

The Effect of Nursery Rhymes on Developing the Prosodic Skills of Japanese Students

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INTRODUCTION

Many, or perhaps most, Japanese students who learn English as a foreign language have difficulty both perceiving and producing its characteristic stress patterns. Production is especially problematic, and students often lack the vowel reduction necessary to achieve the appropriate rhythm in the pronunciation of English words and sentences. Also, their statements in English are commonly misinterpreted as questions, or it is incorrectly assumed that they have not finished speaking since their voices do not fall enough at the end of their utterances. The prosody, or prosodic features of the language, mainly rhythm, stress, and intonation, need to be addressed in the language classroom if our students are to develop an ability to speak English naturally. Although formal accuracy tends to receive most of our attention, it is the 'nonverbal' meaning conveyed in prosodic features that are, as Crystal (1995: 248) has stated, "the crucial element in a communication." However "crucial" it may be, not much attention has been paid to the prosody of English in ELT in this country.

I have tried to develop the prosodic skills of my students with some authentic materials such as movie videos, interview videos, and nursery rhyme tapes. The students are in an introductory-level listening course which, since it also includes pronunciation work, I call a 'pronunciation-based listening class.' In this article I will first illustrate the problems inherent in the teaching of pronunciation of English in Japan, then attempt to suggest how the prosodic features can be taught in the classroom with one type of authentic material, nursery rhymes. Finally, I will report on data from my own research that reveals the effect of nursery rhymes on developing the prosodic features of Japanese students learning English.

1. Problems inherent in pronunciation teaching

1-1. Trends in pronunciation teaching

Referring to the trends and transitions towards communicative language teaching, Naiman (1996: 163) states, “students should be provided authentic language materials and should be engaged in a meaningful interchange of language beyond the word and sentence level.” Yet these conditions do not seem to apply to the teaching of pronunciation. Much pronunciation teaching has dealt with isolated sounds or stress and intonation patterns without regard to the connected speech in which these sounds and patterns occur. However, there must be a gradual shift in emphasis from segmentals (vowels and consonants) to suprasegmentals (mainly rhythm, stress, and intonation). Pronunciation is linked to meaning at the discourse level, so it should be presented beyond the individual sound and word level in the classroom. This notion of the priority of suprasegmentals over segmentals in language teaching was already adopted in 1950s in the SGAV Method (Structural Global Audio-Visual Method, known as the Verbo-Tonal Method), which was originally applied to French language teaching. In the field of ELT, the shift started from late 1970s with work by Joan Morley (1979). However, there is still a large distance to be traveled before we reach the goal of truly communicative pronunciation teaching.

1-2. Indifference to pronunciation

The indifference to pronunciation is especially disheartening in Japan, where it has never been regarded as an important part of language teaching. In fact, it has sometimes been totally neglected by non-native English teachers (i.e. Japanese teachers of English), for one or more of several reasons. Some teachers do not have enough training or expertise in the pronunciation of English sounds, so they do not feel comfortable teaching it; some are conscious of their poor understanding of the technical aspects of the sound system of English; others are aware of their own lack of intelligibility when producing English sounds, and still others feel that they simply do not have the ear for perceiving and producing English sounds. The influence of these reluctant teachers on their students can be easily imagined: the students often do not attach significance to pronunciation in their language learning. Yet if taught effectively and communicatively, pronunciation can be meaningful and interesting to them because they will be able to understand what is said, and have what

they say understood in turn.

1-3. Basic model

Besides the tendency mentioned above to emphasize the problems inherent in teaching pronunciation or to use non-communicative methods when teaching it, there is another socio-cultural problem in pronunciation teaching: what form of pronunciation is to be taken as our model? Given the complexities of recent sociolinguistic realities that always seem to be changing, even the use of familiar terms like 'native speaker' or 'mother tongue' is regarded as disputable. In this environment, choosing one basic model of English pronunciation that would be beyond severe criticism seems impossible. There are as many equally valid variations of English as there are countries where English is spoken as a first or second language, so it seems unrealistic to look for a neutral, all-purpose, universally intelligible style of pronunciation. The more realistic solution lies in the choice of one of the existing natural forms of English as a basic model. The decisive criteria in choosing any teaching model should be that it has wide currency, is readily understood, is adequately described in textbooks, and is easily available in recorded form. Indeed, I personally find the notion of ethnocentrism deplorable, and also have my doubts about how much or how far British or American models are exportable to places with different languages and culture. However, if I must decide on one basic model of English pronunciation to teach, I would choose a representative form of one of these two varieties, based on the issues of international acceptability and intelligibility. It is important to be aware of the way in which the pronunciation model may influence a student, and what must take priority over all else is how easily students will be able to communicate with the English they have acquired.

