

An investigation into how much language teachers' beliefs about what aspects of English pronunciation should be taught correlate with the *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC)

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Introduction

The teaching of pronunciation is perhaps the area of language teaching that is often the most open to varying teacher beliefs and attitudes. Whereas other aspects of teaching such as that of language, reading, writing, and listening can generally be taught with a degree of confidence that what the learners are being asked to learn is largely free from socio-cultural bias and assumptions, the teaching of pronunciation is inextricably tied to models of “correctness” or “appropriacy” that may or may not match the teacher’s values or be physically achievable for the learner. In large part, this stems from the fact that English is pronounced differently according to a myriad of factors such as the place where a person was born, their socio-economic background, their desire to integrate into a certain community, or whether the language is their first or second language. Therefore, when determining how pronunciation is to be taught, teachers of English are faced with an array of decisions that have to be made in terms of what features are to be taught, what can be considered “good” pronunciation, and what prominence the teaching of pronunciation should take within a course of study.

It would seem reasonable to claim that the main reason for teaching pronunciation to learners of English is to enhance the learner’s intelligibility. Therefore, being able to make the sounds of English in such a way that the listener may decipher what the speaker wishes to communicate is necessarily the basis of all pronunciation teaching, and according to Uchida and Sugimoto (2020), “the mastery of intelligible pronunciation should be the goal of English learners.” However, what constitutes this “mastery of intelligible pronunciation” is complicated by a variety of factors.

For many years, it was considered axiomatic that a learner of English would wish to speak with the standard pronunciation of an English-speaking country, especially that of the UK or the USA. This in turn meant that the speakers of standard British English (often referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP) or BBC English) or standard American English were privileged as being the gatekeepers of what intelligible English sounds like. This led to a situation where other varieties of English were considered less intelligible and therefore should not be aspired to. Kachru (1988 cited in Jenkins, 1998) mentioned in his “sixth fallacy” that, “the diversity and variation in English are indicators of linguistic decay; restriction of the decay is the responsibility of native scholars and of ESL programs.” The effect of this association of correct English pronunciation with standard British and American accents has been far-reaching both for learners and for teachers, leading to a “native-speakerism” that pervades the English-teaching industry where teachers from Britain and America are preferred to teachers from other nations and learners have trouble viewing themselves as members of the global community of English-speakers (Seilhammer, 2013).

The *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC)

In response to this, the *Lingua Franca Core* was established as part of the greater *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) movement which seeks to foreground the fact that globally most communication in English takes place between speakers who are using English as a second or other language. As such, Walker (2010) believes that the “primary goal of teaching pronunciation must now be to make learners intelligible to the greatest number of people possible, and not just to the native speakers of the language.” *The Lingua Franca Core* (LFC) then consists of four areas of pronunciation that are considered to be essential to mutual intelligibility across

speakers from different backgrounds whilst, crucially, also being inherently teachable and amenable to allowing learners to retain their accents should they wish to. These four areas are: (1) individual consonant sounds (with the exception of /θ/, /ð/ and the dark /l/; (2) group consonants; (3) vowels; (4) nuclear stress placement. However, somewhat more importantly, the following aspects of pronunciation are *not* included in the LFC due to their not meeting the criteria mentioned above: (1) The vowel sounds /θ/, /ð/ and the dark /l/; (2) exact vowel quality; (3) pitch movement (tone); (4) word stress; (5) stress-timing; (6) weak forms / schwa; (7) features of connected speech such as linking, assimilation, and coalescence.

It is worth pointing out here that the LFC is not without its critics. For example, Dauer (2005) has noted that not teaching word stress (which is not included in the LFC) is likely to hinder the teaching of nuclear stress placement (which *is* included in the LFC). Furthermore, Low (2015) is worried that in seeking to move away from the view that standard British or American pronunciation should be the ultimate goal of pronunciation instruction, proponents of the LFC may be confusing “goals” with “models”. For instance, he claims that standard British English is merely a convenient model of pronunciation which learners may be able to use as a starting point to develop their own intelligible variety of English.

Research Aims

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to ascertain to what extent the concept of *Teaching English as a Lingua Franca* correlates with teachers’ decision-making when it comes to how they teach English pronunciation in their lessons. Specifically, this project is focussed on teachers working for a private language school corporation in Japan. These teachers may come from a variety of countries and backgrounds (and therefore, not necessarily speakers with a British or American variety of pronunciation), and they all possess at least a certificate level English teaching qualification. While it may be unreasonable to expect all teachers to have a fully developed understanding of ELF and the *Lingua Franca Core*, it will be interesting to learn how much of the ELF approach to teaching pronunciation tallies with the teachers’ own currently held beliefs and attitudes towards teaching pronunciation. This may, in turn, point to areas of the ELF approach that are either already part of standard teaching practice or are yet to fully become so. As such, a questionnaire has been devised in order to consider the following research questions:

