

Teaching English Pronunciation to Japanese University Students : A Modern Approach (Part One)

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Abstract

Good pronunciation is important for successful linguistic communication and in recent years language teachers have shown growing interest in connected speech, rhythm and intonation as well as segmental phonemes as vital elements of pronunciation. The first part of this paper examines the background to the teaching of all aspects of English pronunciation to Japanese university students, including the parameters of various teaching situations and the materials and techniques appropriate for them. The second part will give examples from actual lessons of how these materials and techniques can be used, with special attention to the use of non-standard dialect material (e. g. Cockney, Scouse, West African English) for listening practice to maximise learner capacity in overseas situations.

INTRODUCTION

That pronunciation is a vital ingredient of successful linguistic communication hardly needs to be stated. In his comments on the teaching of the pronunciation of English, A. C. Gimson points out that "high adequacy in lexis and grammar can be negated by incompetence in the

signalling phase" (Gimson 1980 : 299). Other writers (e.g. Kenworthy 1987 : 3) have commented on the importance of establishing realistic and varied goals for pronunciation studies, noting that not all learners want or need to attain the same level of proficiency in pronunciation; a prospective teacher of English, for instance, might well strive after native speaker-like competence while a majority of learners will be content if they can be "comfortably intelligible". As early as 1961, O'Connor and Arnold were pointing out that intonation, which they described as being significant, systematic and characteristic, i. e. *sui generis* for any given language, was an area of prime importance for the learner because a native speaker was less likely to make allowances for a foreigner's mistakes in intonation than for those in the reproduction of phonemes: he would be held "responsible for what his intonation seems to say". Ten years later, we find that pronunciation, for teaching purposes, is regarded as comprising stress, intonation, sounds, sound-linking and speech flow (Haycraft 1971 : 1-2); more recently it is unequivocally stated that "rhythm and intonation are the key elements of intelligibility in speech" (Wong 1987 : 2).

This paper takes the position that the teaching of pronunciation should aim at competence in phonemes, stress — at the level of the word or word-group and also in its function as rhythm in the sentence — intonation, and the combination of these elements in connected speech, including such features as juncture (the distinction between *an ice-cream cake* and *a nice cream-cake*) and the ability to recognise and use appropriately the extra-linguistic or quasi-extra-linguistic sounds, and pauses, which are so valuable for smoothing out the natural flow of speech in any language, be it the speaker's L1 or L2, 3, 4... It also raises the question of the exposure of learners to tapes or live samples of types of

pronunciation other than RP or Standard American English and even of local (e. g. Cockney, Bronx) and non-native (e. g. African, Spanish) types of English pronunciation.

It is not proposed to analyse in detail here the problems of Japanese learners with the pronunciation of English, beyond observing that some specific ones have been discussed from the Japanese point of view by e. g. I. Abe and Y. Igarashi in Koike 1978 : 337-354 and from the side of native speakers by e. g. Kenworthy 1987 : 149-152 and Bradford 1993. These last two provide not only detailed (though by no means exhaustive) lists of the problems but teaching suggestions. Ms Kenworthy thinks that Japanese learners may have less difficulty with English intonation than some other nationalities, an idea with which I to some extent agree, but with reservations, especially over the common Japanese tendency to give a rising intonation to all tag-questions. She also raises the interesting point that differences between Japanese male and female use of pitch in their own language causes some males to restrict the range of their intonation when speaking English : this makes them sound "stern" and EFL teachers may have to encourage such learners to widen their range accordingly. Kawakami 1977 and Vance 1987 make useful comments, relevant to the learning of English by Japanese, on the allophonic variations of Japanese / r / and on the differences between the rhythms of Japanese and English sentences.

Problems for Japanese learners are not, of course, limited to purely linguistic considerations ; at university we meet shyness and lack of energy for studies, especially in students who have been subjected to the worst forms of the "examination hell". The general perception of the years at university as an opportunity to relax between the regimentation of school life and the conventions of adulthood also acts against a favour-

able mental “set” for studies. Some of these aspects of student behaviour are discussed by Kyoko Norma Nozaki in Wadden 1992 : 27-33. These mainly negative factors are to some extent counterbalanced by the growing tendency of university students to travel abroad in the vacations ; this forces them to use English and awakens them to the need for a better pronunciation. Japanese adult life, too, is becoming more tolerant of unconventional career patterns, which may include studying or working abroad after graduation. This is leading to a higher evaluation of competence in spoken language skills.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

At university level, these are of three main types :

— regular classes ; pronunciation training can be built into the usual once-or twice-weekly *eikaiwa* courses. In some textbooks pronunciation exercises are provided as part of the material. These have the advantage of encouraging phonological practice on a regular basis, but in the case of texts for international use they tend to concentrate on general rather than specific points so that aspects offering difficulty to certain nationalities (such as / r, l / for Japanese speakers) must still be practised separately. Many popular course-books leave pronunciation practice entirely in the hands of the teacher.

