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Neutralization of Japanese English and Recommendations

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Abstract

Students of this generation deal with various kinds of electronic gadgets in their day today lives. This method of teaching can definitely be appreciated by the students if English Language is taught with help of Technology. They also expect machinery even in language labs and the students also would find it very interesting as they learn language with the help of machine (computers). The students will be taught R.P. Sounds, Phonemic transcription, Minimal pairs, and clusters, Word Stress, Rhythm and Intonation. All these skills are taught to motivate, to encourage them, and make them to master all these skills right from the school. Once the CAELL practice is continuously done the students' accent will definitely be neutralized.

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Introduction

As globalization makes headway, calls for increased ability in an international language like English became louder and louder. English is now a global language with over 1.5 billion users (Angelo and Cross, 1993) ^[1]. Japanese students have to struggle a lot as language English is introduced as mandatory in Junior High and High School. According to the most recent EF English Proficiency Index, the English level of Japanese is ranked 35th out of 72 countries of the world. ^[2]

Aim of the study

The present paper chiefly focuses on certain pronunciation problems faced by Japanese English Learners, especially, while uttering Received Pronunciation sounds and provide solutions to the problems. Japanese English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners' pronunciation errors and provide reasons why the English pronunciation errors take place. The author is interested to know the reasons why Japanese students find it difficulty in uttering Received Pronunciation sounds.

Objectives

- To explain vowel sounds uttered by Japanese English learners (ESL).
- To focus on the problems of Japanese students during articulation of Monophthongs and Diphthongs.

Review of the Literature

According to Kota Ohata, Indiana University of Pennsylvania mentioned in "Phonological Differences between Japanese and English: Phonological Differences between Japanese and English" ^[3]. The fact that native speakers of English can easily identify foreign accents (Non-Native speakers' accents) in ESL/EFL learners' speech, such as Spanish accents, Japanese accents, Mexican, Chinese and Indian accent, etc.,. It is a clear indication that the sound patterns or structure of their native languages have some influence on the speech or pronunciation of their second language. In other words, it is quite reasonable to say that the nature of a foreign accent is determined to a large extent by a learner's (local) native language ^[4].

Thus, the pronunciation errors made by second language learners are considered not to be just random attempts to produce unfamiliar sounds but rather reflections of the sound inventory, rules of combining sounds, and the stress and intonation patterns of their native languages. It is the sound that echoes the meaning. As the accent varies, it leads to change of meaning or communication gap (Brown, H. D. (1994) [5].

L2 learners' pronunciation errors are caused by factors other than difficulty in production. One possible factor is cognitive skills [6]. For example, according to a finding of the study of /l/ and /ɹ/ distinction by Japanese ESL learners, the participants produced these sounds without much difficulty, despite the fact that students were unaware that /l/ and /ɹ/ were two different phonemes, which change lexical meaning in English. Another possibility is what called "false concepts" termed "induced errors" [7]. These are errors caused by misleading teaching. In fact 40% of the students claimed that their pronunciation problems came from a lack of pronunciation instructions in their six years of English curriculum in junior and senior high school [8]. Another 24% felt psychological barriers had hampered correct pronunciation when students try to pronounce English accurately, they are afraid of being teased or they feel embarrassed. From a teacher's perspective, according to observation in Summer Teacher Training, about 30% of the Japanese English teachers of English admitted that they had never taught pronunciation to their students [9].

Research Methodology

Observation is an evaluation by observing the objects directly, accurately, and systematically. It can be about the situation of teaching and learning process. The situation is observed about the English pronunciation errors made by students. The researcher observes the pronunciation of Japanese students of Junior High and High School High School students closely. He uses observation for collecting the information, because by observing in the classroom activities can get not only the information about the students' errors in pronunciation but also the learning process. The observation must be followed by making note to the object. It means, in this research the researcher must make form of observation sheet.

Systematic classroom observation is a quantitative method of measuring classroom behaviors from direct observations that specify both the events and behaviors that are to be observed and how they are to be recorded [10].

Japanese English Learners' Errors

1. Adding Vowel Sounds to the End of Words

In Japanese katakana every word ends with a vowel sound at the end of a syllable. According to Japanese language this is appropriate way of uttering the words. This kind of practice influences the Japanese English learners. As the result when Japanese students speak English, they tend to add a vowel sound at the end of every word they utter. This is how the mother tongue influences Japanese English learners [11].