1. What aspects of pronunciation do teachers believe are worthwhile?
2. How do these aspects conform to the LFC?

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of 21 pronunciation “errors” (in the sense that they may show a difference in pronunciation from that produced by a speaker of a standard variety of British or American English) and asks whether the responding teacher would or would not correct these errors in the course of a typical lesson. Each error is an error that, according to Swan and Smith (2001), is typically made by Japanese learners of English. However, only ten of these 21 pronunciation errors are included in the *Lingua Franca Core*, meaning that 11 of these errors do not particularly impede intelligibility when communicating with speakers from other non-English-speaking countries. Questions 1 - 7 are all errors with consonant sounds (of which 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 are errors that are included in the LFC); errors 8 - 14 are errors with vowel sounds (of which 8, 12, 13 are included in the LFC); and errors 15 - 21 are more general pronunciation errors such as with connected speech, intonation, and syllable and word stress (of which only 15 and 18 are included in the LFC). Where possible, the wording of each question avoids using the *International Phonemic Alphabet*, a fluent understanding of which could not necessarily be assumed; instead, each mistake is simplified and exemplified in order to ease understanding for the respondent; for example, #1 asks respondents if they would correct the following error: Mistaking /l/ for /r/ as in: “My f/l/iend sent me a /r/etter”.

It is predicted that the questionnaire respondents may seek to correct the majority of the errors. This is likely because teachers in Japan may be accustomed to hearing these errors on a regular basis, but as the classes are likely to be made up of only Japanese learners, they may not be especially experienced in noticing to what extent these errors do or do not impede intercultural communication. As a result, they may simply consider that any divergence from their own pronunciation may be considered an “error” that is worthy of correction, meaning that it is still the “native-speaker norm” of what is and is not intelligible pronunciation that holds sway over the English teaching profession in Japan, rather than the principles advocated by the *English as a Lingua Franca* approach.

The full version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix i.

Results and Analysis

In total, 15 teachers responded to the questionnaire. The results for each question are shown below in two sections. The first section shows the results for “errors” of pronunciation that, according to the LFC, are considered important to be attended to by the teacher in order to ensure intelligibility. The second section shows the results for “errors” that are not considered essential from the LFC perspective.

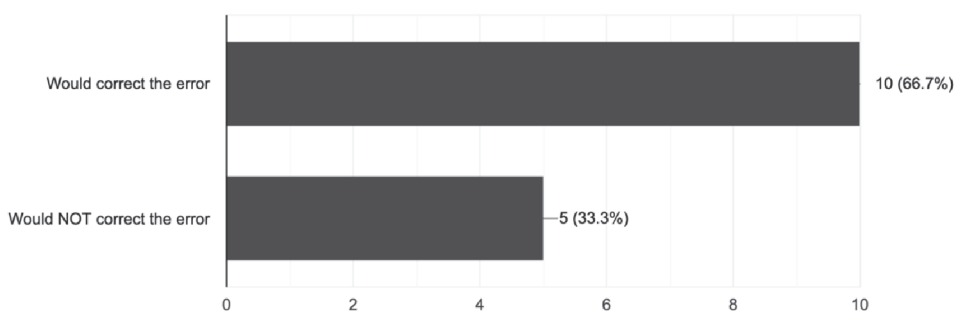
“Errors” that are included in the *Lingua Franca Core*

The following charts show the results for questions #1, #2, #5, #6, and #7. These questions focus on consonant sounds that, according to Swan and Smith (2001), Japanese learners struggle with. The fact that their mispronunciation may also impede intelligibility in inter-cultural communication means that they are therefore included in the *Lingua Franca Core*.

Interestingly, these questions elicited very similar results. For instance, of the 15 teachers surveyed, between 10 and 12 would correct errors in questions #1, #2, #5, #6, while for question #7 the results were slightly less conclusive with 9 out of 15 teachers (60%) saying they would correct a student for confusing /t/ for /ts/.

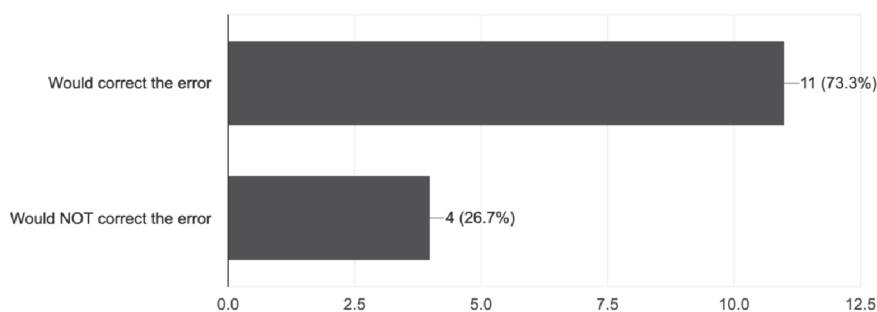
1) Mistaking /l/ for /r/ as in: “My f/l/iend sent me a /r/etter”

