

Pronunciation Trouble Spots for Japanese Learners

Midori IBA

Introduction

In the nine years since I started to teach English at universities in Japan, I have continued to keep an eye open for pronunciation trouble spots of Japanese students. The pronunciation errors that they make are not just random attempts to produce unfamiliar English sounds, but reflect the sound system, including the stress and intonation patterns, of the Japanese language. In this article I would first like to focus on the pronunciation trouble spots that my students have shown in the classroom. Then two major considerations for language pedagogy will be examined: what approach to the teaching of pronunciation is appropriate and what model should be presented for the students to follow. The purpose of teaching English pronunciation is, of course, neither to insist that students make a bid for membership into a privileged group such as RP¹⁾ speakers, nor to eradicate all traces of a 'foreign' accent through drills. However, it seems to me that neglecting pronunciation teaching will simply be a disadvantage to Japanese students when they communicate with people in the world through English. I have already mentioned in a previous article (Iba 1998) that choosing one basic model of pronunciation that would be beyond criticism seems impossible, and this issue will be reviewed in the second part of this paper. Finally, I will illustrate how the trouble spots are to be actually corrected in the classroom.

1. The major pronunciation trouble spots

1-1. Suprasegmentals — Stress and rhythm

The word 'stress' is generally used to refer to the way we emphasize something or give it prominence. Here it will be used to refer more specifically to speech sounds. It refers on the conventional level to the overall prominence of certain syllables over others, and, in the narrower sense, to the muscular energy that produces a syllable.

Japanese speakers of English tend to have too many stressed syllables in their speech because the Japanese language is syllable-timed. Speakers of syllable-timed languages tend to give equal stress to every syllable and to space all the syllables equally.

Some of my students read the following sentence with fourteen stressed syllables:



And they are not taking any chances they are turning to professionals for help.

From the point of view of speakers of the Japanese language, the main stress can fall almost anywhere in an English word.

When a student does not produce sentences with the proper rhythm, the listener will be confused when perceiving the utterances. Stress is said to be a factor of intelligibility. Recent models of how speakers of English recognize words in continuous speech suggest that the recognition process does not simply work sequentially from 'left to right,' one word at a time. The stressed syllable is picked out of the stream of speech and is used to search the mental lexicon. Possible candidates are selected from the lexicon on the basis of the syllable and then examined as to whether or how well they fit with the unstressed syllables on their left or right (Grosjean and Gee 1987). If this hypothesis is correct, incorrect stress decreases intelligibility.

1-2. Supersegmentals — Intonation

When we communicate using sounds, we do not only string allophones together to make up words, but try to convey our messages by using proper intonation. How we say something should be considered carefully because it can mislead our listeners about what we really intend to say. Intonation conveys the attitude of the speaker as well. A simple word such as 'Really?' with different intonation contours can express meanings that range from agreement to disagreement, or from surprise to indifference. Pitch, the perceptual label for 'high'/'low,' plays an important role in our utterances.

Japanese students are not familiar with the characteristic intonation patterns of English because pitch functions are different in Japanese. Sometimes the pitch level of their voice does not fall or rise enough with final rising-falling or final rising intonation.

However, there may be another reason why some Japanese students keep their Japanese-like accent when they speak English. From my teaching experience, especially Japanese male students tend to keep their native accent deliberately because imitating English accent means assuming a pose for them or rejecting their own identity. Pronunciation can therefore also be said to be a matter of self-image. Porter and Garven (1989) refer to this identity problem of learners and conclude that "learners should be given what they want, which underlines the necessity to find out what they want." Learners' attitudes should, of course, be taken into account in pronunciation teaching; yet in my opinion, teachers can advise learners to think differently if their

insistence on retaining their accent seems less strong and more open to suggestion.

1-3. Consonants

The following are the main trouble spots for Japanese students with English consonants.