— intensive courses ; these may be organised by the university or be in the form of vacation camps for students from a number of universities, run by various educational bodies, for instance the Inter-University Seminar House of Kansai (関西地区大学セミナーハウス), where an annual week-long course in practical English studies is conducted every August for up to 80 students from universities in western Japan. In such courses

there may be a programme of special pronunciation lessons, or pronunciation practice may be briefly and informally carried out as part of a daily “warming-up” period to open the day. There is much to be gained from either approach, but if a detailed daily lesson of some length is provided, care must be taken to plan for clear limited objectives or there is danger of the material becoming too diffuse or too boring. An example of material from a ‘main element’ type component of an intensive course will be discussed in Part 2 of this paper.

— speech clinics; the idea of the speech clinic is that concentrated activity helping learners to become aware of their pronunciation shortcomings, with the opportunity for them to practice at their own pace using sophisticated equipment, can improve their performance just as rehabilitation clinics can help those recovering from illness. Speech clinics are an increasingly common feature of language learning activity at university level, where they provide a more scientific foundation for pronunciation studies than the usual classroom situation of teacher and tape-recorder. Typical of the latest equipment is the speech sound analyser, which shows students visually the wave forms of their sounds, stress and intonation and allows them to compare them with models provided by native speakers. Recent experiments suggest that students with access to this form of practice develop high motivation and increased ability to judge their own and others’ pronunciation (Okuda and Laskowski 1994). The well-equipped speech clinic is likely to provide a fertile ground for future experiments in the teaching of phonology. It has the advantage of combining flexibility, realism in pronunciation of models and opportunities for individual attention to the students, both by the teacher and themselves; it also makes possible a more scientific analysis of pronunciation problems than anything previously available. A competent teacher

with a free hand in the design of materials for a speech clinic might well produce more satisfactory results there than in the constraints of a regular classroom or intensive course.

In addition to the three main opportunities described, other possible fields for speech training at university include English-speaking societies and college drama groups. The former are mainly organised by the students themselves, but a teacher involved in their activities could introduce some English-based games with a bias towards pronunciation skills and encourage the club leaders to carry them on by themselves from time to time. On the whole anything that looks like a drill or exercise is probably best avoided in the context of an ESS — after all, the students look for something different from the usual when they join an ESS. Singing games, like “Old Macdonald’s Farm”, with an emphasis on rhythm and un-selfconscious development of voice flexibility and intonation, are perhaps most useful here.

Many universities support a drama group or undertake theatrical productions, like Konan Women’s University’s annual Shakespeare Festival. These provide ample opportunity for constant *ad hoc* practice of difficult points of pronunciation. The fact that the English of the play may be formal and old-fashioned is not very important — many features of the individual sounds, stress and intonation will be similar to those of modern everyday English and have the added advantage that some degree of exaggeration can be encouraged which will benefit both the delivery and the students’ awareness. Students taking part in plays are often highly motivated and the improvement in their delivery of play dialogue may be considerable, with transfer benefit to their ordinary English conversation (see Via 1976).

OBJECTIVES OF PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

These were summarised early in this paper: it may be well to say a little more about them.

In the first place, a distinction must be made between long-term and short-term objectives. I would suggest that pronunciation teaching should aim in the long term to get all students to what Gimson (1980 : 303) describes as *minimum general intelligibility*, where native speakers (and others) will be able to understand the message the speaker is trying to convey, while those students who are going to use English for regular business purposes, especially in contexts where a high degree of intelligibility is necessary (flight attendants, airport flight controllers, English teachers) should be brought as far as possible to the level of *high acceptability*, where there is near-native speaker control of sounds, stress / rhythm, intonation and connected speech. These criteria presuppose, of course, a corresponding level of proficiency in the other areas of linguistic competence such as grammar and lexis.