15 responses



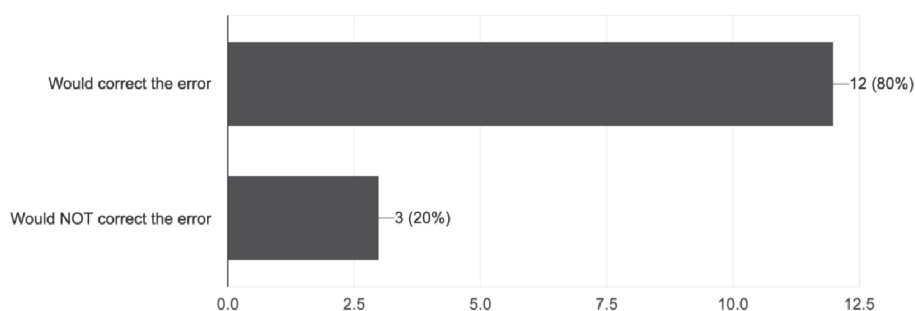
2) Mistaking /h/ for /f/ as in: “I live in a quiet neighbour/f/ood”

15 responses



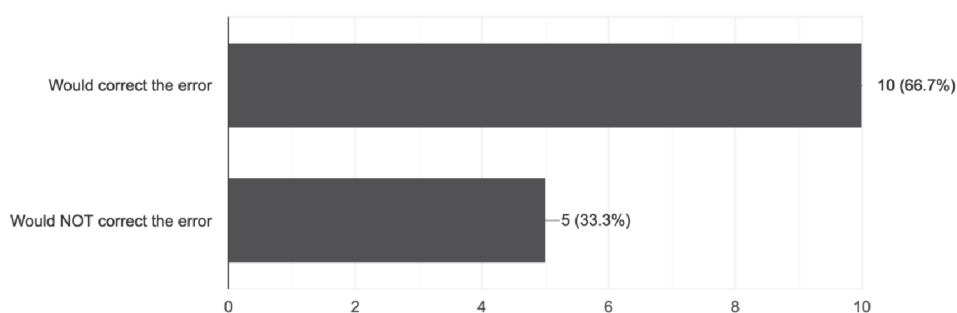
5) Mistaking /v/ for /b/ as in: "This is /b/erry good news"

15 responses



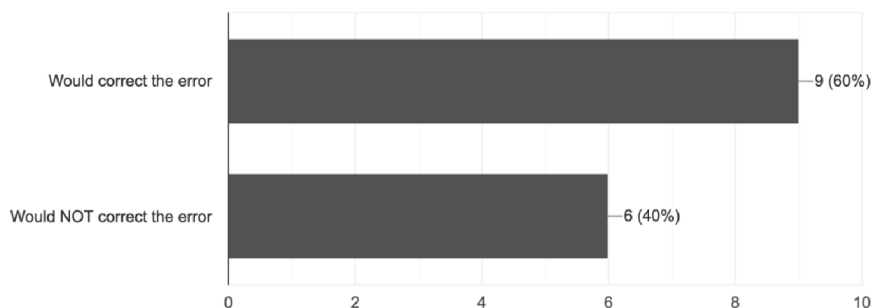
6) Mistaking /t/ for /tʃ/ so that: "My team won" sounds like "My /ch/eam won"

15 responses



7) Mistaking /t/ for /ts/ as in: "It was /ts/oo hot for me"

15 responses

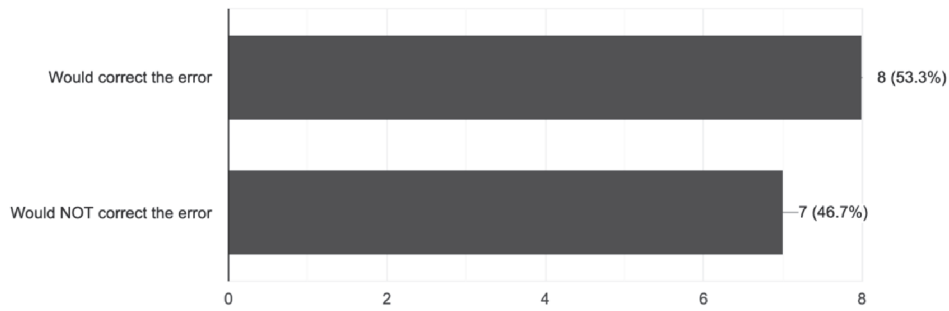


For questions #8, #12, #13, and #15, the focus is on vowel sounds that are considered important from an ELF perspective and which may be difficult for Japanese learners of English. The results for these questions are very similar to the results pertaining to vowel sounds in that, for questions #12 and #15, 11 of the 15 teachers would correct the error and, for question #13, 10 of the 15 would. For question #8, however, only a slight majority of teachers (53.3%) stated that they would correct a student confusing /ɜ:/ with /ɑ:/. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that teachers may find it easier to correct errors of vowel length (as is the case with questions #12, #13, and #15) than errors such as confusing /ɜ:/ with /ɑ:/ which is connected to articulation.

