

An Analytical Approach to Teaching Pronunciation to Japanese Adult Learners of English

Kunihiro Nagasawa
Ibaraki University

1. INTRODUCTION

One major problem in teaching pronunciation to Japanese adult learners of English is that published pronunciation course books are mainly concerned with descriptions of the English sounds and do not usually provide teaching methods which an EFL teacher can use in his classroom.

There are a few courses, however, which give us some general principles of pronunciation teaching. Two approaches can be identified in those courses: imitative and analytical. Prator and Robinett (1986) represent the former, where emphasis is put on "imitating the pronunciation of English-speaking persons (p. 1)." On the other hand, O'Connor (1980: 4), developing Jones' (1972: 9) idea, proposes a more analytical approach where the learner is advised to "listen critically" to his own recorded performance to "see where [his] performance does not match the original." Our view is that when we teach adult learners, the analytical approach is more effective than the imitative approach because they are no more efficient in imitating sounds of a foreign language and need a more cognitive approach. The classroom method which is described in this paper basically follows Jonesian principles. Our aim here is to integrate them into teaching procedures for a university pronunciation course in order to produce maximum improvement under such adverse conditions as large class size, short class term and students whose pronunciation is more or less fossilized.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part identifies and discusses major pronunciation problems Japanese university students encounter. The second part presents a classroom method which was successfully used to improve the pronunciation of the students.

2. PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

2.1 PRELIMINARY REMARKS

When one talks about pronunciation problems of Japanese speakers of English, it has often been pointed out that they cannot discriminate between /l/ and /r/, substitute /s/ for /θ/, put an extra vowel after an ending consonant, etc. But very few people have pointed out that English consonants pronounced by Japanese are far weaker than what they should be. Kunihiro (1980:2) is one of the few people who realize that the greatest weakness of Japanese learners in the pronunciation of English is their weak consonants. "Weak" here can mean two things. First, explosion is weak for the stop consonants. Second, the duration of constriction (for /s/, /v/, etc.) or contact (for /l/, /n/, etc.) is shorter for non-stop consonants. Hashimoto (1980:96) explains this phenomenon by referring to the intrinsic features of the consonants of both languages: in Japanese a consonant and the following vowel occur "concurrently" (e.g., /s/ and /a/ in /sa/ are pronounced almost at the same time), while in English they occur "consecutively," that is, /s/ is distinctly separated from the following /æ/ in /sæt/. These remarks suggest that the intrinsic length and strength of the English consonants should be stressed in teaching pronunciation to Japanese learners of English.

The failure to recognize the distinctive qualities of the English consonants seems to have led to methodological ineffectiveness in pronunciation teaching in Japan. There are very few courses or manuals which focus on these phonetic features. This explains why the majority of course books fail to mention the difference in the way of breathing (in making speech sounds) between English and Japanese. They seem to take it for granted, for example, that Japanese in speaking Japanese use as much breath as English people do in speaking English, which is not the case. Also they wrongly presume that Japanese in speaking Japanese use their tongue as strongly as English people do in speaking English. It is quite obvious that how much breath is used and how it is used is one of the crucial factors which determine the qualities of speech sounds produced. Nakatsu (1975), perhaps, is the only manual that takes into account this fundamental difference in breathing and asks the learner to use diaphragm breathing in order to achieve strong voice projection and clear enunciation.

In this section we will discuss three areas of pronunciation which cause particular difficulties among Japanese learners of English. They are the consonants, stress accent, and stress-timed rhythm. Before the discussion, the teaching of diaphragm breathing is briefly mentioned.

2.2 DIAPHRAGM BREATHING

Since diaphragm breathing is recognized as essential for producing English speech sounds, the participants of the present course are required to pronounce English sounds through it throughout the course. Otherwise, Japanese adults speak through chest (or thoracic) breathing. At the beginning of the course the participants are instructed to breathe and produce sounds from the diaphragm. They bend their body forward with the head dropped, breathe deeply and utter simple sounds like [aaaaaaa]. Then the students do diaphragm breathing sitting on a chair and try to pronounce simple English words like "pen" or "cat." Ninety-five per cent of students can do this without difficulty from the beginning. The necessary thing for the teacher to do is to remind them always to pronounce English sounds through this breathing.

