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Reducing Accent in English -What will Native Japanese Speakers Benefit from Most?

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Reducing Accent in English

– What will Native Japanese Speakers Benefit from Most?

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Author Note

This paper was written for ENG397, Teaching Pronunciation.

Abstract

This paper examines some of the characteristic phonetic differences between Japanese and English and points out major difficulties in pronunciation for Japanese learners of English.

English education in Japan focused on mainly reading and writing English for a long time, and little attention has been given to pronunciation teaching and to the development of effective strategies to address the problem (Saito, 2007). Therefore, Japanese learners of English tend to have difficulty in learning English pronunciation. In addition to that, English classes cannot always have native speakers of English as teachers and Japanese English teachers often lack self-confidence in English pronunciation (Saito, 2007). However, accuracy in English pronunciation is important to avoid miscommunication and negative social consequences.

This paper focuses on the areas of vowels and a few consonant problems and how the pronunciation errors will occur for Japanese learners and introduce effective teaching strategies for Japanese learners and instructors.

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Introduction

This paper examines some of the characteristic phonetic differences between Japanese and English and points out major difficulties in pronunciation for Japanese learners of English.

English education in Japan focused on mainly reading and writing English for a long time, and little attention has been given to pronunciation teaching and to the development of effective strategies to address the problem (Saito, 2007). Therefore, Japanese learners of English tend to have difficulty in learning English pronunciation. In addition to that, English classes cannot always have native speakers of English as teachers and Japanese English teachers often lack self-confidence in English pronunciation (Saito, 2007). However, accuracy in English pronunciation is important to avoid miscommunication and negative social consequences.

This paper focuses on the areas of vowels and a few consonant problems and how the pronunciation errors will occur for Japanese learners and introduce effective teaching strategies for Japanese learners and instructors.

Vowels

There are two major differences between Japanese vowel system and that of English: 1) the different number of vowels and 2) the tense and lax distinctions (Ohata, 2004). In the English vowel system, there are 15 vowels, which include diphthongs such as /ay/, /aw/ and /oy/. On the other hand, Japanese has only 5 vowels. Therefore Japanese learners tend to substitute English vowels with the Japanese vowels which they are already familiar with (Nishikiori, 2007).

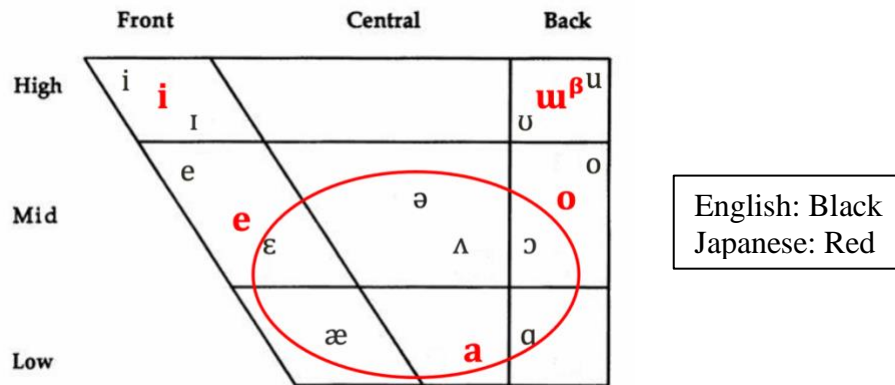


Figure 1: English vowels vs Japanese vowels

As you can see in Figure 1, Japanese vowel /a/ sound is in low central position and it is considered as the closest vowel to the English vowel /ʌ/, and Japanese lacks a middle central vowel /ʌ/ and a low front vowel /æ/ (Smith, 2012). Therefore, the most difficult area for Japanese learners is considered that Japanese has only /a/ sound but English has /æ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, and /ɑ/. As the red circle indicates, Japanese learners tend to cover all of the English vowels /æ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, /ɑ/, /ɔ/ and sometimes /ε/ with Japanese counterpart /a/ (Nishikiori, 2007). In addition, Japanese speakers are not aware of how they should move their mouths, lips, and jaws when they speak English since Japanese does not require large facial expression or movement when speaking (Nishikiori, 2007). Among sounds that correspond Japanese /a/, /æ/ is one of the toughest sounds for Japanese learners to produce because it requires significant oral movement. /æ/

In order to produce /æ/, Japanese learners need to move their tongue more forward, (Saito & Lyster, 2012) spread their lips more and keep it tense and drop the jaw more compared to (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996) Japanese vowel /a/ which is produced with less jaw and tongue movement. Japanese learners also need to pay attention to differences between tense and lax, since there is no distinction between tense and lax in Japanese vowels.

Effective teaching strategies**1) Clear model**

Show Japanese learners clear production model of /æ/, comparing to other English vowels /ʌ/, /ə/, /ɑ/, and Japanese /a/, and explain the tongue position, the shape of mouth, and the movement of jaw with the visual aid. In addition, introduce some example words for each sound.