A point which I have mentioned, but which is little discussed in the available literature, is the desirability of exposing learners to recordings — or live speech — in accents which are not standard but likely to be met in everyday situations where English is used. In fact, the whole area of receptive skills in pronunciation is largely neglected, particularly where integrated skills — i. e. the ability to understand long stretches of discourse — in non-standard dialects are involved. Apart from the obvious fact that listening must precede any attempt at production, surely it is important for learners to be made familiar with the types of pronunciation they are actually likely to encounter? The average student gets his

or her first experience of concentrated exposure to English on a trip abroad — perhaps to Hawaii, or Los Angeles, or London, often in connection with a summer course in English. But this student is just as likely to meet taxi-drivers and bus-conductors as English teachers, and a New York taxi-driver who has recently immigrated from Poland, or a Cockney taxi-driver in London will present a considerable shock to the unsuspecting student reared on a diet of RP or General American English. A salutary experience for me was riding in a London bus when a foreigner was buying a ticket; The Cockney bus-conductor's question "Where do you want to go to?", rendered as [ˈweədʒə ˈwɒnə ˈgʌɪdəʔ] was met with blank incomprehension by the foreigner, eliciting from the conductor an impatient [ˈdʌ ʊ n ʔ tʃu ˌʌnə ˈstɛn ˈplæn ˈɪŋglɪʃ] ("Don't you understand plain English?"). Host families for the home-stay programme may come from a variety of backgrounds. One student who spent four weeks on a course at a language school in Windsor was billeted with an Italian lady who had lived in Britain for many years and was fluent in English, but retained a strong Italian accent which made for some misunderstandings. Another Japanese student at the same language school complained about being in a class with Arab and European students, on the grounds that he "could not listen to Queen's English all the time" as he had wished. This surely misses the point, which is that English is an international language and therefore although non-natives need to learn one of the major accepted dialects (RP, General American, General Australian etc.) and get a firm grounding in it, they should also develop a flexible hearing ability — the art of reinterpreting, in terms of the sounds they already know, the non-standard sounds made by non-native or regional speakers of English. Only in this way can they develop the full potential of "international English". Studies need to cover not only the segmental

phonemes but also the supra-segmentals, otherwise the intonation of say, Indian or Northern Irish speakers will prove very hard to follow. Obviously there is a limit to the exposure that can be given to different dialects, but it seems reasonable for the long-term objective of pronunciation teaching to include some studies of this kind.

Short-term objectives naturally depend on the duration and type of course where the pronunciation is being taught. A first-year university *eikaiwa* course should include a review of segmental phonemes, at least those causing active problems, and practice of basic intonation patterns, with particular attention to tag-questions (rising intonation only on tags which represent real questions, but falling in the more usual cases where they represent comments or exclamations). There should also be attention to natural intonation curves based on overall phrasing, and discouragement of attempts to make intonation on a word-by-word basis. Simple drills of common rhythm patterns, with attention to speeding up on groups of weak syllables, can be a useful exercise, especially when combined with the practice of using schwa / ə / on weak syllables.

Regular *eikaiwa* courses in the other years at university, including the second year at *tandai*, can profitably take more advanced pronunciation topics for practice where the opportunity arises. The refining of segmental phonemes, such as insistence on correct homorganic lateral release in *bottle*, *candle* and nasal release in *ribbon*, *button*, belongs here (though there is no harm in broaching them earlier), and students can be trained to pay regular attention to smooth successions of stresses and rapid weak syllables in long utterances. More difficult tongue-twisters and game-like activities on interesting little points (like the schwa and other clues to the difference between *There were some eight men / ape men in the picture*) can enliven a lesson. Conversations containing extreme in-

tonation patterns (surprise, horror, disgust etc.) can instruct and entertain at the same time (obviously a good teacher does not conduct himself like a circus clown and treat his work as the mere entertainment of students while providing some educational spin-off, but humour and amusement play a valuable part in fixing teaching items in the students' minds — one comes across students mimicking an intonation pattern which one has humorously presented in class some time before and feels tolerably assured that the lesson has been learnt). In regular *eikaiwa* classes a useful principle to remember is that pronunciation items should be taught in the context of meaning and communicative effectiveness and that isolated and arbitrary drilling of discrete items is best avoided (Lovelock 1970 : 1). This is because when we take items of pronunciation (or grammar, or lexis) and build them in a systematic way around a theme or communicative event then the clear relationship between the items and the meaningfulness of the lesson is enhanced and learning is more likely to result. This is implicit in the message of all recent ELT methodology (see Trim in Quirk and Smith 1959 : 60-86, among others). In general, the short-term aims of pronunciation teaching in a regular *eikaiwa* course should be to provide the sort of practice that maximises the communicative value of the course.