2.3 TEACHING THE CONSONANTS

The English consonants can be divided into two groups: stop consonants (e.g., /t/, /p/, /g/) and non-stop consonants (e.g., /s/, /v/, /n/, /r/, /l/). The participants are told that the stop consonants have a far greater explosion than their Japanese counterparts and that the non-stop consonants have a far longer period of constriction or contact than the Japanese equivalents.

Take /t/ as an example of stop consonants. The Japanese learner tends to pronounce /t/ in words like "time" without aspiration and with weak explosion. The English /t/ in this position requires more stream of air and greater explosion than the Japanese equivalent /t/. The unaspirated /t/ in /taim/ pronounced by the Japanese learner sounds like /d/ to an English ear because it tends to concur with the following (voiced) vowel. Similar problems are observed with other stop consonants. As a result, there is a great possibility that "pine" sounds like /bain/ and "clean" like /gli:n/.

Let us then take /s/ as an example of non-stop consonants. When the

Japanese learner pronounces /s/ as in "summer," he tends to make the friction for /s/ shorter and weaker. He should constantly be reminded that the friction for /s/ is far longer and stronger than that for Japanese /s/ (e.g., in /sensei/ "teacher"). It is difficult for the Japanese learner to prolong /s/, that is, to pronounce it independently from the following vowel /ʌ/ because, in Japanese, /s/ "concur," to borrow Hashimoto's word, with the following vowel. Other non-stop consonants like /l/ and /n/ are also longer and stronger than their Japanese equivalents.

The next example is cited to illustrate the misconception Japanese learners have of the firmness with which they press the tongue-tip against the alveolar ridge for the pronunciation of /l/. Explaining how to pronounce dark /l/, Torii and Kaneko (1975: 27) say: "Unlike the pronunciation of clear /l/, you just get the tongue-tip to slightly touch the teeth. And you get dark /l/, which sounds something like [ɯ] ." (My translation and emphasis.) O'Connor (1980: 55), on the other hand, warns the Japanese learner not to make dark /l/ sound like this: "The danger [in pronouncing dark /l/] ... is that you do not make a firm contact of the tongue-tip with the alveolar ridge, the result being either some sort of vowel sound---fiu and fiud for fill and filled, or some sort of /r/-sound---fir and fird."

Taking into account these phonetic features of English and Japanese, the practicing EFL teacher poses the following general principles in teaching the English consonants to Japanese adult learners:

- (1) The English stop consonants are three times as strong as the Japanese equivalents.
- (2) The English non-stop consonants are three times as long and strong as the Japanese equivalents.

"Three times" here is not based on scientific grounds, but on a rather subjective criterion, meaning almost the same thing as "very strong" or "very long." In actual teaching, aspiration is confirmed by blowing a sheet of paper and making it flap. Prolongation of /s/ is practiced by pronouncing /ssssssss/ for several seconds and adding /it/ for "sit."

2.4 STRESS ACCENT

The second problem area for Japanese EFL learners is stress accent. Difficulties come from intrinsic differences in accentuation between English and Japanese. The rules of English accentuation are: (a) the syllable to be accented is stressed; (b) it is prolonged; (c) it is high-pitched. The rule of Japanese accentuation, on the other hand, is only that the syllable to be accented is high-pitched. So when Japanese learners try to give accent to an English syllable, they tend to give it only a high-pitch and fail to stress and prolong it. The teacher needs to constantly remind his students of the rules of stress and prolongation.

The difficulties for Japanese learners to give enough stress accent come from two sources. First, it comes from their inability to give a pulse to the syllable to be accented. It is difficult for the Japanese learner to give a particular pulse to the relevant syllable because in Japanese every syllable has nearly the same stress. Here it should be noted that the Japanese speech habit is closely related to thoracic (or chest) breathing. It is more difficult to give strong pulses to the relevant syllables through thoracic breathing than through diaphragm breathing.

