

Teaching English Pronunciation in Compulsory Speaking Classes at the Tertiary Level in Japan

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Abstract

This is a brief paper summarizing the main points of a presentation given to the Yamagata chapter of the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) in July 2019. At the university where the author teaches, non-English major students take compulsory English Speaking courses during their first year of studies. The author argues that pronunciation instruction should be given to such students and that this should include segmental instruction accompanied by the teaching of IPA symbols so that the students can not only practice pronunciation skills during class but also learn how to enunciate properly words learned outside class time.

Keywords: pronunciation instruction, English communication

1. Pronunciation Instruction Research

Much of the research that has been done into pronunciation has focused on ESL¹ - L2 learners who have moved to or grown up in English-speaking countries. Research by Derwing & Munro (2005) looked at the relationship between the L2 learner's pronunciation and the native speaker's reactions as a listener and categorized the reactions in 3 ways: intelligibility - how much the listener understood; comprehensibility - the degree of difficulty encountered in trying to understand; and accent - how much the L2 speaker's accent differed from the accent of the local community. According to Derwing & Munro, the main concern for the L2 learner should be to improve intelligibility. For some people, a foreign accent can be seen as a

¹ English as a Second Language

negative attribute but it is a common factor in learners' speech and unless it affects intelligibility, it should not be rated harshly. Reducing accent may be a goal for individual learners, but as the examples of famous non-native speakers such as Jackie Chan or Arnold Schwarzenegger show, heavily accented speech can be highly comprehensible (Murphy, 2017).

Research in the area of EIL (English as an International Language) by Jenkins (2000, 2002 in Dauer, 2005) focused on the interactions of Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) and led to the development of the Lingua Franca Core – guidelines for teaching pronunciation to learners who primarily interact with other non-native speakers. In Jenkins' research, the main cause of communication breakdowns was segmental errors and thus she recommends focusing on segments rather than suprasegmental features such as intonation and word stress. The main points of the Lingua Franca Core are that the pronunciation of all consonants, with the exception of /θ/ and /ð/, are important, both singly and in clusters such as /str/ or /bl/. Vowel length is also important (such as the difference between the vowel in “live” and “leave”) and although some vowels can be substituted for others without affecting comprehensibility, the vowel sound /ɜ:/ should not be substituted. In terms of suprasegmental features, Jenkins argues that while word stress is not so important for NNS interactions, prominence (also called nuclear stress) is important.

While there are different opinions on the emphasis that should be given to teaching segmentals over suprasegmentals (or *vice versa*), there is a growing number of researchers who advocate the teaching of pronunciation in class. Kissling (2018) argues that Pronunciation Instruction can help improve intelligibility, reduce accent and improve listening ability. Pronunciation is one of the few areas of language learning which has a physical aspect; the position of the articulators (such as lips, tongue, teeth, jaw and nose) in producing L2 sounds may require the use of different muscles to those used in the L1 production. Therefore, it requires a greater degree of direct instruction compared to other language skills. Many students at university in Japan say they want to improve their pronunciation (Koike, 2014), and some have said that it is something that cannot easily be studied on their own (Fec, 2019). Students who return to Japan

after short-term study-abroad trips often have a greater motivation to improve their pronunciation after experiencing first-hand the communication problems that poor pronunciation can cause.

2. Segmentals and Suprasegmentals

Pronunciation Instruction (PI) can be divided into 2 strands: segmentals – the building blocks of phonetics, vowel and consonant phonemes - and suprasegmentals – facets of pronunciation which include word stress, prominence and intonation. A number of researchers (Parker & Graham, 2005; Murphy, 2017) recommend teaching suprasegmentals first, partly as they are learned first in the L1 and are easier for L2 learners to understand. However, Japanese university students are more likely to have been exposed to suprasegmental practice in their English classrooms at junior or senior high school. From my experience working as an ALT² for fourteen years, students often practice intonation and prominence (for example, in pattern practice or repetition) at junior high school. What Murphy refers to as ‘thought groups’ – “groups of words which go together syntactically and grammatically and are bound on either side by brief pauses” (Jones, 2016, cited in Murphy, 2017, p. 36) - are commonly practiced during textbook readings, sometimes referred to as “slash reading” (as students draw a slash in the place where a pause is required).