An investigation into how much language teachers' beliefs about what aspects of English pronunciation should be taught correlate with the *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC)

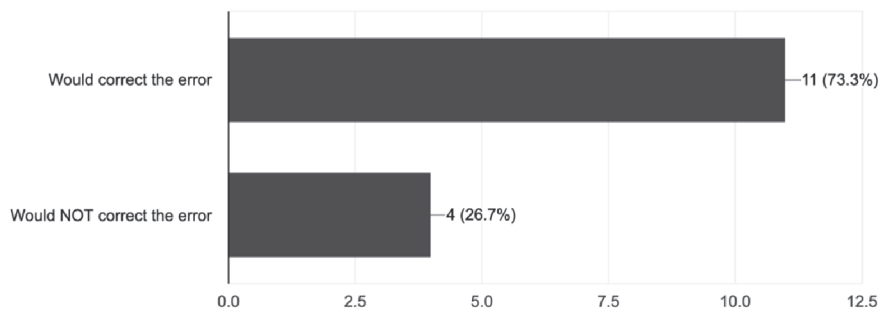
8) Mistaking /ɜ:/ for /ɑ:/ so that "Turn left" sounds like "Tarn left"

15 responses



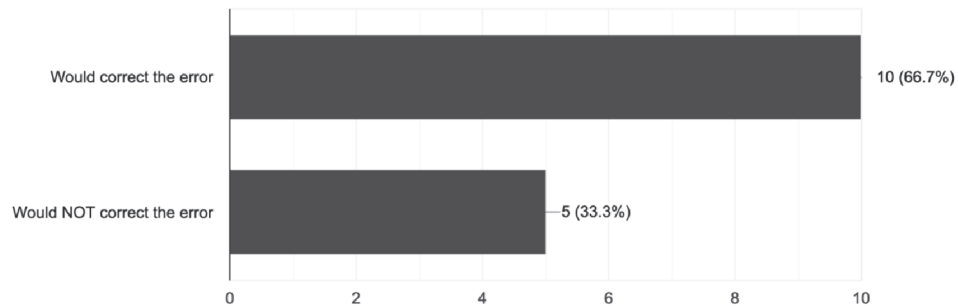
12) Mistaking /ɪ/ with /i:/ so that "Kiss" sounds like "Kees"

15 responses



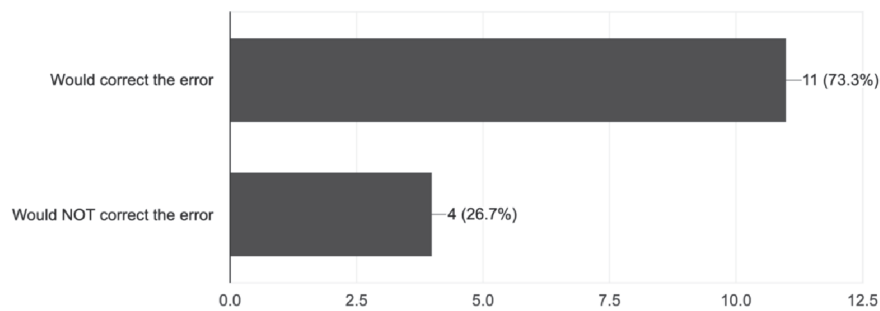
13) Mistaking /ʊ/ with /u:/ so that "Woman" sounds like "Wooman"

15 responses



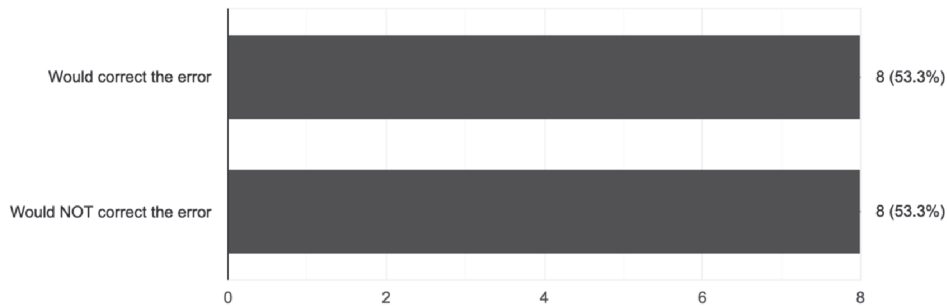
15) Not lengthening vowel length before voiced consonants; for example, in order to distinguish between "sat" and "sad" so that "I feel sad" sounds like "I feel sat".

15 responses



Question #18 was the only question in this section that focussed on sentence stress, specifically contrastive stress, and it was the only question that did not elicit a conclusive consensus. While the results for this question are slightly skewed as a result of one instructor, it is assumed mistakenly, choosing both options “would correct the error” and “would not correct the error”, even with this response removed, there would still be 50% of instructors believing that it is important to correct this “error” and 50% believing that it is not.

18) Failing to stress the appropriate word in a sentence. For example, replying to the question: “Will your sister be here on Thursday?” with: “No, SHE wi...day” rather than: “No, she will be here on FRIday”
15 responses



Overall, it is possible to conclude that when it comes to pronunciation features that *are* included in the LFC, the teachers surveyed were in general agreement that errors with these aspects of pronunciation are worthwhile correcting. In fact, 9 of the 10 questions drew results which showed that the majority of the teachers would correct errors with these aspects of pronunciation. Therefore, the teachers’ beliefs about these aspects tally closely with the principles of the LFC, which may mean that their effect on intelligibility is significant enough so as not to cause undue debate.