The second source of difficulty is related to the earlier education of Japanese students. In secondary school they are taught to "put the accent to the relevant vowel." The fact, however, is that the relevant syllable (including the consonant(s) which precede and/or accompany a vowel) is stressed. For example, in the word "Japan," what should be stressed is not only /æ/ (as it is taught in most Japanese EFL classes) but /pæn/. The typical pronunciation of this word by Japanese students has unaspirated /p/, extremely high-pitched /æ/, and almost inaudible /n/. Particular attention should be paid to the pronunciation of the consonants in the final position (like /n/ in "Japan") which the Japanese learner tends to pronounce very weakly or drops.

2.5 STRESS-TIMED RHYTHM

What seems to be the most difficult aspect for Japanese learners to acquire in English pronunciation is stress-timed rhythm. It is empirically attested that it is more difficult to acquire supra-segmental phonemes like

rhythm than segmentals. In the preceding section it was noted that in accenting English syllables, most Japanese learners find it difficult to prolong them. This difficulty comes from the difference in the rhythm system between English and Japanese. English rhythm is stress-timed rhythm, where the length of time between the stressed syllables is nearly the same. Japanese rhythm, on the other hand, is syllable-timed rhythm¹, where every syllable has nearly the same length of time.

A solution to this problem is to constantly remind the learner of the nature of stress-timed rhythm and drill him in it. With regard to the pronunciation of the consonants, we proposed an exaggerated way of pronouncing them three times as long /strong as the Japanese counterparts. The same method can be used in the practice of stress-timed rhythm. In pronouncing the sentence, "Plastic is quite fashionable and it is easy to clean," the students are advised to pronounce /æ/ in "plastic" and "fashionable" and /i:/ in "easy" and "clean" exaggeratedly prolonged, that is, three times as long as the vowels are ordinarily pronounced. Use of poems and songs are also effective for teaching English rhythm because it is often emphasized in the rhyme scheme of poems and in the rhythm of songs.

The solution to the problem of the acquisition of English rhythm may also involve considerations of other aspects of English teaching than pronunciation. For example, teaching English in Japan does not put much emphasis on speaking or reading aloud. Rather it puts greater emphasis on silent reading and translation. As the semantic unit of the text for translation is words, the learner's attention is focused on words. This practice greatly impairs acquisition of natural speech sounds of English. Therefore, it is vital for the teacher to get the learners to read aloud or say English sentences according to the rule of English rhythm.

3. CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

In the preceding section we discussed three areas of pronunciation difficulty for Japanese learners of English. They were attributed to intrinsic phonological differences between English and Japanese and the practice of diaphragm breathing was suggested as a solution to this problem. The present section tries to offer another solution from a methodological point of view.

It describes and discusses a classroom method which was conceived:

- (a) to provide the participants with a means to analyze their own pronunciation;
- (b) to treat their pronunciation problems individually;
- (c) to provide the students with ample opportunities to practice.

3.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The objective of the present course is to get the participants to acquire basic skills in the pronunciation of the English consonants, the vowels, consonant clusters, word accent, sentence stress, rhythm and intonation. It is a fifteen week course. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes. The average number of participants is fifteen. It is a mixed class of English major and non-English major university students in the teacher training course. They use a textbook written by the present author (Nagasawa 1987). The students also use cassette tapes which accompany the text. The tapes give explanations (in Japanese) of how to make the target sounds and their pronunciation which is given in a somewhat exaggerated way to make the points clear. The tapes also give model pronunciation of the same material by a native English speaker.

The participant is required to use three other things: a mirror, a tape recorder, and what is called a "practice diary." He uses the mirror in class and at home to observe his mouth-shapes when he practices. He uses the tape recorder as a part of his homework to record his own pronunciation and to analyze it. The diary is used to record (a) the target materials, (b) the date and time of practice, (c) whether he read the relevant part of the textbook, (d) whether he listened to the explanations and model pronunciations on the tape, (e) whether he recorded his pronunciation, (f) whether he listened to his recorded pronunciation, and (g) comments, questions, and/or evaluation of his own pronunciation. The student submits the diary to be checked by the teacher the day before the class meets. The teacher writes comments/answers in the diary and returns it to the student. He may take up some points and comment on them in the next class.

3.2 CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

The following are the standard procedures of practicing a target pronunciation.