1) /l/ - /r/

Since the English consonants /l/ and /r/ do not exist in the Japanese language, most students are not confident with distinguishing “light” from “right.” Both sounds are expressed in the same way in Japanese. Japanese has just one liquid sound which sounds like a cross between the English /l/ and /r/. The place of articulation of this liquid sound is very close to that of the English /d/, and speakers of English often mistake this liquid sound for the English /d/. The English /r/ sounds similar to the liquid sound of Japanese, and students often replace the English /r/ with the liquid sound. In fact, one of the most serious problems for Japanese students is mixing up /r/ with /l/. The clue to the correct production of the sounds will be shown in Part 4.

2) /f/ - /h/

The English sound /f/ does not exist in Japanese. Japanese students recognized /f/ as the closest counterpart to /h/. To the Japanese ear, “food” and “hood” sound like the same word in conversation, so they can not understand the difference between them. When they produce /f/, students often replace it with /h/. However, the trouble is that the /h/ sound is not always /h/ before every vowel in Japanese. The /h/ sound is actually / Φ / before /u/, as in “*hujin* (woman),” and / ζ / before /i/, as in “*hikari* (light),” though the average Japanese person doesn’t recognize the difference because /h/, / Φ /, and / ζ / can be described with the same Roman letter “h.” The sounds / Φ / and / ζ / don’t exist in English, so speakers of English have difficulty understanding these sounds made by Japanese speakers of English who intend to say /h/.

3) /b/ - /v/

The /b/ sound appears in Japanese as in *ba-bi-bu-be-bo* in the Japanese syllabary. Therefore, Japanese students can produce /b/ when they speak English, but the English /b/ sound needs a stronger puff of air, or aspiration. There is no /v/ sound in Japanese, so Japanese students tend to substitute /b/ for /v/. It is not their ‘fault’ to say “berry” for “very,” but they might be laughed when doing so. To avoid unnecessary embarrassment, correction is needed. These two sounds also sound alike to Japanese students, so it is also hard for them to hear the difference

between /b/ and /v/.

4) /θ/ - /s/ and /ʃ/

The English /θ/ sound does not exist in the Japanese language. Japanese students often replace it with /s/. These two sounds sound quite different and many Japanese students can tell the difference in perception, but in the case of production, if not trained, they will confuse /s/ with /θ/. If they say the English family name “Smith,” their utterance may sound like “Su-mi-su.” The reason why they mix up these two sounds is that /θ/ and /s/ are transcribed in the same way in the Romanized spelling of the word ‘Sumisu,’ and in the phonetic Japanese syllabary, *katakana*, as in “ス ミ ス.”

The Japanese /s/ sound appears in front of the Japanese vowels /a/, /u/, /e/, and /o/, but if it comes before /i/, it will no longer be /s/, but change into /ʃ/. This phenomenon sometimes affects production of the English speech sound. If Japanese students say “seen,” it might be perceived as “sheen,” as might the words like “seat” be perceived as “sheet,” “see” as “she” and “sin” as “shin.”

As for the difference between the English sound /s/ and the Japanese sound /s/, the English /s/ requires a stronger and longer fricative sound.

5) /ð/ - /z/

The sound /ð/ is peculiar to English. If Japanese students of English have not practiced this sound, they will not notice the distinction between /ð/ and /z/. They will mix up /ð/ with /z/ both in the perception and production of these two sounds. They will often substitute /z/ or /d/ for /ð/. As the consonants /ð/ and /θ/ are both interdental-fricatives, the correction of these two sounds can be introduced to the class at the same time, and most of the students will easily change their pronunciation for the better.

6) Consonant clusters

English allows a wide variety of syllable types. For example, one of the syllable types is CCCVC,²⁾ as in “sprint,” in which the sequences of consonants, CCC and CC, are called consonant clusters.

