish spirantization of /b d g/ into the production of L2 English has already been documented by a few authors (e.g. Algara, González & Boada, 2004; Flege & Davidian, 1984; Zampini, 1996). However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the impact of this feature on intelligibility. Future research on intelligibility

should explore these avenues. Undoubtedly, this would offer a solid asset for L2 pronunciation instruction.

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