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Quinn, Brian T.
Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

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Priorities for Pronunciation in Teaching English
Conversation at Japanese Universities

Brian T. Quinn
Kyushu University

The problem of how to best balance the emphasis on both speaking skills and pronunciation skills in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom is a familiar one to language teachers. In recent years there has been a revitalization as to the importance of teaching proper pronunciation for improving overall communicative abilities. However, opinions regarding the best methodologies to effectively implement such a plan remain in conflict. This paper attempts to analyze the proper role which pronunciation should take and to suggest some approaches that teachers might find effective in teaching English conversation classes by native lecturers at Japanese universities.

In the 1950's and 1960's during the height of popularity with the audio-lingual method, the role of pronunciation in language teaching received a great deal of attention, often too much attention. In the following decades of the 1970's and 1980's, however, people began to reduce the role of pronunciation in language teaching and replace it with increased stress on the overall pragmatic abilities of basic conversational speaking skills.

Interestingly enough, recently there have been an increasing number of articles being written which state that we should once again put more emphasis on pronunciation in the ESL classroom. So as one can see, the pendulum has almost swung full turn. Yet, I believe that the reason for such an educational adjustment in philosophy is the simple reason that, ultimately, all learners of English need to have , at the very least, minimally proficient pronunciation in order to intelligibly communicate in the language. Therefore, we can see a renewed interest in the teaching of pronunciation skills because of its role in facilitating communicative competence.

In Japan, the goal of English education until very recently, had always been primarily for the efficient transfer of information and technology into the country from the West and therefore, reading and translating was usually sufficient for this task. While today information is created in such quantities and at such a rapid pace that specialists must regularly attend international professional conferences. In addition, it is becoming increasingly important for Japanese to communicate effectively in international political, social, economic and scholarly spheres where English has become the "lingua franca" of the world. Finally, with the steady increase of both Japanese traveling abroad and the great influx of foreigners coming to live and work in Japan, clear and intelligible pronunciation is becoming more imperative than ever before.

The native English lecturer at Japanese universities is faced with the difficult task of deciding how to best teach these

essential skills and how much time and attention should be devoted to pronunciation during the limited available class contact time.

In large university English conversation classes the general need for remedial pronunciation is indeed great yet, due to the fact that classes typically meet for only 12 or 13 weekly 90 minute sessions during the one semester required course over a 4 or 5 month period, then to concentrate primarily on pronunciation at the expense of improving the students' practical communication skills would be a great mistake. In addition, pronunciation alone for intermediate and advanced students tends to be extremely boring and unpopular with the students. Therefore, the native teacher must devise ways of incorporating pronunciation enhancing exercises into the format of his normal lessons, which should stress the primary function of communicative speaking skills while never ignoring the essential importance of correct pronunciation.

One of the biggest hurdles the native teacher must overcome is the almost universality of bad pronunciation habits deeply ingrained in the students over a 6 to 8 year period of junior high school, senior high school, and university classes which have almost concentrated solely on grammar, reading and translation skills. Although proper pronunciation has, of course, been introduced, there has been almost no opportunity of practicing actual production skills. Even when reading aloud during a typical reading/translation class they will have only minimal, if any, correction and after so many years most have

learned to adapt known sounds from the Japanese sound system in order to "approximate" English pronunciation and which is often referred to as "Katakana English". Thus, without any true feedback, most students come to assume that their pronunciation is "good enough" and can be understood by native speakers. This mistaken impression is further reinforced by their teachers who themselves show little interest in pronunciation and whose pronunciation is often not much better than that of the students themselves. Therefore, the teachers usually try to speak as little English as possible during the class and the students are left without even a steady language model. Finally, there is usually no opportunity for the junior and senior high school students to have any contact with native speakers except at the rare private schools with a native teacher or in the new "rotating clown" program (otherwise known as the AET Program for assistant English Teachers) sponsored by the Ministry of Education, whereby a native English Speaker is brought into a class once a year to sing and dance for 40 minutes and let everyone have a good hearty laugh. This unfortunate situation makes it imperative for the native teacher to instill a heightened awareness into the students of the extreme importance attached to clear intelligible pronunciation if the ultimate goal is clear and smooth communication.

The teacher should not forget that teaching speaking skills and pronunciation skills are, in fact, two different things. Speaking skills represent overall fluency in using English as a foreign language, such as in short practical conversations,

while pronunciation skills are merely the ability to make the proper sounds of English. Therefore, mastery of one at the expense of the other creates a lot of problems. If most language teachers had to decide which is most important, I am sure that most would choose speaking skills, since it is such skills which allow us to actually interact communicatively.

