Pronunciation Needs Analysis of Japanese Students

Nathan Dover

University of New England

ABSTRACT: For some Japanese students, pronunciation is one of the most difficult challenges they encounter when learning a second language and yet, its importance cannot be understated. This is supported by Harmer who suggests that the most important thing about speaking English is that we should be intelligible and we should be understood by other speakers of English, whoever they are (Harmer, 2015). This paper analysed the pronunciation needs of two Japanese students (student A; an adult male and student B; an adult female) over a period of several weeks. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews based on casual conversation topics. Each interview was recorded and then analysed, strengths and weaknesses were defined and as a result, lesson plans targeting problem areas were designed. The research concludes that an all-encompassing viewpoint of pronunciation teaching, one that draws on various approaches, was needed in order for students to achieve their language goals.

KEYWORDS: Pronunciation analysis, intelligible, learning needs, language goals, lesson plans.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation can be broken into two categories: segmental and suprasegmental. Phonemes are the segmental features of pronunciation which account for sound differences and are divided into two categories, consonants and vowels. Consonants are often referred to as the bricks of the English language whilst vowels are the cement that holds everything together. But what is the actual difference between the two? The distinction has to do with airflow. With vowel sounds there is an open configuration allowing air to pass through the vocal tract without audible friction or obstruction. In comparison, consonant sounds are to a greater or lesser degree obstructed.

The 24 consonant sounds of the English language are distinguished by three categories: voicing, place of articulation and manner of articulation. Consonants are either voiced or unvoiced, whether the vocal cords vibrate or not when the airflow out of the lungs meets varying degrees of resistance. Place of articulation relates to the other human body parts called the articulators (such as the teeth, lips and tongue etc.), that are involved in speech production. These muscle movements arrange the articulators into varying positions and are responsible for where the sound is made. Consonants are described as bilabial, labiodental, interdental, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal sounds. Lastly, each consonant sound is categorised by its manner of articulation in regards to the amount of airflow that is restricted. Stops, fricatives, affricates, nasals, glides and liquids are the different classifications.

Vowels are the nucleus of a syllable, the centrepiece of segmental features that all pronunciation is built upon. Depending on the dialect or variety of English spoken, there are between 14 and 24 in the English language. These are broken into three groups: monophthongs (a single vowel sound), diphthongs (a vowel sound that glides from one to another) and triphthongs (a vowel sound that glides through three vowels). Like consonants, vowels can also be classified in regards to the position of the articulators and the modification of the sound produced. Placement of the tongue distinguishes the vowel sound into front, central and back categories, as well as the height of the tongue into high, mid and low categories.

The suprasegmental features of English are a combination of speech components that accompany consonants and vowels. These components are often considered to be the driving force behind successful pronunciation. Linking is when the final syllable of a word runs into the initial syllable of the preceding word and is responsible for the rhythmic nature of the English language. Intonation and lexical stress are also key aspects in regards to pronunciation. The correct rising and falling of a speaker's voice can alter the semantic meaning of a sentence. Stating facts, eliciting information and expressing emotions are just some of the ways intonation can influence understanding. Lexical stress is when a syllable is given more emphasis in a single word and when a word is given emphasis in a sentence this is called sentence stress.

Student A profile

Student A is an 18 year old Japanese student who is about to enter university. His previous language experience with English was dominated by passive activities such as listening, reading and grammar drills as opposed to communicative, speaking activities. In an effort to improve the latter, student A is studying privately at an Eikaiwa (English conversational school). His pronunciation

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goals are to improve his overall intelligibility, improve his confidence and to obtain a higher level of pronunciation in order to better communicate with his foreign classmates.

Student A Pronunciation Analysis

Student A has already achieved a considerable amount of intelligible pronunciation. Most notable was his use of certain, high frequency loan-words that are common in Japan. Words such as mountain /maʊntɪn/, game centre/geɪm sɛntə/, computer /kəmpjuːtə/, phone /fəʊn / and his first use of the word doctor /dɒktə/ were all pronounced clearly and correctly. Throughout the pronunciation analysis Student A was able to give some examples of clear and precise linking, and his use of some consonant phonemes was clear, well pronounced and easy to understand. Although student A showed a relatively high level of pronunciation, there are several trouble areas that are impeding his intelligibility.

Segmental Problems

Throughout the pronunciation analysis, student A mispronounced the alveolar liquid phoneme /l/ and /r/ in the initial consonant position. The Japanese language only has one liquid phoneme /r/ so this is a considerable problem area for Japanese students. Student A's pronunciation of the alveolar liquid phoneme switched from /l/ to /r/ without reason. This is not surprising considering that in Japan it can be pronounced as an apico-alveolar tap [r] or an alveolar lateral approximant [l].

Mispronounced alveolar liquid phonemes examples were:

Light /laɪt/ and right /raɪt/ Ground /graʊnd/ and glound /glaʊnd/.
Leal /lɪəl/and real /rɪəl/ Fly /flaɪ/ and fry /fraɪ/.
Play /pleɪ/ and pray /preɪ/

Student A also had trouble with other consonant clusters.