As for intensive courses specifically on pronunciation, the approach is rather the reverse of that needed in a regular *eikaiwa* course. Instead of extracting from the text material (stories, conversations, tapescripts, etc.) a limited set of items which can be used to improve the students, command of pronunciation, we have to select what we think are useful pronunciation items, perhaps spread over the fields of segmental phonemes, supra-segmentals and connected speech, perhaps concentrating on just one element of pronunciation, like intonation, and find or devise material,

ideally communicative, which can be used to teach them. Writing one's own material is not easy, but has the advantage of conferring possibilities of flexibility and internal cohesiveness to the course. A typical solution would be to make up a series of dialogues containing the same characters or about the same general situation, say a journey or a family problem, with each dialogue containing certain features relating to phonology (say, one dialogue with many instances of the r/l contrast and a preponderance of High Fall intonations, another dialogue with /əʊ, ɔ:/ contrasts and Low Rise utterances, such as questions, another to practise /ə/ and rhythm patterns). One has, of course, to decide at the outset which problems of speech one is going to deal with and concentrate on those; too wide a spread of problems would end up confusing the students and making the material unwieldy. An important advantage of the intensive pronunciation course is that it provides the teacher with the opportunity, if desired, to concentrate on one particular area and deal with it thoroughly — for instance, to analyse and practise the most important intonation patterns in English.

The teacher involved in preparing materials and working modes for a speech clinic will be constrained by various factors, including the equipment available, the numbers of students to be admitted to groups participating in the programme, the amount of time available for each session, the frequency of sessions, the amount of time available for students to practise by themselves, monitoring facilities and whether the clinic's activities are open-ended or divided into terms or semesters. One way of organising a speech clinic, assuming that it is intended to run with the same participants for a year, is to undertake some market research to find out what speech problems the participants perceive themselves as having together with diagnostic procedures to find out their actual weaknesses in

various aspects of pronunciation. A programme could then be loosely drawn up, covering the most important aspects needing coverage, and material prepared, with provision for revision of material to suit student progress. Time could be apportioned in some suitable way between group and individual activities and between sessions using conventional teaching techniques and those involving new types of equipment like the speech sound analyser mentioned earlier in this paper. But any speech clinic should aim to provide, in the short term, the kind of exercises which will give students a feeling of making progress to provide the incentive for continued studies; the use of the analyser might produce such results if used imaginatively and in conjunction with vigorous encouragement of the students.

TECHNIQUES FOR PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

I take the underlying principles for all techniques of pronunciation teaching to be those generally accepted at this time for ELT work as a whole, as exemplified in e. g. Abercrombie 1956 : 16-27, Billows 1961 : 1-17, Haycraft 1971 : 114-122, Gimson 1980 : 299-326, Kenworthy 1987, Richards and Widdowson (and others) in Rossner and Bolitho 1990, and a great many more. To summarise briefly, they assume awareness on the part of the teacher of the specific problems of the students being taught, active classroom procedures for presenting students with good models and then enabling them to practise intelligently in order to make their own production approximate as nearly as possible to the models, the relating of teaching activities to real-life situations as far as possible and the encouragement of a learner-centred methodology which gives the student not only incentives but also the sense of responsibility for making prog-

ress in conjunction with other students ('progress' means in this context the improvement of speech skills as an integral part of communicative competence). In the opinion of the present writer, good techniques should not concentrate narrowly on one model of English pronunciation, but should rather foster a wide understanding of different dialects of English and even if, as inevitably happens, the teacher ends up by encouraging students to use a type of pronunciation similar to the one he or she uses or takes as a model, care is needed not to prejudice students against other commonly used and widely-accepted dialects. A further point, surely essential for any kind of teaching, not only ELT, is that the techniques and materials should encourage interest and enthusiasm among the students. Finally, the teacher should be open to feedback and self-criticism and be ready to adopt or reject any techniques depending on their efficacy or lack of it. The aim should be successful incorporation of the material in the students' active usage, as far as the teacher's assessment procedures can judge. In this regard, teachers might recall Earl Stevick's rule of thumb : teach, then test, then get out of the way (Stevick 1976 : 122).