“Errors” that are NOT included in the *Lingua Franca Core*

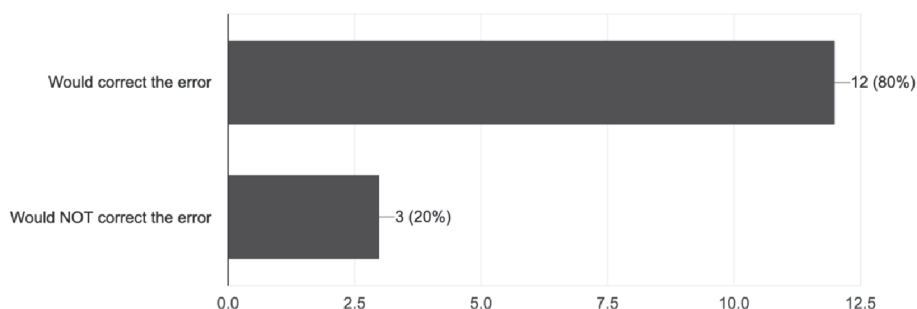
However, the results for questions that pertain to aspects of pronunciation that are NOT included in the *Lingua Franca Core*, and therefore are not considered important for intelligibility from an EFL perspective, show far more variation than the results to questions that are connected to aspects of pronunciation that do occur in the LFC.

Firstly, however, questions #3 (pronouncing /θ/ as either /s/ or /f/) and #4 (pronouncing /ð/ as either /dʒ/ or /z/) which are concerned with the dental-labial sounds that speakers of many languages typically have trouble with, but have in fact been identified as not particularly essential for mutual intelligibility from an *English as a Lingua Franca* perspective, produced, as predicted, results that showed that the majority of teachers would attempt to correct “errors” with these sounds. In fact, 80% of teachers noted that they would correct the error of pronouncing /θ/ as either /s/ or /f/ while 66.7% would correct the error of pronouncing /ð/ as either /dʒ/ or /z/.

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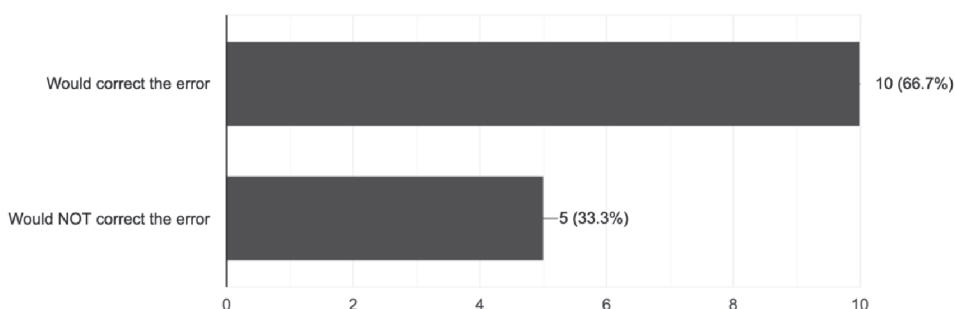
3) Mistaking /θ/ for /s/ or /ʃ/ so that: "Let's go through the theatre" sounds like: "Let's go /s/rough the /sh/eatre."

15 responses



4) Mistaking /ð/ for /dʒ/ or /z/ so that: "The end of the lesson" sounds like: "Ji end of ze lesson"

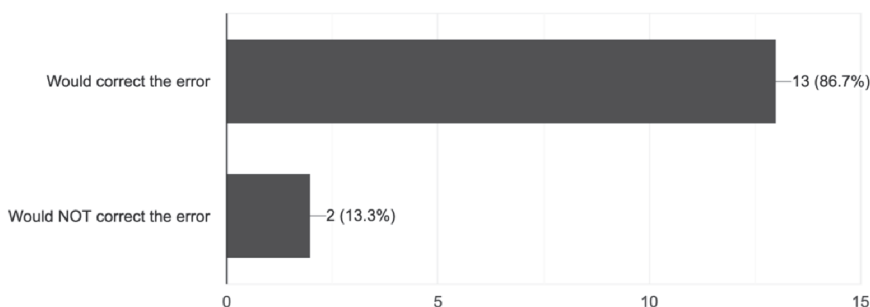
15 responses



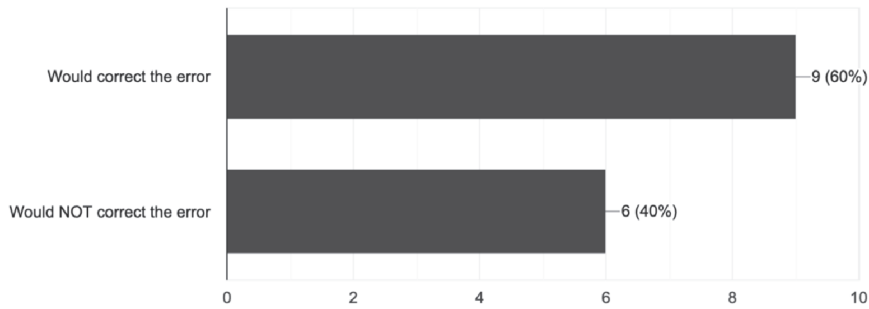
However, questions #9, #10, #11, and #14, which are all related to errors with vowel sounds, show a good deal of variation. For question #9 (mistaking /əʊ/ for /ɔ:/), 86.7% of teachers would correct the error (which is the joint largest percentage of teachers who would correct the error of all the questions on the questionnaire. For both questions #10 (mistaking /ʌ/ with /æ/) and #14 (pronouncing the -er sound on the end of words as /ɑ:/ instead of /ə/), a milder 60% of teachers would correct the errors. Interestingly, however, only a minority of teachers would correct the error of mistaking /ə/ with /ɒ/, with only 46.7% stating they would do so in their response to question #11. This result is significant in that it seems to suggest that the majority of the teachers who responded to this questionnaire may believe that the common -ion suffix in words such as "television" or "transportation" which is typically pronounced with the vowel sound /ə/ by first language English speakers, can be pronounced with the /ɒ/ sound by Japanese (and many other first language) speakers without greatly impeding intelligibility of the word. Therefore, this is so far the first instance of a question eliciting results that tally with the principles of the *Lingua Franca Core*.