As Japanese is a syllable-timed language, Japanese students of English often experience difficulty pronouncing CVC syllables and are apt to add a vowel to the end of a closed syllable. They are not familiar with the sequence of English consonants, so they will often insert vowels in consonant clusters. The word “sprint” may sound like “su-pu-ri-n-to,” and “blue” may sound like “bu-lue.” This table shows the typical errors Japanese students make with English consonants.

CLUSTER	EXAMPLE	TYPICAL ERROR	CLUSTER	EXAMPLE	TYPICAL ERROR
fr	fry	furai	sm	smile	sumairu
fl	fly	furai ³⁾	pl	play	purei
sl	sleep	suleepu	pr	pray	purei ⁴⁾
sw	sweet	suweeto	bl	blue	buruw
sp	spring	supuringu	br	bright	buraito
st	stop	sutopu	tr	true	turuw
sk	skip	sukipu	dr	dream	doriymu
kl	clean	kuriyn	sp	spring	supuringu
kr	cream	kuriymu	sk	script	sukuriputo
kw	queen	kuiyn	lk	milk	miruku
gl	glory	gurowrie	ld	old	owludo
gr	green	guriyn	lf	self	serufu

1-4. Vowels

1) Tense vowels / lax vowels

There are more vowels in English than in Japanese. The Japanese language has a typical five-vowel system. In the following table, the English vowel system and the Japanese vowel system are presented.

	FRONT		CENTRAL		BACK	
HIGH	E	iy	E	/	E	uw
		I			J	u
MID	J	i	J	/	J	u
	E	ey	E		ə	E
		ε		Λ		ɔ
LOW	J	e	J	/	J	o
	E	æ	E			a
	J	/	J	a		

E — English, J — Japanese

If we compare these two sound systems, some problem areas can be predicted. Above all, the tense/lax vowels of English do not exist in the Japanese vowel system, which means Japanese learners have difficulty with the distinction between them. The pairs of tense and lax vowels in English are the high-front vowels /iy/ and /I/, the mid front-vowels /ey/ and /ε/, the high-back vowels /uw/ and /u/, and the mid-back vowels /ow/ and /ɔ/.

As for the tense and lax vowels of English, Japanese students are not aware of the difference, so when they produce vowel sounds in English their vowels may have a sound between the tense and lax vowels.

2) /æ/, /ə/ and /ʌ/

The low front vowel /æ/ and the central mid vowels /ə/ and /ʌ/ do not appear in the Japanese vowel system, and the English vowel /a/ is farther back than the Japanese vowel /a/. The differences in tongue positioning may cause problems for Japanese students who are accustomed to distinguishing in tongue height in the front and back of the mouth.

2. What approaches to the teaching of pronunciation are appropriate?

I would like to focus on three basic principles that are the foundation for my teaching of the pronunciation of English.

2-1. Priority of the prosodic features

The traditional approach to teaching English pronunciation gives priority to individual sounds. Teachers and texts have devoted the majority of time and effort to English vowels first, and then the detailed vowel chart and diphthongs, followed by consonants. As this segmental work takes up most of the time available, some brief attention to prosodic features of English is occasionally paid. This stems from a lack of grasping the importance of supersegmentals, or prosodic features. Prosodic features are important in the communication of meaning in spoken language. In other words, they control the structure of information. They are more significant and central to the communication than accurate production of the individual sounds, because individual sounds can be inferred from the context.

If teachers have enough time for the teaching of pronunciation, they may take a bottom-up approach, beginning with the articulation of individual vowels and consonants, then working up toward intonation. In fact, as I mentioned in the first part of this section, most of us are invariably faced with a situation in which we have limited time. In this case, we should focus first on prosodic features, as they have the greater impact on the intelligibility of learners' English. This top-down approach, beginning with focusing on patterns of intonation, followed by separate sounds, is consistent with a more communicative approach to language teaching. The assumption is that once the prosodic features are mastered, segmental distinctions will follow by their own accord.