1. In class, the teacher briefly explains how to pronounce the target sounds with some demonstrations, focusing on their distinguishing features and their differences from the equivalent sounds in Japanese. (Detailed explanations are given in the textbook, which the students are required to study at home.) If the target pronunciation is /t/, for example, the students pronounce [t'], [t'], [t'] and [t'eibl], [t'aim], etc. (['] indicates aspiration.) They repeat after the teacher several times. But this is not practice time; it is done only for the students to get the "feeling" of the target sounds. As we will see, practice, in its usual sense of the word, is done as homework.

2. At home, the student reads explanations in the textbook of how to make the target sounds. In class the students saw how the teacher produced them and heard how they sounded and practiced them for a short while; that is to say, they have had minimum input of the target sounds. Now the textbook provides a fuller account of how to make them.

3. The student listens to the cassette tape which gives explanations and model pronunciation of the target sounds by a native speaker.

4. The student now has had a fair amount of input of the target sounds ---from the explanations and demonstrations given by the teacher in class and in the textbook and the model pronunciation by the native speaker. Now he practices the target sounds. When unsure of how he ought to do, he may go back to the explanations and/or model pronunciation.

5. When the student thinks he has got correct pronunciation, he records his performance and listens to it to see whether it is satisfactory or not. If he thinks it satisfactory, he stops practice. If not, he practices again until he thinks he has got it right. When he reaches the point where he has tried everything and cannot get correct pronunciation, he stops practice. In that case, he notes down about his problems in the diary to be submitted to the teacher. These problems are treated individually or in class.

6. When the class next meets, the students pronounce the target material (the one they practiced at home) individually to be evaluated by the

teacher. If the performance is good, students can go to the next material. If not, they have to practice the same material at home again using the same procedures as described above. To these students the teacher explains the reasons why their performance is not satisfactory and gives remedial suggestions for practice.

7. The students whose performance was not satisfactory in class practice again at home. They have another chance to perform in the next class. If the performance is not good again, they have no more chances to perform in the class. In that case they tape-record the best result of their practice and submit the tape to the teacher. He gives comments and evaluation on the tape and returns it to the students.

3.3 DISCUSSION

As we have noted at the beginning of this section, there are three methodological considerations which have been integrated into the teaching procedures described above.

Firstly, the students' listening to their own recorded pronunciation was emphasized. Self-monitoring seems to be most effective for adult learners. When they listen to their own performance they understand their problems better and are much more motivated to improve them than when they are taught by the teacher.

This self-monitoring, however, is the most difficult part of the procedures. It is difficult psychologically and technically. From the viewpoint of learners' psychology, they hate to listen to their own voice let alone English pronunciation. The main reasons for this are that the tape-recorded voice sounds different than the speaker expects and that the recorded pronunciation sounds worse than the pronunciation he hears simultaneously as he pronounces. It is definitely necessary to overcome this psychological problem and to listen to one's own voice/pronunciation with a critical mind. Technically speaking, it is difficult for students at the beginning stage of the course to evaluate their own pronunciation. They are not yet technically trained to do so. But usually they begin to acquire the aural abilities to discriminate between correct and incorrect pronunciation fairly soon after they begin the course, even when their productive abilities lag behind. This

becomes possible probably because the students receive a good amount of input in the course. In class, they listen to the demonstrations of the teacher, the performance of their peers, and the teacher's comments on it. In their homework, they listen to the recorded demonstrations of the teacher, the model pronunciation of the native speaker, and their own recorded pronunciation. It is stressed throughout the course that oral practice which is done without an analytical mind is ineffective. It is because of this emphasis on critical listening that this method is called "analytical."

Secondly, it was attempted to treat students' problems individually. An individual "clinic" is done in three ways. First, the teacher gives comments on the performance of individual students in class. Second, he treats problems noted in the practice diary by giving remedial comments for further practice. (He sometimes suggests them to exploit strategies other students used successfully; for example, a student improved her rhythm by reading the text simultaneously with the model reading on the tape.) Third, when practice tapes are submitted (and this is frequently done), he can give far more detailed comments than in class. Another good thing about this "tape therapy" is that those students who are shy and perform poorly in front of the class sometimes show better performance in their recordings. Thus the teacher has a more accurate assessment of their potential abilities of pronunciation.