A few examples are cited below:

Eg:

**Kiss-u' instead of 'kiss' and
'mat-o' instead of 'mat'.**

2. Differentiating Minimal Pairs

As far as possible, Linguistics terminology is avoided in this article, but the term "Minimal Pairs" is an exception. Minimal Pairs are words that differ only in one sound, with that sound being in the same position.

- Ship instead of Sheep
- Work instead of Walk
- Caught instead of Coat
- Vote instead of Boat

Japanese English learners find Minimal Pairs very difficult. The discrete differences between the Minimal Pairs that vary by a single sound can be hard for the students to reproduce the same, especially, when the sounds aren't distinct in their native language.

"Th" Sound /θ/

The RP sound /θ/ is cliché' nemeses of many Japanese English learners. Japanese English students have a "sa" sound in their native language that is the close to the English "the", /θ/ sound. Therefore, they swap the sounds as often as possible. A few examples are mentioned below.

- Thin becomes sin
- Thing becomes sing
- Third becomes sard.

"R" and "L" Sounds

There is another pronunciation problem that occurs with Japanese English Learners. The English "r" sound doesn't exist in Japanese. Many times, students get confused and swap in an "l" sound which is ironic because when an "l" sound occurs in an English word, they often tend to pronounce it as "ru", "ro", "ra", "re", "or" and "ri".

According to the RP rules, the difference between the Japanese "r" and "l" sounds depend upon on how long the blade of the tongue is in contact with hard palate or the roof of the mouth. Japanese students should learn the fact that they should think of "r" sounds and "l" sounds in English words as completely novel letter character.

3. Consonant Clusters

In linguistics, a consonant cluster, consonant sequence or consonant compound, is a group of consonants which have no intervening vowel. In English, for example, the groups' /spl/ and /ts/ are consonant clusters in the word splits.

Japanese students' pronunciations of English words with consonant clusters often result in the insertion of vowel sounds.

Consonant clusters don't exist in Japanese count for middle syllables. The sheer number of consonant clusters should demonstrate how important mastering their pronunciation is to achieve English language fluency.

It is often said that Japanese do not have consonant clusters and that is the very reason why the Japanese cannot make consonant clusters. However, that idea is dubious, because if there is no consonant cluster in Japanese, there is no pronouncing the word 'gakkou' (school). Originally, the word is made from 'gaku' and 'kou'. When they are combined to make the word 'gakukou,' the vowel sound 'u' in the middle is reduced and disappears to make the pronunciation 'gakkou.' Likewise, if Japanese say something like 'sumou,' the pronunciation, spoken quickly, would be 'smou.' Other than these examples, Japanese learners seem to be able to make s-beginning consonant clusters like "sp" in "Speed" (a name of a Japanese musician group with four cute Okinawa girls), "sk" in "Skylark" (a name of a restaurant), "st" in "Starbucks" (well-known coffee shop all over the world) and so on [12].

There are two kinds of consonant cluster that Japanese can pronounce almost correctly --- /n/ + other consonant such as “hand,” “tense,” “wrench,” and the combination of /m/ + /p/ in “bump” or /m/ + /b/ in “combine” (this combination is not on Avery & Ehrlich). This may be because these clusters consist of nasal sound which Japanese has. If Japanese are heard to pronounce incorrectly in such words, it is not the problem of consonant cluster but of the /n/ sound itself in Japanese [13].

On the other hand, there certainly are two kinds of consonant cluster concerning ‘stop’ sounds and /t/ sound that Japanese cannot possibly pronounce. For example, combination of stop sound + other stop sound like /p/ + /t/ in “apt” or “contempt,” or stop + fricative sounds like /k/ + /s/ in “tax,” and /t/ + other consonant in “tree” or “twin” except for /ts/ in “ritz”. the main discussion below is on the latter clusters that many Japanese tend to be unable to pronounce.

