

# **Pronunciation Instruction in an Advanced English Communication Class**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this brief paper is to examine the student feedback to a course of pronunciation instruction in an Advanced English Communication class taught at a private university in Japan. Pronunciation instruction, in conjunction with teaching the IPA symbols, was given regularly throughout a 13-lesson course. The survey data at the end of the course shows that the students found the instruction to be enjoyable and useful but the lack of empirical data means that no clear assessment of improvement in pronunciation can be given.

**Keywords:** Advanced English Communication, pronunciation instruction

## 1. Course Background

### 1.1 Advanced English Communication class

Advanced English Communication (AEC) is an elective course at Koeki University for 2<sup>nd</sup>- to 4<sup>th</sup>-year students. It is taught as a quarterly course; there are two lessons a week for six-and-a-half weeks (13 lessons in total) and the duration of each lesson is 105 minutes. For the 2018 class there were 28 participants, all but one of whom were members of the International Liberal Arts (ILA) course. The English level of the majority of students is estimated to be in the A2 to B1 CEFR range. Although there are no clear guidelines as to what should be taught in this class, the general aim is, as the title suggests, to teach communicative skills more advanced than those taught in the first-year compulsory English classes for Speaking and Listening.

For this course, it was decided to focus on four topics which were deemed to be interesting to the students and beneficial for their studies: pronunciation, idioms, UK/US

English and music. Of these, pronunciation was the core topic. The reasons for focusing on pronunciation will be discussed later, but first I will explain the teaching process.

## 1.2 Pronunciation instruction in AEC class

The pronunciation component took up about 30 minutes of each lesson for 10 of the 13 lessons. The pronunciation practice focused on the main vowel sounds (monophthongs and diphthongs) featured in General British and General American (as defined in Cruttenden, 2014). Consonants, voiced and unvoiced, and suprasegmental features, such as stress and intonation, were also covered. The teaching materials included IPA symbols and charts, Sammy diagrams, minimal pair worksheets and individual phoneme cards. Most of the practice was teacher-led and included models from the teacher for General British, and from a CD for General American, but the minimal pairs practice also involved students testing each other. Students usually practiced together in pairs but sometimes made small groups for activities such as phoneme karuta.

The pronunciation component of each lesson is shown below.

### Lesson Schedule

Lesson 1: (No pronunciation practice)

Lesson 2: Introduction of IPA symbols; stress and intonation in natural speech

Lesson 3: /ɪ/ and /i:/; /e/ and /æ/; /ʌ/ and /ɑ:/; /u/ and /u:/

Lesson 4: Review of lesson 3

Lesson 5: /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/

Lesson 6: /ɪ/ and /i:/; /e/ and /æ/

Lesson 7: (No pronunciation practice)

Lesson 8: /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ /ɑ:/; /æ/ and /ɔ:/

Lesson 9: /æ/ and /ɑ:/; /æ/ and /ʌ/

Lesson 10: Diphthongs and schwa

Lesson 11: Consonants - voiced and unvoiced

Lesson 12: Vowel review

Lesson 13: (No pronunciation practice)

## 2. Reasons to focus on Pronunciation Instruction

There were a number of reasons for choosing to focus on pronunciation in the AEC course. First, studies have shown that many learners want to improve their pronunciation (Derwing, 2003 and Kang, 2010, et al. cited in Koike, 2014, p. 362). In Japanese schools, little attention is given to pronunciation, either due to curriculum pressures or because the teachers have little confidence in their own English pronunciation. As a result, many of the students at this university show a strong L1 transfer (“katakana English”) when they speak English and very few are able to read the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols. Students on the ILA course are required to study abroad as part of their course. Most choose to go to the USA, Ireland, Canada or New Zealand where they join intensive English courses and many of them have homestays. These students therefore have a high motivation to improve their pronunciation in order to be understood by native speakers. Pronunciation teaching can help “develop the learner’s pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication with native speakers” (Roach, 2009, p. 6).

Second, some research has shown that Pronunciation Instruction (PI) can aid receptive skills as well as speaking skills. According to Kissling (2018), PI can help learners improve their intelligibility, reduce their accent and also lead to better listening skills. “Perception and production have been characterized as mutually facilitative (eg. Leather, 1999), meaning that improvement in either skill can spark improvement in the other” (p. 656). So, there were clear pedagogical reasons to teach pronunciation in this course. There are different ways to teach PI and some studies (for example, Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe, 1998 cited in Koike, 2014, p. 365) suggest that suprasegmental instruction can have a greater impact on intelligibility than segmental instruction. The decision to focus on segmental instruction in this course was taken partly because suprasegmental instruction is covered to some degree in the compulsory listening courses for first-year students and also because it was felt that teaching the IPA symbols would help the students in other English-related courses (including *zemis*) by allowing them to vocalize new words they find in their dictionaries during their studies.