2. Classroom activities with nursery rhymes

2-1. Why choose nursery rhymes ?

The characteristic rhythm of English is closely bound up with the correct pronunciation of stressed and unstressed syllables. As Avery and Ehrlich (1996: 107) indicate, "Nursery rhymes are also excellent for practicing rhythm." Nursery rhymes, or Mother Goose, rhymes are simple traditional songs or rhymes, for children. They are said to be the essence of English, and have been popular among English speaking people over centuries. They have typical rhythm and intonation, and their charm is time-tested. This suggests they have great possibilities to be used as authentic material in the language classroom.

Indeed, there are some problems with the idea of ‘authenticity.’ Prodromou (1988) wonders “why a particular piece of authentic materials may fall flat in the classroom.” This warns us that some authentic materials, including nursery rhymes in particular, might be inappropriate as language teaching tools. We can not be too careful in choosing the material because being ‘authentic’ is not a necessary and/or sufficient condition. Yet no one would dispute that nursery rhymes have an immense popularity among people all over the world. There were some students in my class who were at first (April 1997) very passive and reluctant to learn English because they had never gotten good grades up to that point. At the end of the semester (July 1997) I made a student survey which included a questionnaire on our use of nursery rhymes from a textbook collection of 70 rhymes (Ando 1997). The students responded anonymously, and to my surprise all the answers to the question “What do you think of the nursery rhymes in the textbook?” were positive. Some representative comments include: ‘nursery rhymes are fun’; ‘I am interested in alliteration and rhyme.’ and ‘some nursery rhymes sound funny, some merry and others mysterious.’ These comments suggest the validity of nursery rhymes as one effective teaching material.

2-2. Activities with nursery rhymes

A. *Students listen to the tape of the nursery rhymes and indicate which words are stressed.*

This task will develop the students’ ability to distinguish between stressed and unstressed words. They will become aware of which words in a sentence should be reduced.



Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

B. *Students check which words alliterate and rhyme and guess the meaning of the verse.*

Students can enjoy the sound of alliterated or rhymed words. They also consult a dictionary and discuss the meaning of the verse with classmates. After that, the teacher can add some explanation of the meaning and the history of the rhyme.

C. *Production Task*

C-1. *Conducting*

When reading or reciting a nursery rhyme in front of the students, the syllables which receive major stress can be shown by a rapid downward motion of the arm. By raising and lowering your arms as if drawing wavy lines or conducting an orchestra, you can demonstrate the rising and falling intonation

patterns. This is called 'Body Movement' in the SGAV method.

C-2. Backward buildup

To develop fluency over long utterances and improve linking and intonation, I use backward buildup, starting with the final word of sentence then adding the preceding words one (or a few) at a time. For example, "All the king's horses and all the king's men/Couldn't put Humpty together again" would be built up as follows :

again
together again
Humpty together again
put Humpty together again
couldn't put Humpty together again
etc.

It is better to build up from the end of an utterance than from the beginning because the "intonation contour of the original sentence is preserved in that way" (Jull, 1996 : 213).

C-3. Have the students recite a rhyme

As part of the above-mentioned tasks, students are sometimes required to recite a nursery rhyme in front of the rest of the class.

3. Are nursery rhymes really effective?—Method of data collection

Research was conducted in an effort to examine the effect of using nursery rhymes on developing the prosodic skills of Japanese students.

3-1. Participants

The participants were six undergraduate students chosen by lot from a 30-member, introductory-level listening class at Konan University, Kobe, Japan. The number of participants was limited to six because of the size of the available research facilities. These six students all completed their high school education in Japan, during which their mother tongue was the medium of instruction. They have studied English as a foreign language for an average of 6.2 years, during which time the instruction was primarily in the Japanese medium. None of the students has ever studied abroad.