Mispronounced consonant cluster examples were:

Dolphin /dɒlfɪn/ and dolfin /dolfin/ the /ði:/ and the /ðɜ:/.

Student A omitted the final consonant sound in some words including the alveolar fricative /s/ marking for countable plural nouns. There seemed to be a drop off point in which he failed to follow the word through to completion. He also used the incorrect form of this, pronounced /ðɪs/, in reference to objects and people regardless of their plurality. He mispronounced the intervocalic syllables, replacing the phoneme /m/ for /n/ in the word same /seɪm/ pronounced as /seɪn/. Student A had trouble with the unstressed schwa phoneme/ə/ which he continually mispronounced either with a strong vowel or consonant phoneme.

Mispronounced unstressed schwa phoneme examples were:

Picture /pɪkʧə/ pronounced / pɪktɜ:/ Doctor /dɒktə/ pronounced /dɒktɜ:/.

Suprasegmental Problems

Throughout the pronunciation analysis, student A displayed several suprasegmental problems. He failed to link phonemes together. Instead, strongly pronouncing each word independently so articles and determiners were given unnecessary stress. Student A also displayed problems with his use of contractions.

Mispronounced linking and contraction examples were:

"Two birds is fly but cow is not fly" / tuː bɜːdz ɪz flaɪ bət kaʊ z nɒt flaɪ/
"Doctor is stand, doctor is sit" /dɒktə iz stænd dɒktə iz sɪt/
Student A's word and sentence stress was uneven and lacked rhythm. He elongated the final vowel sounds in the words Sally, into and sea. There was also a failure to assimilate his words together. Most notably, a failure to join the final sound with the preceding one.

Mispronounced unevenness and elongation examples were:

"Sally and Jim go into the sea" /sæliy ənd ʤɪm gəʊ ɪntʊ ðə siy/.
"The real dolphin plays with the toy dolphin" /rɪəl dolfin pleɪ ðə tɔɪ dolfin/.

Student B profile

Student B was in her late 20s and was working professionally as an office worker. She had studied English for several years and took private English lessons with a tutor in order to improve the English skills required for her job. Her pronunciation goals were to be better understood at work and ultimately, to achieve a high score (7-8) in the IELTS speaking test.

Student B Pronunciation Analysis

Student B displayed some achievements in her English pronunciation, most notably her fluency and positive attitude towards communicating. Her intonation and rhythm was (at times) sufficient enough to be intelligible and this was evident in the sentence *"It's important because you can…"* This sentence contains the correct stress on the middle syllable /pɔ:/. Her pronunciation of the

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ordinal numbers first /fɜːst/ and second /sɛkənd/ was clear and precise as were the words communicate /kəˈmjuːnɪkeɪt/ and similar /sɪmɪlə/. For the majority of the pronunciation analysis she showed a good command of consonant and vowel pronunciation.

Segmental Problems
Unfortunately her intelligibility was quite affected by her mispronunciation of key words and phonemes. She mistook the interdental fricative phoneme /ð/ for the alveolar stop phoneme/d/ and she also mispronounced the alveolar liquid phonemes /l/ and /r/ in the intervocalic position.

Mispronounced key words examples were:
That /ðæt/ pronounced /dæt/
Different pronounced /difulənt/ remember pronounced / lɪˈmɛmbl/
Clothes / kləʊðz/ cours / kəʊrz/.

Mispronounced consonant and vowel phoneme examples were:
Final consonants:
Restaurant /rɛstrɒnt/ restaurong /rɛstrɒŋ/ entertain /ɛntəˈteɪn/ entertay /ɛntəˈtey/
Business /bɪznɪs/ businet /bɪznɪt/ field /fiːld/ fielz /fiːlz/
Initial consonants:
Very /vɛri/ bery /bɛri/ dress /drɛs/ ress /rɛs/
Intervocalic consonants:
Attractive /əˈtræktɪv/ accactive / əˈkæktɪv/

Other final consonant mispronounced examples:
Omitted the past tense marker /d/ on changed and the present continuous marker /ɪŋ/ on changing
Mispronounced the present continuous marker /ɪŋ/ in entertaining /ɛntəteɪnɪŋ/ for /ɛntəˈteɪnz/
Mispronounced the present continuous marker /ɪŋ/ in socialising /səʊʃəlaɪzɪŋ/ for /səʊʃəls/

She unnecessarily inserted the vowel sound /æ/ between words which could be heard in the sentences *"like / æ/ formal party"* and *"Is something like / æ/ I have projects"*. In the sentence *"you have to have the cake"* she pronounced both modal verbs /hæv/ despite the first use which indicates obligation and the second which indicates possession.
She also had trouble distinguishing between singular and plural forms of verbs, omitting the alveolar fricative/s/ on many words.

Suprasegmental Problems
Student B's intelligibility suffers due to her inability to contract words in connected speech patterns.