2) Comparison of other vowels

/ɛ/ vs /æ/: As Japanese does not have tense and lax differentiation, Japanese learners tend to pronounce /æ/ shorter than it has to be, and it ends up close to lax vowel /ɛ/. Also, /æ/ is between the Japanese /a/ and /e/ (Nishikiori, 2007), therefore Japanese learners have trouble with distinguishing these sounds in pronouncing such words as *bad* /bæd/ vs *bed* /bed/.

First, have Japanese learners listen to the audio sounds /ɛ/ and /æ/, and pronounce them one after another from /ɛ/ to /æ/ while paying attention to how the tongue position becomes lower and shape of the mouth and lips become tense. Then, practice minimal pairs such as, *beg* /bɛg/ vs *bag* /bæg/, *bend* /bend/ vs *band* /bænd/.

/æ/ vs /ɑ/: Because Japanese learners tend to substitute /æ/ with Japanese counterpart /a/ which is close to English /ɑ/ sound, they need to be able to differentiate these two sounds. /ɑ/ sound is a low back vowel, compared to the /æ/ sound, which is a low front vowel, that is, the front of the tongue should be pushed further forward when producing from /ɑ/ to /æ/ (Figure 2). As it has been already discussed above, Japanese does not require large facial movement, therefore the learners end up pronouncing *hat* /hæt/ and *hot* /hat/ the same way.

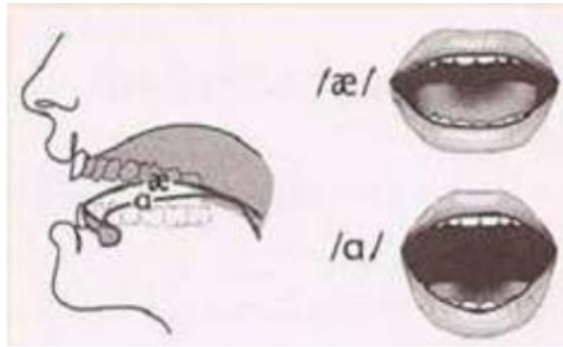


Figure 2: The articulation position of /æ/ vs /a/ sound

To practice these two sounds, have Japanese learners listen to the audio sounds /æ/ and /a/, and pronounce them while comparing how the tongue position moves forward and back, and shape of mouth and lips become tense and loose. Then, practice minimal pairs and tongue twisters such as, *The fat cat sat on the rat with the hat.*, *The cop's cap was really a hot hat.*

/æ/ vs /ʌ/: According to Figure 1, mid /ʌ/ sound in middle central position does not exist in Japanese vowels. Since Japanese learners are not used to shaping their mouth in a neutral position, they might end up producing these two sounds, as in *cap* /cæp/, *cup* /cʌp/ or *bat* /bæt/, *but* /bat/, in a similar manner that a native English speaker cannot recognize which words they are trying to say.

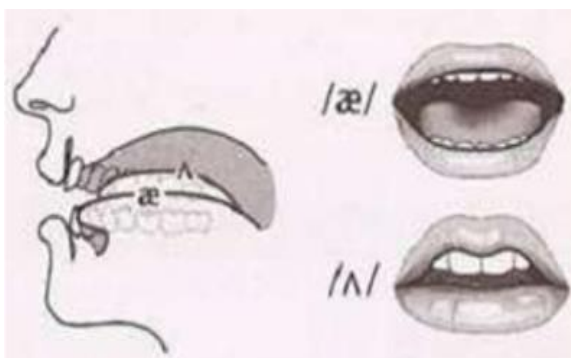


Figure 3: The articulation position of /æ/ vs /ʌ/ sound

To differentiate these two sounds, have Japanese learners listen to the audio sounds of minimal sentences of /æ/ vs /ʌ/ such as, *I could catch that bass / bus.*, *That's my cap / cup.*, and

distinguish which sound of word is pronounced. Then, move on to tongue twisters such as the set of sentences listed below.

A cap

A bad cap

A bad cap in a cup

A bad cap in a cup on a bud

A fan

A fan having fun

A fan having much fun

A fan having much fun in match

Tense vowels and Lax vowels

The difference between tense and lax vowels is made according to how much muscle tension or movement in the mouth is involved in producing vowels (Ohata, 2004). The tense vowels are articulated with more muscle tension than the lax vowels. Since there is no distinction between tense and lax in Japanese vowels, Japanese learners tend to pronounce both short vowels and long vowels in a same way (i/I, e/ε, u/ʊ, o/ɔ). Although Japanese has short vowels (1 mora) and long vowels (2 mora), the vowel quality does not change between a short vowel and a long vowel (e.g., short vowel=/o/ vs long vowel =/oo/, short vowel=/e/ vs long vowel=/ee/). The only difference between short vowels and long vowels is duration. (e.g., *Koukou* (High school) is pronounced as *Kookoo*, *Eigo* (English) is pronounced as *Eego*.) On the other hand, in the English

vowel system, the placement of the tongue creates a different sound such as /o/ vs /ow/, /e/ vs /ey/. As the result, Japanese learners often produce the tense and lax vowel pairs of English as if they were the same vowels (Ohata, 2004); for example, *sheep* /ʃip/, *pool* /pul/ may be pronounced in the same way as such words *ship* /ʃip/, *pull* /pul/ respectively.