3-2. Procedure

The participants were asked to read a nursery rhyme which was not

included in their textbook to insure that none of them had previous exposure to it. The rhyme used in this research was “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” by an author especially well-known and popular in Britain, Edward Lear. This famous rhyme, written about a century ago, and which includes a lovely illustration drawn by the author himself (see Appendix), might not be categorized as a ‘nursery rhyme’ by some, since such texts are commonly thought to be anonymous works that have been handed down from generation to generation. However, given the structure and intended audience of the piece, I have treated it as a ‘traditional’ nursery rhyme for the purpose of my research.

3-2-1. First recording

The participants read the rhyme aloud in turn and their voices were recorded on MD (Mini Disc). Prior to recording, they received no instruction about the rhyme or advice on how to read it, but were simply encouraged to be unafraid to make errors. They read the rhyme as they liked, and their errors were not corrected at this stage.

3-2-2. Instruction and practice

I also recorded the rhyme being read by two native-speaking English instructors, one a male from the USA, and the other a female from Canada. The student-participants were asked to choose one of these voices as the model to follow in their own practice. They were asked to listen to the tape of the model voice as often as possible, and a few days later each participant received private instruction from me on reading the rhyme aloud. At this point, problems with pronunciation were pointed out and corrected, with the focal point of correction on prosodic features (especially rhythm and intonation), not on individual sounds. After this instruction, the participants resumed their practice reading and listening to the rhyme again for a few days. They were also encouraged to memorize the rhyme, although they were under no compulsion to do so.

3-2-3. Second recording

One week after the first recording, each participant’s voice was recorded again. Three out of the six students could fluently recite the rhyme from memory. Since memorization was not compulsory, the rest of them read from their papers. All the voices of the participants were carefully recorded on mini-disc.

3-2-4. Sound analysis

A computerized sound analysis was made to gauge whether there had been any improvement in the prosodic skills of the participants between the first recording (FR) and the second recording (SR).

The FR and SR of each participant were compared by both the repeated listening to the recordings and by the analysis of the computer print out which, in this case, consists of three views (i.e. windows). See Figure 1.

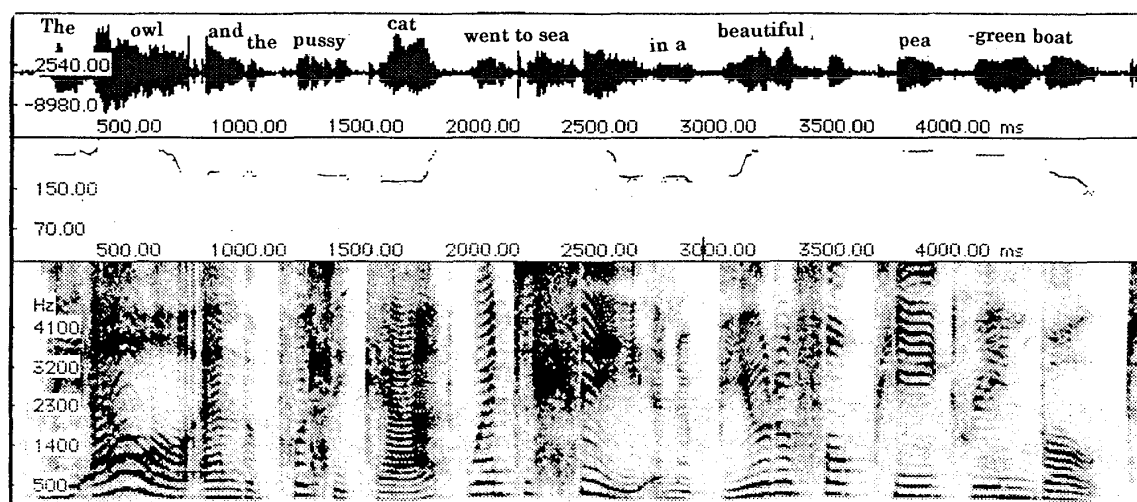


Figure 1

The display shows an analysis of the vocalization “The owl and the pussy cat went to sea/In a beautiful pea-green boat,” which is the first part of the rhyme used for this project.

