

Correcting English Consonants of Japanese Speakers

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外国語とした英語の子音を日本人に教える

Introduction

Non-native English-speaking teachers are the main teachers of English in Japanese primary and secondary classrooms. They are responsible for teaching English pronunciation to Japanese learners. While junior high school English teachers have chosen English as their subject field and have trained to teach it, elementary school teachers typically have not had as much training in English. With the introduction of English as a subject in fourth grade of elementary school curriculum in Japan, more than in the past, elementary school teachers are responsible for teaching English pronunciation to young learners of English. Yet, many Japanese teachers are not confident in their pronunciation of English and feel inadequately equipped to teach it. Furthermore, studies reveal that pronunciation is an area which some teachers avoid or are reluctant to teach (Macdonald, 2002).

Can future Japanese teachers of English know what phonemes they are properly pronouncing and which they are not? Can they correct their own already formed habits of mispronouncing certain phonemes? This paper focusses on the pronunciation of five consonant sounds by Japanese college students. Following that is an examination of the efficacy in correcting inaccurate pronunciation and a discussion of teaching and learning challenges.

Objectives

This study covers English pronunciation of a group of students at Kyushu Lutheran College. The group is comprised of English majors enrolled in the college full-time. Some of them stated that they wish to become English teachers. All subjects are native Japanese speakers.

For this study, commonly mispronounced consonants were chosen as targets for correction. Fricatives articulated in the front of the mouth are very difficult for Japanese speakers, most noticeably [v] and the two 'th' sounds: [θ] and [ð], which should not be replaced by either dental [t] & [d] or alveolar [s] & [z] (Hudson, 2013). The [r] and [l] are two sounds commonly blurred in Japanese speakers' English. For example, in international broadcast news regarding tsunami and earthquakes, Japanese can be heard mispronouncing the term earthquake, with [r] missing and [θ] being replaced by [s]. Due in part to the high frequency of these consonant sounds, and in part to their common mispronunciation by Japanese speakers, these five consonants, [v], [θ] and [ð], [r] and [l], were emphasized.

A primary objective of the study of the full-time college students was to find if subjects could consistently produce these sounds in speech after deliberate training within a two-semester course.

In other words, could they improve their own pronunciation even after poor habits had been formed?

Method

At the beginning of their second term in the freshman year, a pre-test of two groups of English majors was administered by the native English-speaking instructor. The test consisted of 14 sentences to be read by each subject. Subjects were aware that the tester was listening to their pronunciation, but they were not advised of what specific sounds the tester was listening for in any of the 14 sentences. Table 1 shows a sample of consonant sounds tested. The total number of subjects for this test was 21. Of these subjects, eight of the 21, or 38% consistently pronounced the [v] sound, as in the words *travel* and *view*, in the pre-test. 28% consistently pronounced the [r] sound, as in the words *drove* and *read*. 28% consistently pronounced the [l] sound, as in *Lucy* and *fly*. 38% consistently pronounced the [θ] sound, as in *thank*. 23% of the 21 subjects consistently pronounced the [ð] sound, as in *other*.

One challenge facing students at the beginning of the course was an uncertainty of whether they were correctly pronouncing target sounds. Until this pre-test, there had been a lack of confirmation whether they were pronouncing English consonants correctly or not.

Following the pre-test, the results were given to each student, showing their individual success rates with 14 specific vowel and consonant sounds. Between the pre-test and the post-test, the students received instruction in English pronunciation, including consonants, vowels, rhythm, stress and intonation. This instruction took place in two semesters of a communication English class, in which pronunciation was not the main topic of instruction but was one of the emphases. In this course, for each consonant sound practiced, the instructor used diagrams to show the workings of the mouth and spoke in Japanese to explain the specifics of what happens in the mouth and with the lips and breathing to correctly produce each sound. During speaking drills during class, the instructor listened to each student in practice of specific sounds and corrected individuals when they were mispronouncing the target sound. For the practice of the [v], the [r], [th] as in *thank*, and [th] as in *the*, the students also looked in hand-held mirrors to ascertain their own mouth, tongue and lip manipulation, looking for cues such as lip formation as directed by the instructor. Nearly all subjects successfully made the target sounds by the end of practice sessions. With each sound practiced, some students were consistently successful, while others were inconsistently successful. In addition to the communication English course, these full-time students took a one-semester course focusing on English pronunciation.

At the end of their third semester at the college, a post-test of both of the above groups of English majors was administered by the same native English-speaking instructor who administered the pre-test. As in the pre-test, the post-test consisted of 14 sentences to be read by each subject. Subjects were aware that the tester was listening to their pronunciation, but they were not advised of what specific sounds the tester was listening for in any of the 14 sentences. Table 1 shows the success for five of the consonant sounds tested.

Results

Of these 21 students, nine, or 42% consistently pronounced the [v] sound, as in the words *Vic* and *seven*, in the post-test. 38% consistently pronounced the [r] sound as in *Rob* and *gray*. 57% consistently pronounced the [l] sound, as in the words *sleep* and *late*. 66% of the subjects consistently pronounced the [θ] sound, as in *thank*. 52% of the subjects consistently pronounced the [ð] sound, as in *those*. Table 1 shows these results and the improvements made since the pre-test.

Table 1. English consonant correct pronunciation results among English majors in an extended course

consonant	pre-test	post-test
v	38%	42%
r	28%	38%
l	28%	57%
[θ] (<i>thank</i>)	38%	66%
[ð] (<i>the</i>)	23%	52%

Continuing Challenges

Over the two semesters, students made improvements in pronunciation, but gains were not sustained. During drilling and speaking practice in class, the teacher found that individuals could properly pronounce targeted sounds of the day. This was when the students were aware of the sounds the teacher was listening for and the pronunciation techniques were fresh in their minds. The post-test, however, shows that retention of pronunciation skill is lacking. Many speakers do not retain the proper form over time.

This confirms research of Uchida and Sugimoto (2018). Realizing that one advantage non-native English-speaking teachers have over native English-speaking teachers is that they can explain the detailed formation of sounds, Japanese teachers of English should base their teaching on a good understanding of the sounds of both English and Japanese. Japanese teachers of English should clearly understand how to manipulate the speech-forming parts of the body so that they can communicate this to their students.

In this study, favorable results show that improved English pronunciation is achievable even after years of speaking English and regularly mistaking some sounds. When students know what sounds they are pronouncing correctly and which they are not, they can improve on their weaknesses. When the teacher uses explicit description in Japanese of what happens with mouth, tongue, lips, and breath to properly pronounce sounds, students can know what to look for when pronouncing in front of a mirror. Non-native Japanese teachers of English would do well to learn to explain in Japanese to their Japanese students how to pronounce sounds.

References

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