9) Mistaking /əʊ/ for /ɔ:/ so that: "I left my coat by the phone" sounds like: "I left my caught by the fawn"

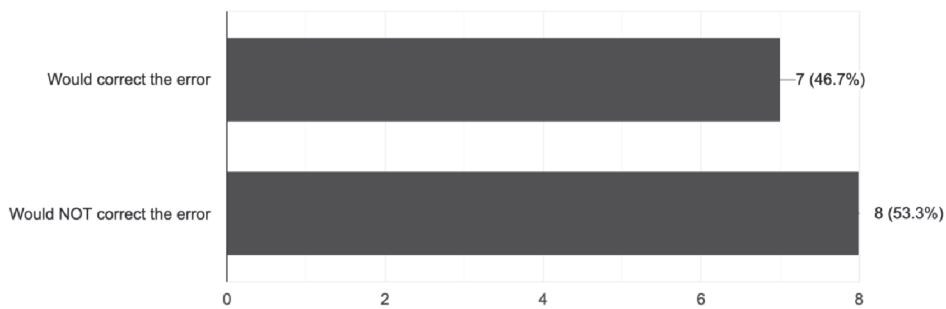
15 responses



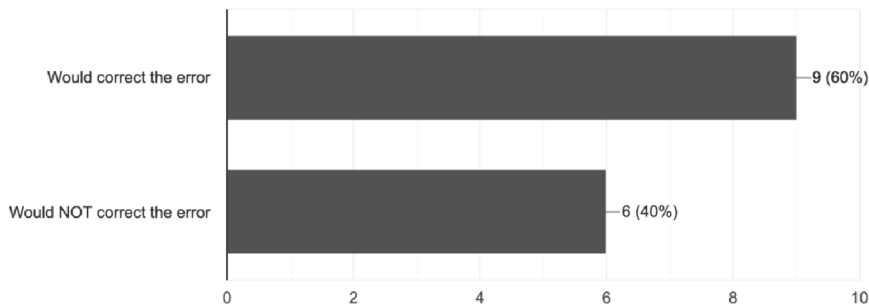
10) Mistaking /ʌ/ with /æ/ so that: "It is my lucky day" sounds like: "It is my lackey day"
 15 responses



11) Mistaking /ə/ with /ɒ/ so that: "Station" and "Television" sound like "Stayshon" and "Televishon"
 15 responses



14) Pronouncing the -er sound on the end of words as /ɑ:/ instead of /ə/ so that "teacher" sounds like "teachah"
 15 responses

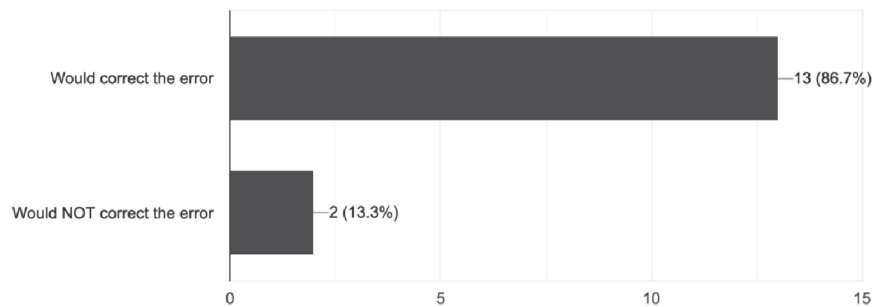


The results for question #16 (Inserting a short vowel sound into consonant clusters, for example, so that the word "product" sounds like "purodukto") are also interesting in that the vast majority of teachers (86.7%) would correct the error. Epenthesis such as this could be considered a defining characteristic of *Japanese English*, especially that of less proficient English users, and is typically attributed to the prevalence of English loanwords in Japanese (Yazawa et. al, 2022). Nevertheless, such a feature is not considered to hinder intelligibility from an *English as a Lingua Franca* perspective, which may suggest that there are other reasons for choosing to correct this error other than its effect on intelligibility which may include its apparent oddness to first language English speakers. This may suggest that teachers are deciding to correct this type of "error" according to more traditional ideas of correctness.

