"Sensei. How do I say this?" A case for required pronunciation courses for English teacher trainees in Japan

Adrian Paterson

Abstract: Students and teachers of English in Japan often complain that they lack confidence when it comes to English pronunciation. This paper will look at some of the common reasons why they might feel that way, and discusses the consequences of such attitudes. This can lead to a downward spiral where students do not feel confident about their English pronunciation, and if they go on to become teachers, they perpetuate the problem by avoiding pronunciation instruction. This paper argues that the place to break this cycle is in teacher training courses. When trainees are given the knowledge and resources they need to teach pronunciation, they will then have the confidence to teach it to their students who will in turn be more confident. It ends with discussion of what some of the key components of such a course should be.

Introduction

I have been teaching English pronunciation in various roles to Japanese students of all ages for nineteen years, and I have been teaching an English pronunciation course to teacher trainees for the last three years, and these experiences have given me some insights into some of the obstacles facing Japanese learners of English in general, and trainee teachers specifically. I have found that in most cases, articulation is not the biggest hurdle for them, because there are a relatively

small number of sounds that exist in English but not in Japanese. The problem is a lack of confidence because they have not been taught how to do it. Many communicative textbooks do not even cover pronunciation. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) criticize proponents of the communicative approach because they ". . . have not dealt adequately with the role of pronunciation in language teaching" (p.8). The frustrating thing is that it is not that difficult to teach. I have learned from experience that it is best to start with the familiar by showing students how they pronounce similar sounds in Japanese, then I can use that as an anchor from which to teach them the English phonemes. This means that trainees need to know about force, place and manner of articulation for consonants, and degrees of openness, tongue position, and lip rounding for vowels.

In this paper, I will discuss some of the common excuses for not teaching pronunciation that I have heard in the past, and in some cases even used myself. Then, I will go on to give some reasons why I think it needs to be taught. Finally, I will outline what I think the key components of a pronunciation course for Japanese trainee English teachers should be. I will not attempt to argue for a greater part for pronunciation in the English curricula of Japanese junior and senior high schools. However, I believe that if all English teachers have the skills and resources necessary to teach it effectively, there will be an overall improvement.

For the purposes of this paper I will use "trainee" to refer to students of tertiary institutions in Japan who are studying to attain a teacher's license specializing in English, "teacher" to refer to graduates of such courses who are practicing teachers in elementary, junior, or senior high schools in Japan, and "student" to refer to students of elementary, junior, or senior high schools who are or will be taught by the above.

Some excuses for not teaching pronunciation

It would be easy to see this section as a series of strawman arguments where I set up weak arguments in order to easily knock them down. This is generally considered a poor argument style because the weakness of a counter-argument is not in itself proof of the strength of a claim. However, in this case, I think that many of the counter-arguments are symptomatic of a lack of proper teacher training. Harmer (2001) suggests that teachers are "nervous of dealing with sounds and intonation" (p. 183), and that seems to manifest itself in the following arguments against teaching them.

It is too difficult – It can be quite intimidating for people to try something new and unfamiliar, simply because they do not know where to start or get the necessary resources. It is nearly impossible to teach something that we do not understand ourselves. It is precisely this lack of knowledge that underlines the need to provide training in pronunciation. This can be just as true for native-speaker teachers as for non-natives. While they may be able to model native pronunciation, without training they probably will not be able to explain how they do it, or how their students can emulate it. The goal is not to produce highly trained phoneticians who will go on to conduct groundbreaking research in the field, it is to give them a basic understanding of the tools available.

It takes too long – It is true that it can take a long time to master the articulation of new phonemes because developing the muscle memory for fluent articulation requires a lot of repetition. However, the goal of a pronunciation course for trainee teachers is not to achieve this mastery, it is to give them the tools to do this themselves and to pass it on to their students. For example, when trainees understand things like force, place and manner of articulation then they can use resources like the IPA chart or other references to help them learn and teach the

pronunciation of consonants.

Pronunciation errors do not usually cause major communication problems – Whereas the previous arguments relate to the costs of teaching pronunciation, this one argues that the benefits do not outweigh the costs. In other words that the time and effort necessary to acquire good pronunciation are not justified by the results. Lightbown and Spada (2013) say that proponents of this view argue that the critical period hypothesis suggests that "native-like pronunciation was an unrealistic goal for older learners" (p.68). Many teachers seem to think that in most cases pronunciation errors do not interfere with communication, and that many learners will acquire "serviceable pronunciation" without specific pronunciation teaching (Harmer, 2001). While it is true that for a lot of errors, the intended meaning can be guessed from context, this is not always the case. So, if someone says "I will fry an airplane", it is more likely that they are a pilot rather than a chef. However, if they used the Japanese pronunciation of both 'work' and 'walk' which sounds more like 'wark', and said "I am going on a warking holiday", it is not obvious whether they plan to go hiking or do casual work during their trip. I have also been confused when a student was telling me about something he thought of in the bath, but in the context, I thought he meant bus. But, even when the intended meaning is clear, a pronunciation error can cause considerable embarrassment, for example the teacher in my Japanese class who was trying to explain the Japanese etiquette of 'sitting' on cushions, or the friend who wanted to tell me about the 'big election in Japan' that was occurring at the time. Japanese learners of English are already self-conscious about using English, so experiences like that could potentially turn students off English completely.