While further practice of suprasegmentals at the tertiary level would certainly be beneficial (see Koike, 2014), segmental practice is also necessary. Despite 6 years of English study at school, many first-year university students in Japan commit segmental errors in speech which affect their intelligibility. Research by Kanazawa (2019) on the English pronunciation of Japanese Junior College Students studying to become nursery school teachers showed that common segmental errors included a lack of distinction of the length of vowels, such as /ɪ/ and /i:/, substitution of the vowel sounds /ɑ:/ for /ɜ:/ (for example, in the word “university”) and /ɔ:/ for /ou/ (for example, in the word “open”), and difficulties in the production of consonants which do not appear in the

² Assistant Language Teacher

Japanese syllabary, such /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /l/ and /r/. Wada (2019), citing Nishio & Tsuzuki (2014), adds /æ/, /w/, /s/, /z/ and the aspiration of /p, t, k/ as specific phoneme problems for Japanese speakers which should be addressed in order to improve intelligibility.

3. PI in Speaking classes

There are a number of ways to teach PI in class. These include traditional methods such as the teacher providing a direct model for the students or using sagittal section diagrams to show the correct positions of the articulators. Minimal Pairs worksheets can be used to practice different phonemes, either as simple words or within sentences. Communicative methods, espoused by Celce-Murcia et al (2010), allow for practice of specific phonemes in communicative activities such as role plays.

In my compulsory Speaking classes for first-year students I have used all of the above methods, as well as phoneme karuta³, alliterative sentences for consonant practice (such as “Big bad Bob” or “Tell tall Tim”), and identifying specific vowel phonemes in textbook dialogs. All these activities are done in conjunction with teaching recognition of the IPA symbols. Few of the students are familiar with these symbols before coming to the university, but knowledge of them enables learner agency; students can look up words learned independently of the teacher and understand their pronunciation with the aid of a dictionary.

As almost all of my students are Japanese, the main problems of pronunciation they experience are in line with those stated above by Wada et al. In listening tests given to students over the last two years, I have found the following problems of reception. For vowels, common mistakes were: /ɪ/ and /i:/ (bins / beans); /ɜ:/ and /æ/ or /a:/ (first / fast; bird / bad); /u/ and /u:/ (look / loop). For consonants, errors involved /r/ and /l/ (raw / law); /s/ and /ʃ/ (see / she); final position /t/ and /d/ (hat / had; heart / hard).

³ a game in which students have to slap the card with the same phoneme as that read out by the teacher

4. Discussion

A number of issues were raised in the discussion after the presentation. One was concerning the assessment of improvement in pronunciation of the students over the course of the classes. The suggestion was made to record each student reading a set passage at the start of the course and at the end of the course to ascertain which pronunciation errors were made and whether the instruction helped the students to correct these errors over the period of the course. A related suggestion was to use video recorders and/or smartphones to record student activities during regular classes (such as self-introductions or role plays) which could then be checked for common or specific problems of intelligibility. One interesting comment concerned the link between musical ability and pronunciation skills; some anecdotal evidence suggests that students who are adept at singing are better able to replicate native-like pronunciation (i.e. the accent of native speakers of English). This leads to the question of the potential benefits for pronunciation of using music in the English classroom.

5. Conclusion

In this short essay I have attempted to summarise the main points of my presentation on Pronunciation Instruction. PI is an area which seems to be gaining more recognition from linguists and interest from teachers, perhaps due to the shift in emphasis from trying to emulate accents such as British or American English to focusing on intelligibility. Japanese students, especially those who have the chance to travel or study abroad, soon find out that “katakana English” pronunciation can often be unintelligible to native speakers. Students, thus, want to improve their pronunciation, and teachers of Speaking classes at university can help them by providing PI. By teaching the IPA symbols as well, teachers can give students the means to further their knowledge of pronunciation outside the classroom.

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