Therefore, all language teachers, especially the native instructors of large sized conversation classes, are faced with the dilemma of whether to always stress good pronunciation or to take a laissez-faire attitude about it as long as students are more or less understandable.

First of all, the teacher should set clear, attainable goals and objectives for the students. The teacher should realize that his students will never sound like native speakers. "The acquisition of a good pronunciation in the target language is commonly held to be the most difficult of all tasks in language learning. It is a matter of physical fact that after the age of puberty virtually no one can acquire a native pronunciation". (Paulston-Bruder, 1976:81) However, all satisfactory students should eventually be able to make themselves understood to a native speaker from any English speaking country. In fact, there is no real need to sound native. "The great majority of learners will have a very practical purpose for learning English and will derive no particular benefit from acquiring native-like pronunciation." (Kenworthy, 1987:2) A realistic goal for the majority of students should be to attain practical intelligibility whereby native listeners can comfortably

understand their speech without having to unduly strain and suffer. A clear explanation of such goals has been outlined by Chastain: "The goal in learning to speak a second language is to be able to communicate orally with a native speaker. Realistically, teachers cannot, and should not, expect their students to be able to speak like natives. The rate of speech will be slower than that of a native. The syntactical usage will be at a simple level and most likely will include carry-overs from the native language. There will be many needed words that they will not know. But if they can make themselves understood in the language, they and their teacher can be quite proud of their achievement. Although they may not wish to accept such a modest goal, honest second-language teachers must admit that most students do not attain this level of proficiency in speaking. Perhaps achievement would be higher if the goals of the profession were set at a more realistic level". (Chastain, 1976:335) Therefore, our primary goal as language teachers should be to make our students communicatively functional so they can actually use the language and be understood.

In regard to which version of the English is preferable for the students, in Japan it is best for the university teachers to use one of the standard forms of pronunciation, that is, either Standard British English or Standard American English because of the universal acceptance of both. At the same time, however, it is often a good idea to broaden the students range of comprehension by occasionally exposing them to other variants of English

during the listening comprehension portions of the class. At such times other brands of English such as Indian, Australian, Irish etc., could be introduced briefly to help point out the fact that when using English internationally, several different variants will continually arise. Yet, at the same time it is strongly advisable not to overload the students by actually teaching such multiple types of English pronunciation since this would only be counterproductive and confuse their already unsteady foundation in the English sound system..

Even at the Japanese university level it is impossible to ignore the fact that most often English is still taught strictly as a reading course, much as are Latin and Greek in the United States. In such a situation, spending great amounts of time working on pronunciation would make little sense. However, for native English teachers, improving the overall speaking and communication skills remains the primary goal. Obviously, if not enough time is spent teaching and practicing the sound system of English then quite often the students will not be understood by other native speakers. Most teachers have encountered one or more

Japanese students who could speak quite fluently and rapidly but at the same time could hardly be understood. Thus, one of the teacher's roles is to provide the students with a more balanced ability in the language so that the students comprehensibly can keep pace with his fluency.

What then is good pronunciation? Hockett states: "a good pronunciation of a foreign language is one which will not draw the attention of the native speaker of that language away from

what we are saying to the way we are saying it." (Hockett,1972:62) So, we should try to help the students acquire a pronunciation which does not interfere with communication.

Next, we will take a look at teaching the sounds of English itself. Since the sound system is an integral part of English, as with any foreign language, it should have a role in every class and be exploited naturally from the lesson material. One of the best ways to utilize this opportunity is to anticipate problems while preparing the lesson plan. Such a method works especially well with the veteran teacher who is familiar with the most typical Japanese pronunciation difficulties. Another way to bring pronunciation into the lesson is to work from student errors. All conversation teachers need to develop a strong habit of listening carefully throughout the lesson for pronunciation problems, especially during pair and group work when the teacher should be circulating around the classroom. When general problems can be isolated then pronunciation drills can easily be adapted on the board from the lesson material or from the students' conversations. Often just a few minutes at the end of the class can be profitably utilized in this fashion to help correct student errors. However, careful attention must be paid not to personally single out students' errors which could cause them great shame and embarrassment among their peers. If, however, a student should make a drastic mistake, such as inadvertently pronouncing an obscenity instead of the desired word, then it is the teacher's duty to inform the student quietly while the other students are engaged in pair work or after the class so as to

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prevent even more embarrassment should the student repeat the error with a native speaker.

There are some times, however, when pronunciation work should not be done. For example, when practicing the lesson's dialogue or reading passage or when two students are successfully conducting a conversation during independent pair work. Whenever there is communication taking place in English, which is the primary goal of our teaching, then we should not interfere. In such instances, it is better for the teacher to listen for problems and later focus the students' attention to them in a remedial manner after the exercise is completed. Occasionally, a teacher may feel the need to correct a word that has been mercilessly mispronounced by one of the students in their groups. At this time it would be best for the teacher to briefly join into the conversation and use the same word once or twice to naturally teach the correct form.