The chief techniques of pronunciation teaching now in use are well-known ; here they will be listed briefly. For individual sounds they include :

- use of mouth diagrams
- drilling in minimal pairs
- tongue-twisters
- practice in identifying instances of *schwa* or other sounds in selected
- material
- practice of dialogues containing target sounds ;

For stress and rhythm :

- exercises on word-stress (e. g. homographs with stress differences such as 'import (noun) and im 'port (verb))
- stress-shift exercises ('I saw him v. I saw 'him)
- drills in common stress patterns (e. g. • ○ • • ○) with attention to speeding up on weak vowels and drawing students' attention to the relationship of *schwa* to weak stress
- again, practice of dialogue material exemplifying the points taught ;

For intonation :

- familiarisation of students with some basic facts about English intonation, e. g. the relation between intonation range and intensity of feeling, and between stress and pitch, which do not always coincide
- analysis of some basic English 'tunes' e. g. the Low Fall used for ordinary statements, descriptions, etc., and the Fall-Rise used for doubt or hesitation (with more advanced students it may be thought desirable to go into more detail over the formal anatomy of English intonation)
- practice of intonation with suitably or memorable dialogue material, including chorus work and practice between individual students

For connected speech :

- more dialogue work, perhaps using longer phrases or sentences and with attention to such matters as juncture and the behaviour of intonation in long groups.

It will be seen that the above list suggests that the teaching of intonation may require more formal explanation and drawing up of basic rules, prior to practice, than the other areas of speech study. This is reflected in the books and articles on the subject; virtually all writers from O'Connor 1967 and Haycraft 1971 to Wong 1987 and Kenworthy 1989 indicate that the rules, as far as they can be firmly adduced, of

intonation in English are highly complex and many of the teaching techniques advanced are quite technical. Kenworthy 1989 : 85-6 suggests that teachers of intonation fall into two groups ; those who introduce rules and those who teach by 'benign neglect', just 'leaving learners to their intonational devices'. She points out that research suggests that in many languages, including Japanese, intonation patterns have a broad similarity to English, e. g. falling intonation on statements, rising intonation on questions of the 'yes-no' type but sometimes falling where question-words are used, especially where no particular curiosity or cordiality is intended. Such points might tend to encourage support of the 'benign neglect' school. However, many ELT practitioners in Japan are so familiar with problems occurring over the intonation of e. g. tag-questions and absence of attention to the 'stepping head' so characteristic of English (especially British) speech patterns that they may feel that some attention to suggesting rules for good intonation is necessary. It seems clear, however, that rules should be given with many reservations over the numerous exceptions, rather as 'tendencies' (Kenworthy 86) than as rules. It is also apparent that intonation, and all the other features of pronunciation, must be presented in the context of living material, dialogues and the like, in order to be effectively learnt.

To the techniques listed above two further comments seem useful, one especially relevant to the teaching of Japanese learners and the other of more general application. The first comment concerns the special approach needed for Japanese learners. As they are shy and prone to worrying over comparisons between their own performance and that of others, the teacher must exercise extra care — both here and with other areas of ELT — not to over-correct or over-criticise learners, but to be extra patient with slower ones. It is also necessary to downplay the

differences between British and American (and other) forms of spoken English where these cause excessive anxiety to learners. In practical terms, if they can improve their pronunciation to the point where it is free of major interference from Japanese speech habits, it is likely to be basically acceptable to and understood by most reasonably well-educated members of the international English-speaking community. Only a few individuals will ever be good enough to concentrate on very specific points of their speech to make it conform to a purely British (or American, or Australian, or other) model. Comprehension of various types of spoken English is another matter, for which see above. One point must be insisted on — Japanese learners should be strongly discouraged from writing new words down in *katakana* as this invariably harms their efforts to improve their English pronunciation.

The other comment deals with the order in which techniques are applied in the teaching process. On the whole, it seems reasonable to provide listening practice before speaking practice and teacher-based activities before learner-based ones. In essence, the approach to pronunciation teaching — perhaps even more than for other ELT activities — should facilitate a gradual transfer of responsibility to the learner — in the case we are considering, the university student — from the teacher. Schematically, this can be represented in the following form :

$$T \rightarrow Ss, Ss \rightarrow T, (T \rightarrow S, S \rightarrow T,) S \rightarrow S,$$

where T = teacher, S = student, Ss = students. Brackets indicate optional stages in the process. This gradual transfer prepares the students for their own work while allowing them, in the early stages of the process, reliance on the teacher as mediator of the new material. This sequence, while valid in any teaching situation in the world, is especially useful in Japan where the tradition of student deference to the teacher and relative

passivity is frankly detrimental to the learning of subjects like language, where learner activity and self-reliance are important ingredients (see Finocchiaro and Bonomo 1973 : 11).

(End of Part One)

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