It is theoretically and empirically clear that the failure of clusters results from Japanese open syllable system. Since the main feature of open syllable is that every consonant must be pronounced with vowel, those whose system is open are thinking that every single alphabet must be pronounced elaborately. In fact, Japanese clam school (about 50 pupils in Nishi-Tokyo City), It is heard that many Junior and Senior

High School pupils pronounce the word “act” as /akuto/, “tax” as /takusu/. When, they were asked to speak the words fast, and they could achieve the correct consonant clusters (Since it is not the official experiment, there is no reference to this). This personal research support that the method of pronouncing quickly is effective to consonant cluster [14].

Another failure of consonant cluster is concerning /t/ sound. As with /t/ beginning consonant cluster, the situation is different from the ones mentioned so far. For there is no sound in Japanese that represent /tu/, most Japanese replace it for either /tsu/ (tree /tsuriy/) or /to/ (try /toray/). That is why, Japanese pronunciation of such words that include t-sound consonant clusters is often regarded as strange. Actually, my students cannot say “try” without inserting extra “o,” and “twin” without “su.” However, it is not the case in Japan that /ts/ sound is difficult, for the above-mentioned reason that Japanese language already has the consonant cluster in “tsunami” or “tsugaru.” Unlike the former types of consonant cluster, it is not the matter of rhythm; the pronunciation itself, so teachers must correct the students t-sound in daily classes [15]. The author has identified a few more accentual errors commonly committed by Japanese L2 students. A few examples with orthography are given below:

Table 1: A Few common English Pronunciation Errors of Japanese ESL Students

| Place of Articulation | Phoneme | General Japanese English | Error | Phonetic Transcription | Minimal Pairs |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|---------|------------------------|--|
| Relax the mouth and keep sound short. | /ɪ/ | "sit" /sɪt/ | /i:/ | "seat" /Si:t/ | /ɪ/ or /i:/ practice |
| Move tongue to a lower front position. | /æ/ | "man" /mæn/ | /e/ | "men" /men/ | /e/ and /æ/ practice |
| Tongue more central. Lips relaxed. | /ʌ/ | "cup" /kʌp/ | /æ/ | "cap" /kæp/ | /æ/ or /ʌ/ practice |
| Back of tongue high. Lips rounded but relaxed. Short. | /ʊ/ | "full" /fʊl/ | /u:/ | "fool" /fu:l/ | /ʊ/ or /u:/ practice |
| Weak endings: e.g. "London" "England" | /ə/ | "the" (schwa) | /ə/ | "Teacher" /ti:tʃə*/ | /ə/or/ɑ:/ practice |
| Back of tongue high. Lips rounded but relaxed. Short. | /u:/ | "fool" /fu:l/ | /ʊ/ | "full" /fʊl/ | /ʊ/ or /u:/ practice |
| Fix tongue in central position. Long. | /ɜ:/ | "bird" /bɜ:d/ | /e/ | "bed" /bed/ | /e/ or /ɜ:/ practice /ʌ/ or /ɜ:/ /ɔ:/ or /ɜ:/ practice |
| Tongue moves from front centre to front high. | /eɪ/ | "late" /leɪt/ | /e/ | "let" /let/ | /eɪ/ or /e/ and vis versa |
| Tongue low front to high front to centre. | /aɪə/=aɪ/ +ə/ | "fire" /faɪə*/ | /aɪ/ | //faɪ*/ | /aɪə/ or /aɪ/ /ə/ |
| Tongue central. Then tightly round lips. | /əʊ/ | "note" /nəʊt/ | /ɒ/ | "not" /nɒt/ | /əʊ/ or /ɒ/ |
| Tongue central. Then tightly round lips. | /əʊ/ | "bone" /bəʊn/ | /ɔ:/ | "born" /bɔ:n/ | /əʊ/ or /ɔ:/ |
| Tongue low front. Then round & unrounded lips. | /aʊə/=aʊ/ +ə/ | "flour" /flo:*/ | //aʊ/ | /flaʊ/ | /aʊə/ or /aʊ/ |
| Tongue from high front to centre but not too low. | /ɪə/ | "beer" /ɪə/ | /i:/+ə/ | "be / are" /bi:r/ | ɪə/ or /i:/+ə/ |
| Tongue from centre front. Drawback to centre. | /eə/ | "bear" /beə*/ | /e/+ə/ | "bare" /bɜ:*/ | /eə/ or e/+ə/ |
| Start with lips tightly rounded. Unrounded. | /ʊə/ | "tour" /tuə*/ /tɔ:*/ | /u:/ | /tu:r/ | /ʊə/ or /u:/ |
| Voiced. Vibration. Trap air with lips. | /b/ | "bet" /bet/ | /v/ | "vet" /vet/ | /b/ or /v/ |
| Make friction with top teeth & bottom lip. | /f/ | "fill" /fɪl/ | /h/ | "hill" /hɪl/ | /f/ or /h/ |