Mispronounced connected speech examples were:
Sentence fragment "I think it's…" the four syllables are contracted into one / θɪks/. Also, her
Contraction of "that's…" is mispronounced / ðæs/.
Her syllable stress on certain words also caused confusion. With the word similar /sɪmɪlə/ she placed the stress on the final syllable instead of the first, and with the word restaurant (pronounced /rɛstrɒŋ/, she also placed the syllable stress on the final, incorrect consonant.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Learning Needs of Both Students:
Student A's pronunciation strengths were apparent in his use of high-frequency loan-words that make up his everyday lexicon. Segmentally, he had trouble with certain consonant and vowel phonemes and at times was unable to pronounce diphthongs adequately. He also had difficulties with initial consonant sounds which construct minimal pair phonemes. Student A had difficulty in completing words, in particular, his omission of final consonant phonemes indicating plurality and tense. Due to his inability to link words together, student A had trouble maintaining connected speech throughout the interviews.
Student B displayed a high level of fluency and confidence overall. However, she had trouble With initial consonant sounds and minimal pair phonemes which unfortunately hindered her overall intelligibility. She also had difficulty in word completion and omitted final consonant phonemes indicating plurality and tense. In regards to suprasegmental features, student B also had trouble maintaining connected speech, inserted unnecessary vowel sounds and strongly mispronounced words at crucial times throughout the pronunciation analysis.

Student a Recommendations
Like any branch of linguistics, there are myriad approaches for teachers who are trying to improve a student's pronunciation. Therefore, the researcher suggests that Student A will benefit equally from a range of activities broadly grouped into either the intuitive-imitative approach or the analytical-linguistic approach of teaching pronunciation. Whereas the intuitive-imitative approach relies on a students' ability to imitate a suitable pronunciation model, the analytical-linguistic approach incorporates other tools such as a phonetic alphabet, vocal muscle charts and other supplementary aids in conjunction with audio recordings.

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Student A's segmental foundations should be established through daily drills and imitation of suitable models. Various forms of drills such as choral, individual, high, low etc. are invaluable resources for this particular type of activity. However, students quickly grow tired of endless drills therefore the use of realia such as a simple beach ball, would add a physical element to a potentially boring activity.

Structural linguistic minimal-pair drills and activities should be useful to highlight the single different phonemes in words, particularly /t/ /d/ and /l/ /r/. Activities such as bingo, run and grab, Pictionary or syntagmatic (contrast in a sentence) and paradigmatic drills (contrast in two sentences), can show minimal-pairs in a new context and help highlight the differences between the phonemic sounds.

Story-time activities will help student a focus on the completion of final consonants and morphemes. For example, "what do your parents do every day?" is an exercise in the present third person tense that requires the consistent use of the alveolar fricative /s/. This could then be contrasted with the same activity in the present first person tense.

Finally, a teacher-led dictation exercise is useful for both listening and pronunciation, allowing student A to hear and practice the correct way to link words together.

Student B Recommendations

The weak areas in student B's connected speech such as contractions, linking and word stress will greatly benefit from communicative activities based on the reform movement. The reform movement was the first major linguistic contribution to pronunciation teaching and advocated for the establishment of phonetic education in order for students to become intelligible communicators. Using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) will be particularly helpful to student B and help develop good speech habits from the very beginning. Particular attention should be paid to the weak areas in her pronunciation such as consonant and vowel phonemes, contractions, linking and word stress.

Activities beneficial to improve Student B's suprasegmental pronunciation skills should be based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles and activities. CLT is arguably the most popular teaching method in second language learning today and brings the use of language to the forefront of all classroom interactions. Activities such as mixed patterns, where students listen to a CD and match it to the correct stress pattern, audio dictations and mini presentations will all help her connected speech.

Once student B has been made aware of the linking rules, pair work with the teacher is a good opportunity to mark where the sounds are linked. Similar gap fill worksheets followed by communicative activities will allow student B to practice elements of contracted speech. Other beneficial activities include mixed patterns (student B listens to a CD and matches it to the correct stress pattern), audio dictations and mini presentations should all help her connected speech.

Finally, student B should keep a diary with the aim of reading it in class. This will allow for teacher feedback and a self-assessment of her progress.

CONCLUSION

The study of pronunciation has now taken its rightful place amongst its language contemporaries such as grammar and vocabulary. Teachers have access to multiple approaches and styles so that students studying English as a second language are better equipped than ever before to obtain a high level of intelligible pronunciation. This paper suggests that not one style should be favoured over the other and in fact, the benefits obtained by combining various approaches far outweighs any individual approach on its own.

Although pronunciation intelligibility was the ultimate goal for both students, Brinton, Celce-Murcia & Goodwin (2010) suggest that rather than making students sound like native speakers (which is unrealistic most of the time), teachers should enable students to surpass the threshold level so that their pronunciation does not detract from their ability to communicate. Both Student A and student B will benefit from a range of exercises taken from either the intuitive-imitative approach or the analytical-linguistic approach and it is the teacher's responsibility to utilise any means necessary in order to improve their students' language skills, communicate with confidence and enjoy speaking English as a second language.

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