2-2. Connection with listening

You might have encountered students who are perfectly able to understand English aurally while still being unable to produce accurate sounds of English orally, though as Penny Ur (1984: 12) states, “it is certainly true that if the learner learns to pronounce . . . sounds accurately, it will be much easier to hear them correctly when said by someone else.” You might also have read articles saying that the first step in learning to pronounce is “learning to hear and identify a sound or sound consonant when a native speaker produces it” (Prator and Robinnett 1985: xvi).

I will not argue whether comprehension before production or production before comprehension is right, but I would like to claim that exposure to listening exercises will help students realize what has to be accomplished in the production of English sounds. I would like to avoid using monotonous, time-consuming exercises and select authentic materials for the listening exercise instead.

2-3. Additional use of hand movements

When teaching the production of sounds or stress and intonation patterns, teachers should involve as many senses as possible. Particular hand movements will be helpful in producing individual sounds. For example, with English consonants such as /p/ and /b/, the movement of clenching the fist and unfolding the fingers quickly while producing /p/ or /b/ can be introduced in the class.

As for the rhythm, stress, and intonation of a word, phrase, or sentence, moving the arms and hands in concert with those prosodic features will be effective in producing more natural English intonation and stress patterns. For example, you can illustrate intonation patterns by rising and lowering your arm as you say the sentence. I have already mentioned in a previous article (Iba 1998) that empirical research shows these hand movements are effective in helping students produce natural sounds.

3. What model should we set up for the students?

If you consult the contents of the Encyclopedia of English (Crystal 1995), you will find a chapter titled “World English.” English is now a dominant or official language in over 60 countries all over the world, and is represented in every continent and across the three major oceans. This spread has caused English to be called “World English,” or “a global language.” There are no precedents for such a geographical spread or for the large number of people who speak it. According to Crystal, about 2,090,000,000 people are routinely exposed to English, but what is impressive is not so much the grand total, but the speed with which the expansion has taken place since 1950. The problem is not so much in relation to the countries where English is a first language but

for those where it has a status as a second or foreign language. A language can hurt the cultural identity of people who are forced to use it against their will.

There are two major issues that conflict with each other — the need for intelligibility and the need for identity. Intelligibility is related to internationalism. If a nation tries to define the meaning of its existence in relation to the world and regards the world as a whole, its people will promote the use of English to access the broader English speaking world. It is crucial for them to understand English and to be understood through their English. On the other hand, identity implies individuality. If a nation wishes to preserve its uniqueness and to prevent itself from being a face in “the crowd,” or in “the world,” people will feel resentful for having to use English, especially when their own language is threatened by the dominance of English.

Within complicated sociolinguistic realities, choosing one basic model for the pronunciation of English that would be beyond criticism seems impossible. There are many varieties of English all over the world, 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. If I have to decide on one basic model of English pronunciation to teach, I would choose one of the major two varieties, British Standard English or American Standard English, though the term “Standard English” may provoke an argument. In choosing a language model, we should avoid individual preference or prejudice and focus on the criteria of its having wide currency, being readily understood, adequately described in textbooks, and available in recorded form (Iba 1998). In my opinion, intelligibility and acceptability should be set as priorities in language teaching. 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 is how easily students will be able to communicate with the English they have acquired.

4. Hints and tips for classroom activities

In this section, hints and tips for classroom activities will be presented, I based on the following three items I use most often in my classes:

- 1) diagrams that indicate the place of articulation
- 2) handmovements and conducting
- 3) rhymes and limericks

The purpose of using diagrams is to show the difference in tongue position between the troublesome consonants. The teacher can demonstrate the sounds visually and explain to the students how the speech organs will be positioned when producing sounds. Hand & words movements and conducting are mainly used in concert with the

rhythm, stress and intonation of a word, phrase, or sentence. They can additionally be adopted to illustrate the pronunciation of individual sounds. One of the important features of rhymes and limericks is the regular, rhythmical way in which they are spoken, so they can be another helpful and entertaining way of developing fluency.

I sometimes combine the above items, and the combination varies according to the sounds or supersegmentals which I focus on.