The speaker whose voice was used for the model of this utterance was the Canadian female instructor. Figure 1 shows:

The top view: Waveform. Used for pitch-synchronous formant extraction

The middle view: Pitch contour of waveform

The bottom view: Sound spectrogram of waveform

3-3. Results

3-3-1. Aural impression

As mentioned, the participants were selected by lot and not according to high levels of either proficiency or interest in English, and in fact, a lack of motivation could be detected in the classroom performance and attitude of several of them prior to this project. Yet once chosen, most of them participated in the experiment enthusiastically, and they listened to the tape of the model voice repeatedly over the course of a week. As a result, a difference in their pronunciation between the FR and SR was clearly recognizable in an aural examination of the recordings. The six participants can be classified into two groups:

GROUP 1: three participants who were strongly influenced by their mother tongue, Japanese. Their FR sounded ‘Japanese-like’ because their rhythm was not stress-timed but syllable-timed, and the vowels or consonants of their utterances were typical realizations of the Japanese

sound system, not the English sound system.

GROUP 2: three participants whose pronunciation of English was not as problematic. The overall impression of their English utterances was much more positive than for Group 1 because they made the vocal reduction necessary for English rhythm, the stressed syllables in their utterances were marked by length and loudness, and their intonation patterns closely approximated native-speaker norms.

As for the segmental units of vowels and consonants, both groups had problems. In this project, problems with individual sounds were neither pointed out nor corrected. The participants had never been formally taught the pronunciation of English until they enrolled in the present pronunciation-based listening course. It is natural, then, for their articulation of sounds to be far from the English target at this point. As mentioned in section 1-1, segmentals will be taught only after providing ample practice of suprasegmentals.

Group 2 participants spoke and read aloud in English quite well since the beginning of class in April, well before this project started. Their SR sounded more natural than their FR, though there was not such dramatic progress as found in Group 1. The SR of Group 1 showed great progress in prosodic features. For example, they produced reduced vowels equivalent to the English schwa in their SR as a result of their work on imitating the model voice during the practice period. That is, in their SR they were able to imitate the intonation patterns of the model voice so closely that their SR sounded quite different from their FR.

3-3-2. Display observations

All the FR and SR samples of the participants were analyzed by computer, and the data collected were carefully compared with those of the model speakers. While the aural impression described in 3-3-1 is rather subjective, a computer-analysis of the FR and SR offers an objective view of the same phenomenon, and if there is a close correlation between the two, the computer data can be taken as proving the appropriacy of the initial aural impression.

Having observed the data of each student in turn, I found that the shape of the wave form of the FR (see Figure 2-B) changed, having become similar to that of the model voice (Figure 2-A). Also, although pitch contours were sometimes indistinct in the computer display, in the SR their shape looked essentially equal to that of the model voice (Figure 2-C). This phenomenon was seen in the data of every participant. The details are as follows.