Thirdly, it was stressed that practice is done at home, not in class. In-class time is devoted to the teacher's explanations and demonstrations of the target sounds and the students' performance for teacher evaluation. This idea seems to be against the common practice of EFL teachers to "spend as much [his] valuable class time as possible in practicing, as little time as possible in explaining (Brown 1975: 22)." One might argue that the proposed method has a serious weakness because the teacher cannot monitor how the students practice, how much they practice or if they actually listen to their own pronunciation or not. They could cheat by giving wrong homework descriptions. The fact, however, is that when students do not practice, they do not submit the diary and cut the next class. The fact that the teacher cannot monitor the students' practice does not seem to cause any serious problems. Conversely, the self-study approach presented above

has several advantages: it can cope with a large class, provide the participants with ample practice time, and, by saving time for in-class practice, treat their problems individually.

4. EVALUATION AND APPLICATION

4.1 EVALUATION

Evaluation of the students' pronunciation is made in three ways. The first is the evaluative comments the teacher gives to the individual students' in-class performance every week. Secondly, evaluation is made for the end-term performance (delivery of a three or four minute speech). Thirdly, the teacher evaluates improvements of the individual students by comparing two recordings of the same material which are done at the beginning and at the end of the term. Usually progress is remarkable.

The students' evaluation of the method used in this course is made in the reports they submit to the teacher at the end of the term. In their reports they unanimously say that use of a tape recorder and a mirror is very effective. Many students confess that they were shocked to find themselves performing so poorly in the recording and in the mirror.

4.2 APPLICATION

The present course is based on two particular conditions. First, the participants use a textbook and tapes which were produced by the classroom teacher himself. But this is not a necessary requirement. The basic idea of the method is simply that the students record their own performance and listen to it to analyze their problems. So the method is applicable only if there are tape recorders available for the individual participants. Second, the present course is provided for prospective teachers of English. Average learners of "general" English may not need the correctness and clarity of pronunciation which is required in the course. Communication is, after all, not so much affected by deficient pronunciation. However, it is also true that better pronunciation will make communication easier and more pleasant.

NOTES

*I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Tetsuya Kunihiro who read an earlier draft of this paper and provided me with invaluable comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Dana Aumend for his suggestions for improvements of style. Needless to say, any remaining inadequacies are my own.

¹ The term "syllable-timed rhythm" is used here because it is most widely used when referring to the rhythm of standard Japanese. It is more appropriate to say, however, that standard Japanese has mora-timed rhythm while some other dialects (e.g., Aomori dialect) have syllable-timed rhythm. Hon (book), for example, has two morae in standard Japanese while it has one syllable in the syllable-timed dialects, the time of pronunciation being a little longer in the former.

REFERENCES

- Brown, Vernon. Improving Your Pronunciation. Tokyo: Meirindo, 1975.
- Hashimoto, Mantaro. "On'intaikeino hikaku" [Comparison of the Japanese and English phonological systems.] Vol. 1 of Nichiei hikaku koza. Ed. Tetsuya Kunihiro. Tokyo: Taishukanshoten, 1980. 69-105.
- Jones, Daniel. An Outline of English Phonetics. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972.
- Kunihiro, Tetsuya. "Sousetsu [General remarks.] Vol. 1 of Nichiei hikaku koza. Ed. Tetsuya Kunihiro. Tokyo: Taishukanshoten, 1980. 1-5.
- Nagasawa, Kunihiro. Kyoshinotameno eigohatsuon [English Pronunciation Manual for Teachers.] Tokyo: Kaibunshashuppan, 1987.
- Nakatsu, Ryoko. Kokyu to on to kuchibiruto [Breathing, Sounds, and the Lips.] Tokyo: Gomukan, 1975.
- O'Connor, J. D. Better English Pronunciation. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- Prator, Clifford H., and Betty Wallace Robinett. Manual of American English Pronunciation. 4th ed. Tokyo: CBS Publishing Japan Ltd., 1986.
- Torii, Tsugiyoshi and Naomichi Kaneko. Eigo hatsuon'no shido [Teaching of English Pronunciation.] Tokyo: Taishukanshoten, 1975.