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16) Inserting a short vowel sound into consonant clusters, for example, so that the word "product" sounds like "purodukto"

15 responses



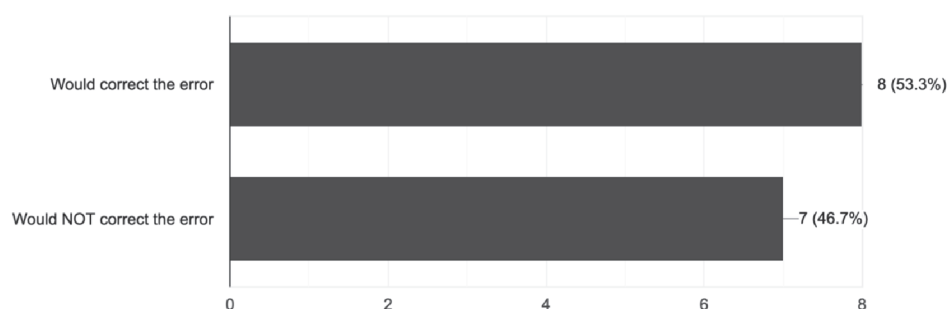
Questions #17, #19, #20 and #21 are concerned with aspects of pronunciation that are said to give English its rhythm such as word and sentence stress and the tendency for first language English speakers to weaken and link unstressed words. Again, these features are not included in the *Lingua Franca Core*, and the questionnaire results do in fact show that there is less enthusiasm for correcting these "errors" compared to those previously mentioned.

The results for questions #17 (Failing to stress the correct syllable in a word. For example, saying "COMputer" instead of "comPUter"), #19 (Failing to "weaken" unstressed syllables within a word. For example, pronouncing each syllable in "kitchen" equally so that it sounds like "kichen" rather than "kichən") and #20 (Failing to "weaken" unstressed words within a sentence. For example, pronouncing "to" so that it sounds like "too" (rather than /tə/) in the sentence: "I went to the park") are identical, with 8 teachers (53.3%) choosing to correct the error and 7 (46.7%) choosing not to. Therefore, while a majority of teachers see value in attending to these "errors", this majority is very slight (a difference of just one teacher), and there is an obvious contrast between this set of results and the more conclusive results for the questions relating to vowel and consonant sounds, for example, which may suggest that the lack of significant impact on intelligibility caused by these prosodic features has been noted to some degree by the teachers surveyed.

The above conclusion may be somewhat corroborated when the results for question #21 (Failing to connect words together. For example, pronouncing the words "do" and "you" separately in questions such as "Where do you want to go?" rather than as one sound: "Where ju want to go?") are considered. For this question 66.7% of the teachers would choose NOT to correct the error which is the largest percentage of teachers choosing not to correct the "error" of any of the questions in the questionnaire (albeit question #11 is the only other instance of a majority of teachers choosing not to correct the error).

17) Failing to stress the correct syllable in a word. For example, saying "COMputer" instead of "comPUter"

15 responses



19) Failing to “weaken” unstressed syllables within a word. For example, pronouncing each syllable in “kitchen” equally so that it sounds like “kichen” rather than “kichən”

15 responses



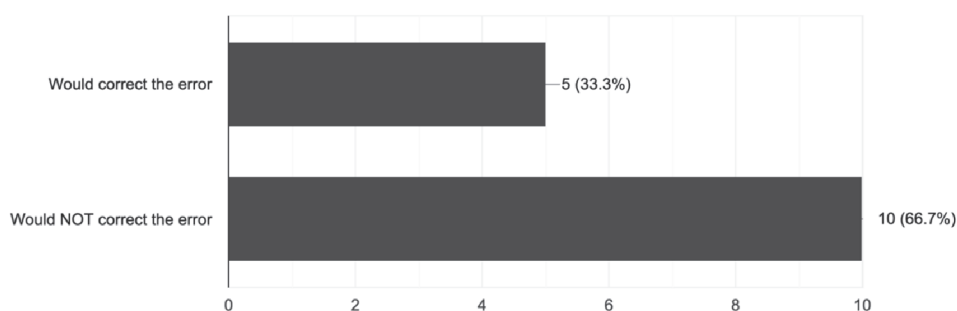
20) Failing to “weaken” unstressed words within a sentence. For example, pronouncing “to” so that it sounds like “too” (rather than /tə/) in the sentence: “I went to the park.”

15 responses



21) Failing to connect words together. For example, pronouncing the words “do” and “you” separately in questions such as “Where do you wan...rather than as one sound: “Where ju want to go?”

15 responses



In summary, the results to questions attending to aspects of pronunciation that are *not* included in the LFC show much greater variety with much less of a consensus as to which of these errors are important to be corrected when made by their Japanese students. Of these 11 questions, nine drew results that showed most of the teachers surveyed would correct the “errors” within them, with two questions eliciting results that showed the teachers would not. In comparison, none of the questions in the previous section showed that most teachers would not correct the error. Furthermore, even with the nine errors that most of the teachers said they would correct, the majorities were generally much slighter than they were in the previous section. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that while these teachers tend to edge towards correcting errors rather than not correcting errors, there is still a sense that their lesser importance is being noticed, perhaps because of their diminished impact on intelligibility in inter-cultural communication as posited by the LFC.

Discussion

While the results of this small-scale research project are not able to definitively prove to what extent the principles of the *Lingua Franca Core* are guiding teachers' decisions about what pronunciation "errors" they should be correcting, the results noted here do shed some interesting light on the points at which teacher beliefs and the LFC differ and converge. Prior to administering the questionnaire, it was hypothesised that the respondents would largely choose to correct the vast majority of the errors. While this proved to be true, it is perhaps not as true as was expected, and some interesting patterns emerged.