The Group 1 participants were all male students and all of them took the

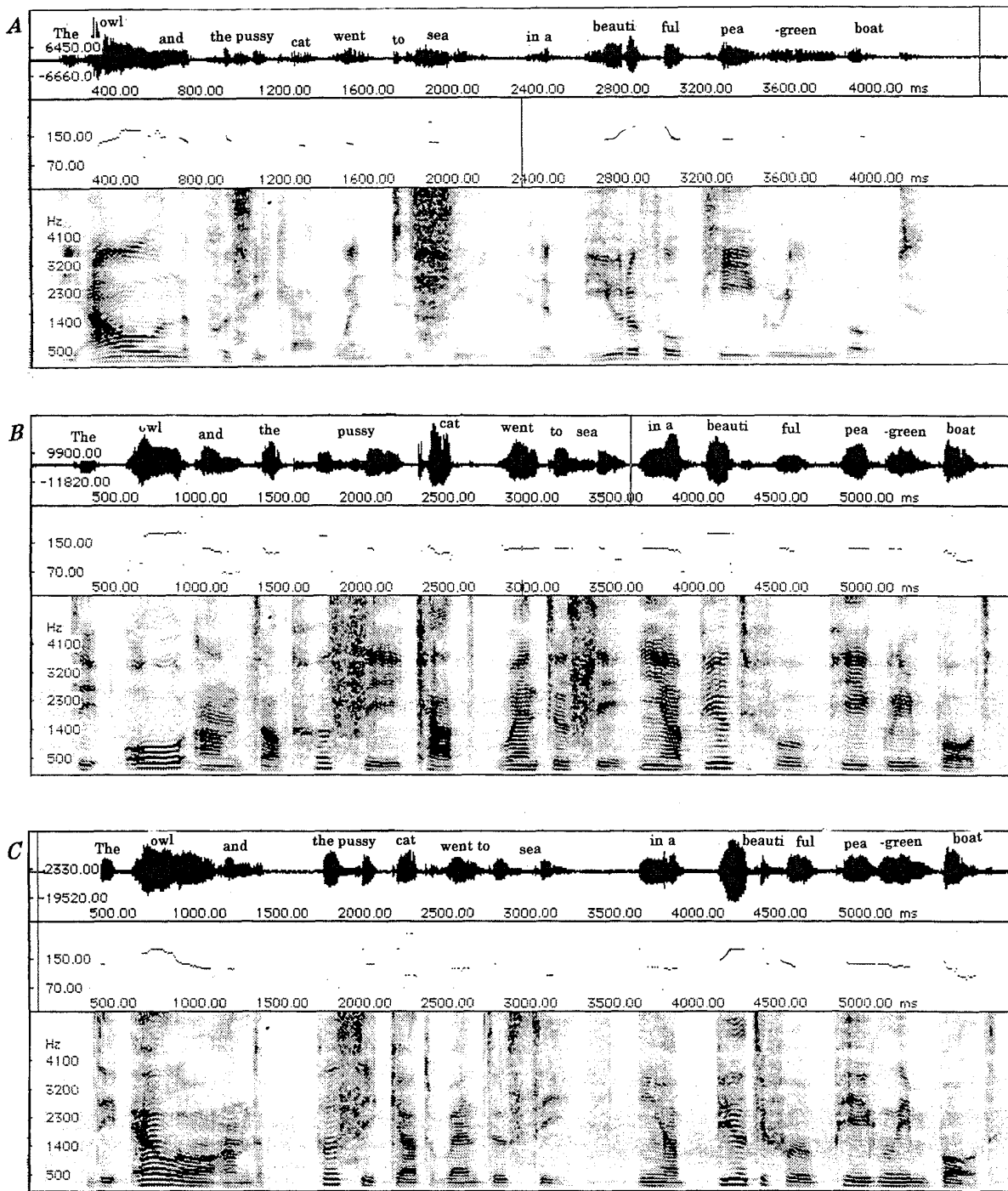


Figure 2

- A : Model voice of an American male instructor
- B : FR of one of the Group 1 students
- C : SR of the same student

voice of the American male instructor as their practice model. Figure 2 is an example of one of the students of Group 1.

The Group 2 participants were all female students and all of them took the voice of the Canadian female instructor as their practice model. Figure 3 is an example of one of the students of Group 2.