As we have seen the arguments against teaching pronunciation do not stack up. It does take a lot of practice to completely eliminate all pronunciation errors, but with proper teacher training, the fundamentals of English pronunciation can be taught relatively quickly and easily. However, more importantly, the fact that pro-

nunciation errors can cause miscommunication or embarrassment justify dedicating the time and effort required to teach it well.

Reasons to teach pronunciation in teacher training courses

The arguments listed in the previous section apply equally to the English classroom and teacher training. The thinking behind them shows that a lack of proper training can cause a lack of confidence by teachers, which in turn can have a detrimental effect on their students. When something is poorly understood, it can be a very intimidating. I believe that one of the main reasons why teachers are reluctant to tackle pronunciation is that they simply do not have the necessary tools to effectively teach it, and so they tend to avoid it. This in turn means that their students are poorly trained in pronunciation, and so the cycle of ignorance continues. The way to break this cycle is by teaching teacher trainees the fundamentals of pronunciation, so that they will feel more confident about teaching it, which will improve their students' ability, and in turn improve the ability of future generations of English teachers.

As we saw in the previous section, pronunciation errors can cause misunderstandings and embarrassment for students. This in itself should be reason enough to teach pronunciation, but these misunderstandings can have more serious consequences, such as; giving offense to a listener, or marking them as targets of prejudice or discrimination (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.71). A learner with poor control of suprasegmental features could come across as angry or too abrupt simply through inappropriate sentence stress, or by using the wrong tone of voice (Kelly, 2000, p.11). While all of the core English speaking countries have laws specifically designed to prevent discriminatory employment hiring practices related to race, rejecting a candidate because of an "incomprehensible accent" is much more of a grey area (Nguyen, 1994). These may be extreme examples, but they can and

do happen, so it is the responsibility of any reasonable teacher to give their students the tools necessary to avoid such accusations.

Many Japanese people that I have spoken to have expressed nervousness about speaking in English because they lack confidence in their ability to speak and be understood. Even English teachers at my sons' schools have appeared embarrassed when I speak to them. This nervousness does not just result from fear of making pronunciation errors, but is certainly a factor. Japanese people are aware that the phonemes of English that do not exist in Japanese can cause them difficulty when speaking English. There is a desire among students to improve their pronunciation, so what is required is teachers who are capable of teaching it, and the time to teach them is during teacher training.

Key components of a pronunciation course for Japanese trainee English teachers

Nation and Macalister (2010) advocate a systematic approach to curriculum design. After identifying the goals of the course, teachers need to decide content and sequencing, format and presentation, and monitoring and assessment. These decisions are informed by the wants and needs of students and constraints on the teaching context. The first thing is to determine the goals of the course. So, what do trainee English teachers in Japan need to know in order to effectively teach English pronunciation to their future students. Realistically, pronunciation would need to be taught in one course because of other required courses. Therefore, native-like pronunciation cannot be the goal of such a course. A more realistic goal is making trainees aware of the basics of articulation and suprasegmentals, where to find the resources necessary to deepen their knowledge of pronunciation themselves, and how to use those resources effectively. By limiting the goals like that, the course could be taught quite effectively in a semester.

Another important decision is whether to use a textbook, and if so, which one. This will have a great influence on other aspects of the course. When selecting a textbook, it is important choose one that can be taught reasonably easily, and that can be used as a reference when trainees become teachers. There are several good textbooks to choose from, for example Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) and Kelly (2000). Both books offer comprehensive coverage of articulation and suprasegmentals, and have appendices with various quick reference guides. Kelly (2000) comes with an audio CD, but Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) does not, however, the 2nd edition (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010) does. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) is a much longer book (435 pages vs. 154), and goes into a lot more detail so it will be a very useful reference for trainees after they become practicing teachers. Kelly (2000) is not as comprehensive, but it makes up for this by being concise. This means it is better suited to a semester course such as the one envisaged here, however, it still has enough to be a handy reference for practicing teachers. This is just a small selection of the books available. Ultimately, it is up to course teachers to decide which book best suits the current situation and teaching style, and the future needs of their trainees.

In terms of content and sequencing, the key is to limit the course content that trainees need to learn. These are primarily articulation of English phonemes and suprasegmentals. The number of phonemes to be taught is relatively small because all Japanese phonemes exist in English, but not all English ones exist in Japanese. This means that phonemes common to both languages do not require extensive teaching. However, they can serve as useful anchors when teaching the ones that differ from Japanese. I have found that teaching the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart to trainees helps them to understand articulation, and will help them to access pronunciation guides in the future. However, I do not advise them to teach it to their students in the future, because, except for the most advanced classes, the time it would take to teach IPA could be better utilized practicing

other aspects of English. Instead, when I taught senior high school classes, I developed a simplified system based on more familiar symbols used in English and Japanese, for example I use a small ッ to represent an unreleased plosive (e.g. "What's up?" as *wotsaッ(p)*, and schwa /ə/ for unstressed syllables. This has the advantage that it can be used with minimal explanation.