Therefore, to summarize what has been just said, for the native English teacher with limited class time it is best to incorporate pronunciation practice into the weekly lesson, anticipate problems, correct mistakes and whenever possible avoid interrupting real communication among the students.

It is another good idea to only teach one pronunciation point at a time since if the teacher undertakes too much at once then potentially none of the points will be adequately absorbed by the students. Teachers should also be careful to always use real English as much as possible in the classroom. Many teachers speak unnaturally slow which only does a disservice to the students.

By speaking naturally, the native teacher can give the students an excellent opportunity to adapt their comprehension skills to the many instances of reduction, unstressed vowels and blending which only take place in natural speech.

Next, the native teacher has to decide what areas of pronunciation most need to be taught. First of all, he must deal with the sounds themselves. Many English sounds simply do not occur in Japanese, such as /ð/ as in 'soothe', /θ/ as in 'south' etc. These can be taught successfully by utilizing minimal pairs to give the students a contrastive analysis such as, 'thick/sick' or 'fan/van'. Most pronunciation is, of course, learned by mimicking the teacher's examples, however, adult learners can be greatly aided by giving a linguistic explanation for any sounds with which they have constant difficulty. Therefore, teachers can make good use of a large articulatory chart, if available, or just draw a simple one on the board. By utilizing such a chart the teacher can show the students exactly where to place their tongue and lips for difficult sounds.

Throughout all conversation classes one of the main duties of the teacher is to provide sufficient feedback to the students so they can know if they are pronouncing the sounds satisfactorily or not. After a while, many students should be able to start correcting themselves after developing a better awareness for English sounds. It is additionally important to help the students establish priorities as to which sounds are or are not critical for comprehensible pronunciation. This is also important so they do not waste a lot of time worrying about aspects of pronunciation

which do not adversely affect communication in a significant manner. The teacher of large conversation classes must do his best to develop an atmosphere of constructive cooperation so that as the semester progresses the students will start to correct each other's pronunciation errors in addition to monitoring their own efforts which can be of tremendous help to general class progress as a whole. To best create such an atmosphere the teacher should continually demonstrate concern for the learners' pronunciation and progress. If the teacher does so sincerely, he stands a better chance of instilling a similar concern in the students themselves.

A lot of problems develop due to interference from the English spelling system. Since the spelling systems of many languages do not represent all the sounds of the language, linguists have developed special notation systems called phonetic alphabets. The use of such a phonetic spelling system can be a great aid in teaching pronunciation yet, for non-major required one semester English courses in Japan it is probably better to use general spelling while clearly indicating the stress and reduction where necessary. There is one major exception to this however, that is when introducing the sound of schwa /ə/, which is the vowel sound made when the lips and tongue are in the neutral position. This vowel phoneme is so extensive that it should be used frequently to explain the difficult phenomenon of reduction which is a major trait of natural English. Due to the lack of a schwa vowel in Japanese and due to other problems of rhythm and stress in English, Japanese students will always have difficulties in the

use of weak forms of words. Therefore, the occurrence of schwa should be indicated frequently until the students can begin to get a more natural feel for it in their own pronunciation.

Other aspects of pronunciation which may be covered when encountered in the lesson material are: consonant clusters, sound linkage, word stress, rhythm, weak forms, sentence stress and intonation. Due to the brevity of time the teacher will need to address these features succinctly as time allows in every lesson to help the students understand as well as produce more natural English sounds. If the lesson and dialogue materials have been properly introduced with sufficient emphasis on the main sound features, then as the students practice in pairs and groups the teacher can judge their progress and determine what additional pronunciation practice may be beneficial. Throughout all of this the teacher needs to provide the students with a better awareness of those features of the English sound system which will be most critical to them when speaking to a native English speaker. It is also important to have the student pairs practice with situations they are likely to encounter in real life so they can actually match rhythm and intonation with the actual emotions and feelings called for in a given situation. It is often a good idea for the teacher to use humorous exaggeration when teaching intonation and by bringing the aspect of dramatic humor into the classroom the students will feel more at ease and thereby enjoy themselves with similar mimicking while continuing in pair work and role plays. Therefore, this method is extremely effective for

reinforcement of proper intonation.

The following is a brief description of some general areas where Japanese students often tend to make pronunciation mistakes. These areas will generally need to be closely observed by the teacher during all production work.

The following sounds do not occur in Japanese:

/f/ as in 'fan', /v/ as in 'van', /ð/ as in 'soothe', /θ/ as in 'south'. Therefore, Japanese students tend to make the following substitutions: /h/ will be used for /f/, so 'feel' may be pronounced like 'heel'. /z/ or /d/ will be used for /ð/, while /s/ or /t/ will be used for /θ/.