Firstly, aspects of pronunciation that appear in the *Lingua Franca Core*, and are therefore important to be attended to so as to ensure mutual intelligibility, appear to be viewed with similar importance by the teachers who responded to the questionnaire, with a significant majority of teachers choosing to correct these "errors".

Secondly, and somewhat more importantly, there is much less of a consensus for the aspects of pronunciation that do not appear in the *Lingua Franca Core*. For instance, while most teachers would choose to correct errors with consonant and vowel sounds that do not appear in the LFC, the number of teachers choosing *not* to correct these answers was generally larger than those choosing not to correct the consonant and vowel sound "errors" that do occur in the LFC. Furthermore, there appears to be greater ambivalence towards prosodic features of English pronunciation among the teachers surveyed as the number of teachers choosing not to correct "errors" with word and sentence stress, and weakening and linking unstressed words in an utterance, tended to be almost equal to, and sometimes less than, those that *would* choose to correct the "error". This may point to an area of the LFC that is in agreement with teacher beliefs about what aspects of pronunciation are valuable.

Implications

It is worth pointing out again that the results noted above do not necessarily mean that attempts to teach aspects of pronunciation which are not included in the LFC should be abandoned completely. Instead, there is perhaps greater value to be had in drawing teachers' attention to the fact the LFC exists and may provide a theoretical underpinning to their own intuitions, which may in turn help teachers to feel greater assurance that what they are choosing and *not* choosing to focus on in the classroom in terms of pronunciation may be shared more widely than they imagine.

It can also not be underestimated how much impact this may eventually have on the inclusion of a greater variety of *Englishes* within what is considered "correct" pronunciation. For instance, if Japanese learners of English start to feel more assurance that their own variety of English is intelligible to a larger proportion of the international community of English speakers than they had previously assumed, then they may start to develop greater confidence in their ability to use English for intercultural communication and worry less about how their English sounds compared to the native-speaker ideal which they are unlikely ever to be able to emulate.

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Appendix i (The Questionnaire)

(note: the questionnaire was actually administered using a Google Form)

Errors in BOLD = included in the *Lingua Franca Core* (essential for intelligibility)

Errors not in bold = omitted from the *Lingua Franca Core* (do not impede intelligibility)

Which of the following pronunciation errors would you try to correct if a student made them in your lessons:

1. **Mistaking /l/ for /r/ as in: “My f/l/iend sent me a /r/etter”**
2. **Mistaking /h/ for /f/ as in: “I live in a quiet neighbour/f/ood”**
3. Mistaking /θ/ for /s/ or /ʃ/ so that: “Let’s go through the theatre” sounds like: “Let’s go /s/rough the /sh/eatre.”
4. Mistaking /ð/ for /dʒ/ or /z/ so that: “The end of the lesson” sounds like: “Ji end of ze lesson”
5. **Mistaking /v/ for /b/ as in: “This is /b/erry good news”**
6. **Mistaking /t/ for /tʃ/ so that: “My team won” sounds like “My /ch/eam won”**
7. **Mistaking /t/ for /ts/ as in: “It was /ts/oo hot for me”**
8. **Mistaking /z:/ for /ɑ:/ so that: “Turn left” sounds like “Tarn left”**
9. Mistaking /əʊ/ for /ɔ:/ so that: “I left my coat by the phone” sounds like: “I left my caught by the fawn”
Mistaking /ʌ/ with /æ/ so that: “It is my lucky day” sounds like: “It is my lackey day”
10. Mistaking /ə/ with /ɒ/ so that: “Station” and “Television” sound like “Stayshon” and “Televishon”

11. **Mistaking /ɪ/ with /i:/ so that “Kiss” sounds like “Kees”**
12. **Mistaking /ʊ/ with /u:/ so that “Woman” sounds like “Wooman”**
13. Pronouncing the -er sound on the end of words as /ɑ:/ instead of /ə/ so that “teacher” sounds like “teachah”
14. **Not lengthening vowel length before voiced consonants; for example, in order to distinguish between “sat” and “sad” so that: “I feel sad” sounds like “I feel sat”.**
15. Inserting a short vowel sound into consonant clusters, for example, so that the word “product” sounds like “purodukto”
16. Failing to stress the correct syllable in a word. For example, saying “COMputer” instead of “comPUter”
17. **Failing to stress the appropriate word in a sentence. For example, replying to the question: “Will your sister be here on Thursday?” with: “No, SHE will be here on Friday” rather than: “No, she will be here on FRIday”**
18. Failing to “weaken” unstressed syllables within a word. For example, pronouncing each syllable in “kitchen” equally so that it sounds like “kichen” rather than “kichən”
19. Failing to “weaken” unstressed words within a sentence. For example, pronouncing “to” so that it sounds like “too” (rather than /tə/) in the sentence: “I went to the park.”
20. Failing to connect words together. For example, pronouncing the words “do” and “you” separately in questions such as “Where do you want to go?” rather than as one sound: “Where ju want to go?”