A characteristic of Japanese that affects English pronunciation is that it uses a syllabic script based on consonant-vowel pairs, whereas English uses individual phonemes. This means that English words with consonant clusters will usually get vowels inserted between them, for example "black" is pronounced *burakku.* Another important difference between Japanese and English is that Japanese is a syllable timed language, which is a problem when they learn a stress timed language like English. This means that when Japanese speakers use English, they tend to speak with a monotone. English speakers emphasize or deemphasize key ideas using sentence stress, and an inability to use and recognize this could result in miscommunication.

In terms of format and presentation, it is important to anchor new phonemes to ones that students are already familiar with. An example of anchoring is teaching the English /r/ and /l/ using the Japanese /ɾ/, which is used in the syllables represented in roman script as *ra, ri, ru, re,* and *ro.* The Japanese /ɾ/ is a voiced alveolar flap, whereas the English /r/ is a voiced post-alveolar approximant, and /l/ is a voiced alveolar lateral. When my university has its open campus, I teach a 10～15-minute sample lesson on the English /r/ and /l/. I always start by getting them to say the Japanese /ɾ/ repeatedly and to pay attention to what they are doing with their mouth and tongue. Then I prompt them to describe what they did, and use presentation slides and demonstration to help show them that it is made by briefly stopping the air flow with the sides of the tongue against the back teeth and the tip around the alveolar ridge, and then released by flapping the tip of the tongue down. Once this is established, I can then start showing them how the /r/

and /l/ are articulated.

In the case of /r/, air is restricted and allowed to flow continuously through the front by curling the tongue to form a tunnel-like shape with the lips rounded, and for /l/ the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge and air is allowed to flow between the sides of the tongue and the back teeth and with the lips slightly spread. From there, I move on to using the sounds in single syllable minimal pairs, such as; lock/rock, lice/rice, lead/read, etc., followed by simple clusters such play/pray, blue/brew, fly/fry, etc., and finally, in the middle of multi-syllable words like; collect/correct, pilot/pirate, etc. The minimal pairs are arranged on a slide with the /l/ words on the left and the /r/ words on the right. I end the lesson by getting students to point in the direction of the sound they hear when I say one of the words selected randomly from pairs. This approach has been quite successful for me, and I have received a lot of positive feedback from students over the years. Other researchers have reported similar results (Hattori & Iverson, 2008; McClelland, Fiez, & McCandliss, 2002; Saito & Lyster, 2012).

Some other examples of anchoring are: Teaching English schwa /ə/ by showing that it is articulated approximately half way between the Japanese open back vowel ア and the closed front vowel イ. Japanese learners of English usually pronounce "seat" as "sheet" because in Japanese when /s/ is with a closed front vowel it becomes /ʃi/, so students need to practice saying it as "sa/si/su/se/so" and "sha/shi/shu/she/sho".

For suprasegmentals, I have found that the simplified system of symbols mentioned above help to show how sentence stress and stress timing work. For example, I would represent the following: "How long have you been in Japan?" as "haLong ivyə Bi ninjəPan". After I explain the difference in timing between Japanese and English and that English speakers stress keywords, I get students to identify the keywords in the sentence. I explain that what we call stressed (or accented in Japanese) syllables are not so much given extra value, instead that the un-

stressed syllables lose value. We can see this where “have you” is reduced to “ivyə”. I clap the rhythm on the stressed syllables to illustrate stress timing, and also use “di DA didi DA didi DUM”. To further illustrate this, I show them that even when the auxiliary verbs are increased, the rhythm does not change, so “How long would you have been in Japan?” as “haLong wəjiv Bi ninjəPan”.

Finally, for monitoring and assessment, I try to take a practice-based approach. I monitor their pronunciation by getting all students to articulate the sounds that we are practicing, and repeat them until they get them right. I also get them to complete feedback sheets after each class. They write about things that stood out for them during the class, and ask questions about things they did not understand or want to know more about. These help me to identify problems, so that I can address them in the next class. The goal of the course is to equip trainees with the tools that they will need when they are practicing teachers. Therefore, I assess students based on a written teaching plan and a micro-teaching demonstration. They have the option of teaching a specialized pronunciation lesson, or a pronunciation component of a general English lesson. This is intended to encourage them to prepare necessary resources, and to feel more confident about teaching pronunciation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the excuses for not teaching pronunciation do not stand up to scrutiny, and in fact have a detrimental on English teaching in Japan. Many of the so-called problems related to teaching English pronunciation stem from a lack of knowledge, and consequently teachers lack confidence to teach pronunciation. The obvious place to address these issues is in teacher training courses. I am not arguing for pronunciation to be given more time in the junior and senior high school curricula because this time is already severely limited.

However, when teachers have the knowledge and resources that they need to teach pronunciation, they are more likely to embrace it as an integral part of the curriculum, rather than see it as something to avoid.

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