Many consonants which occur in Japanese can be easily transferred to English, yet many consonants only occur before particular vowels so they will have great difficulty in pronouncing unfamiliar consonant-vowel sequences such as:

/ti/ and /tu/ which do not occur in Japanese so they will often have trouble with words like 'team', 'two', etc.

The sequence /si/ does not occur so there will often be problems with 'see', 'seat', etc.

The only vowel which commonly follows /w/ as in 'wet' in Japanese is /a/ so there will be difficulty with such words as 'win', 'white', 'wait', 'would', etc.

Japanese /b/ may be pronounced almost like a /v/ so there will be frequent /v/-/b/ confusion.

Japanese speakers often cannot distinguish English /r/ from /l/ which causes constant confusion.

Japanese has only five vowels while English has approximately

eleven, therefore, students will often use the nearest Japanese vowel when trying to pronounce English. For example, there is no short /i/ vowel sound in Japanese so there will be frequent substitution of a long /i/ so the word 'sit' may often sound like 'seat'.

There is no schwa in Japanese and thus students will tend to substitute many different vowels for it. In addition, they will tend to use a full vowel in unstressed syllables while pronouncing each consonant in unstressed syllable clearly and distinctly in contrast to normal native reduction.

Japanese make no distinction in the vowel sound of such words as 'cap', 'cup' and 'card' whereas each vowel is clearly distinct in English.

English rhythm and stress are extremely difficult for Japanese to master since in Japanese each syllable is given equal stress, which makes a word of four syllables twice as long to pronounce as a word of two syllables. There will be frequent mistakes in the placement of stress in words and in sentences. Mistakes in sentence stress are also caused by a lack of understanding the proper relationship between stress placement and meaning.

There are very few consonant clusters in Japanese which has a normal C-V-C-V or C-V-V syllabic pattern. So they often pronounce a word like screw as 'su-ku-ru' by inserting vowels after final consonants in a given syllable.

Intonation is often less of a problem to English communication for Japanese than rhythm and stress since many areas are easily adaptable without producing unacceptable patterns.

The above areas of pronunciation difficulty are by no means all inclusive yet, it gives the native teacher an overview of the extent of pronunciation interference from the Japanese students' own linguistic sound system.

(Source: Kenworthy, J. Teaching English Pronunciation. New York: Longman, 1987. pp.149-152)

Conclusion

Even at the university most students enrolled in native speaker English conversation classes basically would like very much to learn how to speak the language. Almost all are beset with such problems as lack of practical experience or confidence. In addition, they use incorrect sounds forms and patterns. Teachers should stop trying to have them attain near native mastery and pursue a more realistic goal of developing in them a functional ability so they can make themselves understood. We should never spend too much time on just the refinements of pronunciation and concentrate instead on teaching those basic sound skills which best foster communication. The teacher should show true interest and concern in developing the students' pronunciation skills and create a positive environment in which the students will not be afraid to respond to the teachers questions and suggestions.

We should never forget that perfect pronunciation of all sounds is not at all necessary for good communication. The students should never be afraid of possessing an accent as long as they can talk successfully with a native. Teachers should make

it perfectly clear that no one will have a negative reaction to a strong accent as long as the language is comfortably intelligible, it only becomes a problem when there is a breakdown of communication. Therefore, the goal in teaching pronunciation is to foster in the students an adequate sound system which does not interfere with communication from both the viewpoint of the speaker and listener. When correcting student errors it is imperative that the teacher use gentle encouragement and find a middle ground between overcorrecting, so that the students lose confidence or become discouraged and that of undercorrecting so that the students are not sure if their pronunciation is correct or not.

The native English lecturers for general conversation courses at Japanese universities will always have three extremely important objectives which face them at the beginning of any course: 1) To allow 18 and 19 year olds the chance to painlessly adjust themselves to living communicative English while re-igniting their enthusiasm for language learning after having mostly lost interest during the previous 6 years of grammar translation classes. This includes helping them to overcome the "culture shock" which affects large numbers of students, who may never have even interacted with a foreigner before. 2) To initiate in the students the steady transformation of their acquired wealth of English grammar, structure, syntax and vocabulary into a kind of knowledge more useful than for simply deciphering obscure examinations. That is, to guide them into the ways of using English in both an active and practical way for expanding

their communication potential in the evermore internationalized world. 3) To instill in them a strong awareness regarding the importance of clear pronunciation so they will go on to continually monitor themselves in order to avoid unnecessary breakdowns in communication and thus, will become better able to successfully interact with English speaking people of all nationalities.

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