| | | | | | |
|---|------|-----------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|---|
| Voiced. Friction with top teeth & bottom lip. | /v/ | "vet" /vet/ | /b/ | "bet" /bet/ | /v/ or /b/ |
| Voiceless. Friction. Tongue between teeth. | /θ/ | "thin" /θin/ | /s/ | "sin" /sin/ | /θ/ or /ð/ practice and /θ/ or /t/ practice. Minimal Pairs /θ/ or /d/ practice Minimal Pairs /θ/ or /s/ practice |
| Voiced. Friction. Tongue between teeth. | /ð/ | "they" / ðei/ | /d/ | "day" / dei/ | Minimal Pairs /ð/ or /d/ practice |
| Voiceless: tip of tongue behind top teeth. Friction. | /s/ | "mass" /mæs/ | /ʃ/ | "mash" /mæʃ/ | /s/ or /ʃ/ practice |
| Voiced: tip of tongue behind top teeth. Friction. | /z/ | "rise" /raiz/ | /s/ | "rice" /rais/ | /s/ or /z/ practice |
| Voiceless. Friction. Front of tongue to palate. | /ʃ/ | "push" /puʃ/ | /s/ | "puss" /pus/ | /ʃ/ or /s/ practice |
| Voiced: Front of tongue to palate. Friction. | /ʒ/ | "confusion" /kənʃju:ʒən/ | /ʃ/ | "Confucian" /kənʃju:ʃən/ | /ʃ/ or /s/ practice |
| Tongue touches hard palate. | /l/ | "light" (clear) | /r/ | "right" | Minimal Pairs /l/ or /r/ practice |
| Back of tongue to back roof. Nasal art with lips | /ŋk/ | "think" | /ŋ/ | "thing" | Minimal Pairs /ŋ/ or /ŋk/ practice |
| Tightly rounded. Unrounded & glide | /w/ | "west" | /v/ | vest | /w/ or /v/ practice |

Conclusion

The poor achievement is blamed on the way English is being taught in Japanese schools. It was found that a very little time is devoted to actual pronunciation practice but too much class room teaching is done. In other words, the syllabus is more of teacher oriented than student centric. In order to attain speech intelligibility and to avoid pronunciation mistakes, students should spend a great deal of time in English Language Labs (CAELL) ^[16].

One of the major reasons why Japanese ESL students have difficulty in pronouncing the English sounds is their poor listening skills and a desire to adhere to Japanese Pronunciation. Munby. J. 1998 ^[17].

The dawn of twenty first century has ushered Technology into every field and English language is not an exception to it. Dr. JJB. Vijay Vardhan in his 'General Indian English (Telugu English speakers) Pronunciation Vs Received Pronunciation' ^[18] suggested that the schools should mandatorily introduce 'Computer Aided English Language Labs' (CAELL) right from their primary schools as part of the syllabus. These lab sessions, especially focus on the polishing English pronunciation of the students. There is also another major reason why CAELL (Computer Assisted or Aided English Language Labs) should introduce language labs to the Japanese students ^[17]. Students of this generation deal with various kinds of electronic gadgets in their day today lives. This method of teaching can definitely be appreciated by the students if English Language is taught with help of Technology ^[18]. They also expect machinery or electronic gadgets even in language labs and the students also would find it very interesting as they learn language with the help of electronic gadgets (computers) ^[19]. The teachers should focus on R.P. Sounds, Phonemic transcription, Minimal pairs, and clusters, Word Stress, Rhythm and Intonation. All these topics should be taught, practiced and motivate, to encourage them, and make them to master all these skills right from the school. Once the CAELL practice is continuously done the students' pronunciation will definitely be neutralized ^[20].

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