### 3. Course survey results

At the end of the course, the students were asked to complete a short survey about the 4 main course components. All 28 students submitted responses. For the pronunciation section of the survey, the students were given three statements and asked to give their responses on a 4-point Likert scale. Below the statements was a box for students to write comments. The three statements and the responses were as follows (n=28):

1. I enjoyed the pronunciation practice. (A=24; B=4; C=0; D=0)
2. I think the pronunciation practice was useful for my English study. (A=23; B=5; C=0; D=0)
3. I want to improve my English pronunciation more.<sup>1</sup> (A=23; B=5; C=0; D=0)

Response Key: A = そう思う (I agree); B = ややそう思う (I somewhat agree); C = ややそう思わない (I somewhat disagree); D = そう思わない (I disagree).

In the comments section, 22 out of 28 students wrote comments, either in Japanese or English. Of the 22 comments, all but one (“Hard to understand”) were positive. Most described the practice as either “enjoyable” or “useful.” Below is a selection of the comments which gave more detailed answers about the pronunciation practice (the numbers are for reference in the Discussion):

1. 発音が分かると他のことがわかることにも繋がるので、とても助かった。また、発音記号も一緒に学んだことはとても役に立った。 [*If you understand [someone’s] pronunciation it can lead to understanding other things too, so this was very helpful. Also, learning the IPA symbols at the same time was very useful.*]
2. 発音は個人では勉強しづらい部分だと思うのでこうして講義を通して学べてよかった。 [*It is difficult to study pronunciation on your own so I’m glad I could learn it in a course like this.*]

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<sup>1</sup> *I want to improve my English pronunciation further* may have been a better choice of words, but as the author feared that some students would not understand *further*, the word *more* was used instead.

3. 発音を学ぶことで新しい単語もある程度読めるようになった。[*By studying pronunciation, I have learned how to read new words to a certain extent.*]
4. *I could learn the pronunciation. My listening skill became good.*
5. *I think that it's important for Japanese to learn the pronunciation. I want to speak English better.*
6. 発音の練習を今まであまりやってこなかったのが、発音の練習はとても役に立った。[*Until now I haven't studied pronunciation much, so the practice was very useful.*]
7. 今まで発音記号とかわからなかったけど、くり返しやることで覚えることができました。[*Until now I didn't understand IPA symbols but by repeated practice I could learn them.*]

Note: Where the original comments were written in Japanese, the author's translation is given in English.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Analysis of the survey results

An analysis of the student responses and comments shows that the students found the pronunciation practice enjoyable and useful. The overwhelmingly positive responses to statement 2 – “I think the pronunciation practice was useful for my English study” – and statement 3 – “I want to improve my English pronunciation more” – showed that students feel this practice is useful for them and confirmed the research findings mentioned earlier in Koike (2014) that many learners want to improve their pronunciation. This is stated explicitly by comment number 5. Some comments (numbers 1, 6 and 7) confirmed the author's expectations that the students had not studied pronunciation much before and/or were not familiar with the IPA symbols before the course. Comments 1, 3 and 4 imply that this practice can lead to improvement in other skills besides pronunciation, such as listening and reading new words.

## **4.2 Limitations and Implications for Future Classes**

It is important to note the limitations both in the survey results specifically and the course in general. The survey results show that the students had a positive overall impression of the pronunciation component of the course but the survey statements were quite generalized and without further information it is difficult to know what the students themselves mean by, for example, the statement that the practice is useful. It would be helpful to know in what way they believe this will be useful for them, either in their current studies or for their future. It was the author's supposition that the practice will be useful for the students when they study abroad, but there is no way to verify this hypothesis from the survey data, and the absence of comments on this subject suggests that this was not a big consideration for the students. Another limitation is the lack of data to assess whether the students' pronunciation did improve over the duration of the course. Assessment of pronunciation in research studies is usually done by asking native speakers to assess the intelligibility of non-native speakers' speech (Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2017) but such analysis was not done for this course. This is something which the author would like to consider for future research.

In terms of the pronunciation course as a whole, one should note that some research suggests that instruction of suprasegmentals has a greater overall effect on intelligibility than segmental pronunciation instruction (Koike, 2014; Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2017; Kissling, 2018). According to Parker & Graham (2005, p. 11), suprasegmental features (intonation, rhythm and stress) have greater communicative value than single sound features, so practicing rhythm in whole sentences can have a greater effect on intelligibility than focusing on segments such as "l" and "r." The reasons for not focusing on suprasegmental instruction were given earlier, but the author would like to consider whether by teaching the IPA symbols in 1<sup>st</sup>-year classes more time could be given to working on rhythm, stress and intonation in future AEC classes.

## **5. Conclusion**

There are clear reasons for giving pronunciation instruction to students of English at the tertiary level in Japan. First, pronunciation instruction has been shown to improve

intelligibility of speech and receptive skills. Second, Japanese students usually have little opportunity for such practice at junior high and senior high school level. Third, the students themselves want to improve their pronunciation and so are motivated to practise it. This paper has shown that the students in the AEC class found the pronunciation instruction enjoyable and useful but the author would like to look further at ways to make the instruction more effective and if possible to include suprasegmental instruction in future classes.

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