4-1. Focus on supersegmentals

a. Using rhymes

It is not always easy to perceive the existence of a regular beat in natural speech. Rhymes and limericks, on the other hand, make students notice the evidence of the rhythm of English without difficulty. For example, students can enjoy listening to the following rhyme and notice the stressed syllables easily.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells,
And pretty maids all in a row.
And pretty maids all in a row.

Sometimes students can be asked to recite the rhyme to get used to the rhythm of English and to develop fluency.

b. Using handmovements and conducting

Since syllable duration plays a more important role in English than in Japanese, we should feature it more prominently. Moving the arms and hands while reciting rhymes, limericks, or sentences will help students notice the difference of duration visually and become aware of it through bodily sensation. Tapping on desks or clapping hands is a useful way to mark distinctions in the stress of English.

4-2. Focus of individual sounds

Concerning particular consonants, diagrams are useful in demonstrating the place of articulation of troublesome sounds which cannot be seen by looking at the mouth. For example, if /r/ and /l/ are the target sounds, I will draw two diagrams on the board and explain how to produce these sounds.

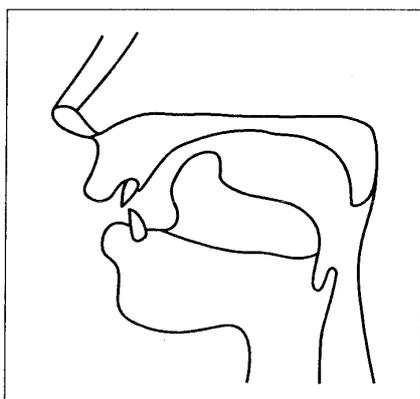


Diagram of the sound /r/

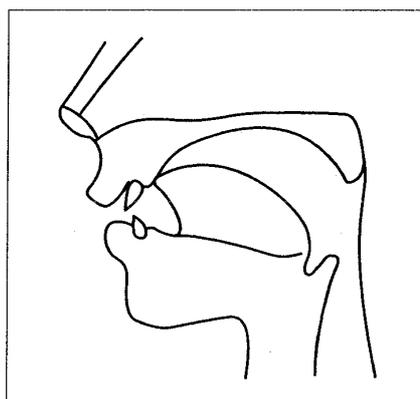


Diagram of the sound /l/

Most students have difficulty making the distinction between the /r/ and /l/ sounds of English, and they don't know that the tip of the tongue should touch the upper tooth ridge while producing the /l/ sound. They also don't know the fact that the /r/ sound is made with the tip of the tongue touching no part of the mouth. Once they learn the position of the tongue, however, they can make the distinction between /r/ and /l/. Some students learn to produce these sounds quite easily and precisely as well. This procedure can be applied to particular pairs of troublesome sounds such as /f/ and /h/, /b/ and /v/, /θ/ - /s/, and /ð/ - /z/.

I also use particular rhymes for each pair to make students familiar with the target sounds. As for /r/ and /l/, students are asked to recite the following rhyme.

Rain, **r**ain, go away
 Come again another **d**ay
 Little Johnny wants to **pl**ay

In this article, I have presented the English pronunciation trouble spots for Japanese students first, then I have illustrated how these spots can be corrected. It is important that pronunciation teaching should be done in a meaningful context, otherwise student might be unable to carry it over when they communicate with people in English. We should also be careful about overemphasizing the correction of sounds. If a student still substitutes an English sound with a similar Japanese sound even after practice, and this substitution does not interfere with comprehensibility, we do not have to insist on the accuracy of the sound.

Notes

- 1) RP is an abbreviation of Received Pronunciation. RP is the standard way in which middle class speakers of Southern British English pronounce words.
- 2) C — consonant, V — vowel
- 3) The words “fry” and “fly” may be perceived and produced as the same sound by Japanese students.
- 4) The words “play” and “pray” may be perceived produced as the same sound by Japanese students.

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