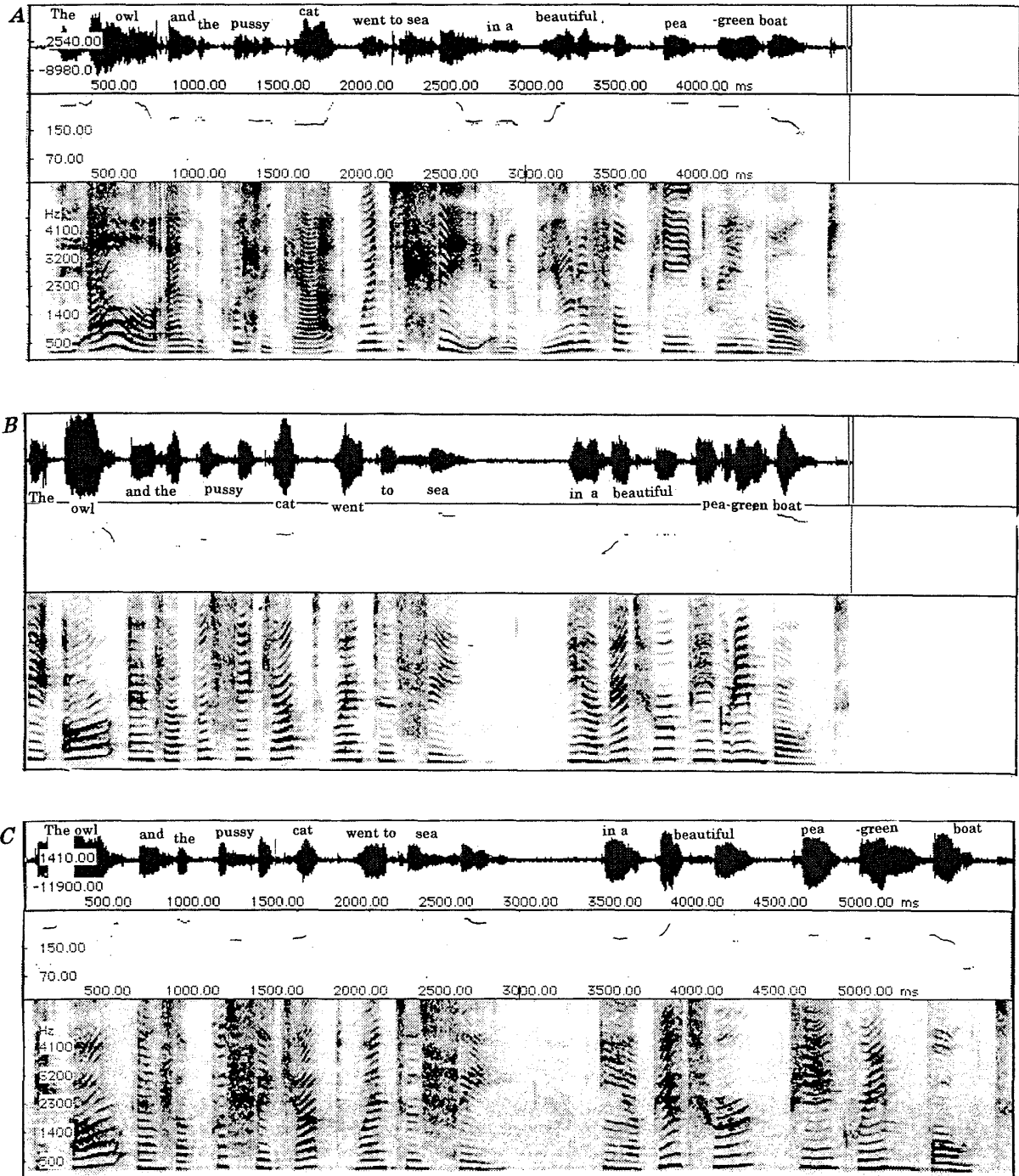


Figure 3

A : Model voice of a Canadian female instructor whose intonation was more pronounced.

This is exactly the same as Figure 1.

B : FR of one of the Group 2 students.

C : SR of the same student.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study reported above support the initial hypothesis that nursery rhymes can be effective in developing the prosodic skills of language

learners; in addition, the use of such materials has helped to raise the participants' overall knowledge and awareness of prosody of English. However, I have provided data limited to one small area of my own classroom experience, so more systematic longitudinal studies on the teaching of prosody are necessary.

Another troublesome issue we are left with is the fact that students may be unable to retain over time what they have been taught explicitly. Also, many teachers have recognized that the prosodic skills vary widely among students: some are exceptionally quick to pick up on them, others quite slow. For this reason, I recommend that teachers try to give students ample opportunities to listen to appropriate authentic materials in the classroom. Finally, I also hope that through the application of a few ideas presented in this article, teachers can better help students to comprehend aural messages and recognize the role that prosody plays in them, as well as to be able to use aspects of prosody in their own oral communication.

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Appendix

"The Owl and the Pussy Cat" by Edward Lear

I

THE Owl and the Pussy-Cat went to sea
 In a beautiful pea-green boat:
 They took some honey, and plenty of money
 Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
 The Owl looked up to the stars above,
 And sang to a small guitar,
 "O lovely Pussy, O Pussy, my love,
 What a beautiful Pussy you are,
 You are,
 You are!
 What a beautiful Pussy you are!"



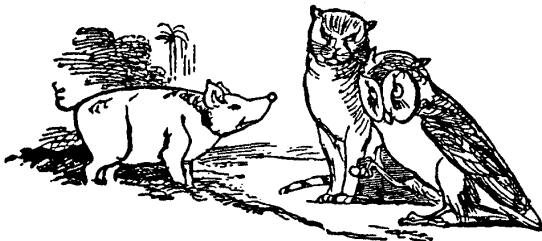
III

"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
 Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."
 So they took it away, and were married next day
 By the Turkey who lives on the hill.
 They dined on mince and slices of quince,
 Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
 And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand
 They danced by the light of the moon,
 The moon,
 The moon,
 They danced by the light of the moon.



II

Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl,
 How charmingly sweet you sing!
 Oh! let us be married; too long we have tarried:
 But what shall we do for a ring?"
 They sailed away, for a year and a day,
 To the land where the bong-tree grows;
 And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood,
 With a ring at the end of his nose,



His nose,
 His nose,
 With a ring at the end of his nose.