

Pronunciation among Japanese learners of English

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to discuss English pronunciation among Japanese learners of English and consequently propose a research plan into the efficacy of direct and concentrated verbal training.

Pronunciation is arguably the most important and problematic aspect facing non-native speakers of English and indeed, the first thing people notice when engaging in conversation. Improper pronunciation not only leads to misunderstanding and ineffective communication but in some cases negative impressions of the speaker, and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, however advanced, becomes meaningless when it can't be pronounced correctly.

On initial encounters with Japanese people, one will undoubtedly notice occasional grammatical errors, most notably the misuse of verb tenses, particles and the omission of articles. Nevertheless, basic and often entertaining conversations can often be achieved with the Japanese without any major difficulty.

However, from time to time, problems and misunderstandings materialize as a result of inaccurate and in some cases completely incorrect pronunciation. Indeed, it may have never occurred to native speakers of English that the pronunciation of words they so often take for granted would create such an obstacle for non-native English speakers. Delving into the Japanese language, one will learn that the 'v' sound does not exist in Japanese and is therefore approximated to its most similarly-sounding relative, 'b.' Furthermore, the majority of Japanese words, when written using Roman characters (following The Hepburn system, 1867), comprises of a vowel immediately succeeding every consonant. Vowels also end almost all Japanese words when written in English with the rare exception of words that end in 'n.'

In one incidence from personal experience of first time encounters with Japanese people, the country of Vietnam being pronounced “*Betonamu*” caused all manner of confusion.

This pronunciation problem or lack of oral ability amongst Japanese English speakers to physically make the sounds that exist in English, and tendency to only speak what English teachers in Japan often refer to as *Katakana* English, is the main reason Japanese not only struggle to make themselves understood, but also struggle to understand native speakers of English since *their* pronunciation contains a spectrum of sounds non-existent in the Japanese language and thus unfamiliar to the Japanese ear.

Pronunciation and intonation that more closely resembles that of a native speaker of the language may possibly be achieved after sufficient time spent in the country or submerged in an environment surrounded by native speakers of the language. However, Japanese speakers of English at such a level are very rare and most conversations or interactions between native speakers of English and Japanese tend to fall into a “two steps forward, one step back” pattern, where both the native speaker and the Japanese constantly have to repeat or rephrase what they have said in order to be understood thus stalling the progression of the conversation. Inability to recognize and reproduce certain sounds in English creates a hurdle very few Japanese ever overcome in their race to achieve fluency in the language.

The cause of this problem, as previously suggested, may be the Japanese “alphabet” itself and its process of replacing English sounds that do not exist in Japanese with inaccurate approximations. Table 1 shows the most common English sounds that are distorted by Japanese approximations.

English sound	Japanese approximation.
V	<i>B</i>
Th	<i>S/Z</i>
R	<i>L</i>

Table 1 : Japanese approximations of English sounds

Teaching pronunciation often tends to be a neglected or overlooked component of English lessons with most of the emphasis being placed on grammar and the memorization of vocabulary. Nevertheless, to develop practical communication skills, i.e. to make oneself understood without causing misunderstanding or offense, the teaching of pronunciation must be emphasized in the classroom.

Pronunciation focused classroom activity

In addition to the challenges of effectively pronouncing English words, the Japanese also have a tendency to use a number of “loan words” or convenient abbreviations of English words and would seem to expect native speakers of English to understand them.

Loan words are common in most languages with English no exception. Take the words “entrepreneur” “kindergarten” or “karaoke”, all borrowed from French, German and Japanese respectively. However, the prevalence of loan words in Japanese accompanied by non-native like pronunciation greatly hinders communication in English. The same is true with the aforementioned convenient abbreviations. Common examples are the words “*biru*” “*depaato*” and “*kombini*” all being abbreviations of the English words building, department store and convenience store.

An enjoyable classroom activity devised in an attempt to counteract these problematic tendencies was first to brainstorm with the students on the blackboard a list of loaned or abbreviated words they used in daily conversation. This required

a fairly advanced knowledge of Japanese. The correct corresponding English words were taught or elicited where possible, then a pre-lesson prepared list of 25 common Japanese loan words/abbreviations with the correct English equivalent was given to each student. They were then made to listen and repeat the English words with emphasis being placed on pronunciation, namely positioning of the tongue between the teeth to create the ‘th’ sound and directly behind the top teeth creating the ‘l’ sound; lightly placing the top teeth against the bottom lip creating the ‘v’ sound, and gently pursing the lips maintaining a neutral tongue to create the ‘r’ sound. Overemphasis of such sounds provided a comical element to the activity while giving the students a clear example to imitate.

Next, a set of 25 cards each with an English sentence containing a blank space was placed inside a pencil case and circulated around the classroom in a “musical chairs” type fashion. When the music stopped, the student holding the pencil case would withdraw a card, read the sentence aloud and fill the blank space with the correct English word from the list. Using the correct vocabulary in the context of the sentence helped to reinforce the students’ understanding of the word while at the same time training them in its pronunciation.

The activity also provided an element of “peer learning” with the students performing in front of and encouraging each other while the teacher played a relatively passive role.

Such activities create opportunities for students to focus less on conventional grammar and more on the practical and essential aspect of pronunciation with comprehensive talking-based tasks.

Proposed research

The aforementioned observations have inspired an action-research proposal to examine the pronunciation of 8-10 students of second grade high school age over a period of 6 weeks. The students will undergo 30 minutes of intensive pronunciation training once a week in an attempt to improve their recognition and oral ability to reproduce the most problematic English sounds for Japanese. Their progress along with their opinions regarding the ease of producing the sounds will be recorded and the results will be presented in a forthcoming paper.