/iy/ vs /ɪ/

Both sounds are high front vowels, that is, the tongue should be positioned high in the mouth, and shifted toward the front. In the tense vowel /iy/, the tongue is positioned a little higher than the lax vowel /ɪ/ (Figure 4). Another important difference is whether lips are tensed or not. The lips should be tensed when /iy/ is produced, compared to when the lips should be relaxed in the /ɪ/ sound production. Japanese /i/ is close to English /i/, but it is pronounced shorter than English /i/ and the lips are not as spread as in English. Since Japanese /i/ is not a tensed vowel, it may sound the same as English /ɪ/ sound, which can cause misunderstanding and miscommunication.

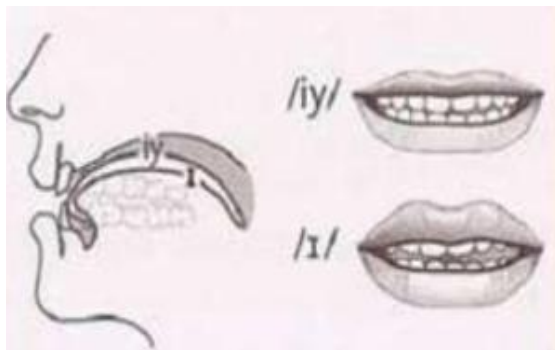


Figure 4: The articulation position of /iy/ vs /ɪ/ sound

Effective teaching strategies

First, show Japanese learners the figure of the articulation position of /iy/ and /ɪ/ (Figure 4), and introduce the differences in the tongue and the lips position among these two sounds. Then, practice listening and pronouncing minimal pairs with the audio sounds; for example, *bean* /bin/ vs *bin* /bɪn/, *cheap* /tʃip/ vs *chip* /tʃɪp/, *eat* /it/ vs *it* /ɪt/. After that, have learners listen to word

pairs such as, *big deal*, *these things*, *little meal*, and indicate which word contains which sound, and read them aloud.

/uw/ vs /ʊ/

Both sounds are high-back vowels, therefore the tongue should be lifted high and shifted to the back. When lax vowel /ʊ/ is pronounced, the tongue should be positioned slightly lower than /uw/ (Figure 5). The major difference between these two sounds comes from the shape of the lips. Both sounds are rounded vowels, but the lips are tensed and small circle in /uw/ sound, while the lips are relaxed and loose circle in /ʊ/ sound. Japanese /u/ is called Compressed vowel /u^ɸ/, which is not rounded and the inner surfaces of lips are not exposed. Japanese learners tend to prefer to use /uw/ in place of /ʊ/, since /ʊ/ is more centered, more relaxed than /uw/ and close to the mid central vowel position in which Japanese vowels do not exist.

In addition, the English spelling system might get Japanese learners confused. Japanese writing system has a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and characters. Each sound represents one syllable; for example, America is spelled アメリカ (*A-me-ri-ka*) in Japanese. On the other hand, there is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and characters in English. The same letter does not always represent the same sound, at the same time, the same sound is not always represented by the same letter (Umera-Okeke, 2008). Therefore, even though the words are spelled “o-o” for both words such as, *book* /bʊk/, *boot* /bʊt/, the sounds are pronounced differently.

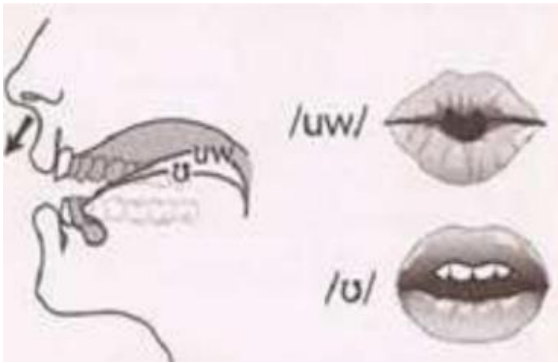


Figure 5: The articulation position of /uw/ vs /ʊ/ sound

Effective teaching strategies

First, show Japanese learners the figure of the articulation position of /uw/ and /ʊ/ (Figure 5), and introduce the differences in the shape of lips among these two sounds and Japanese /u^β/. Then, practice beginning with the tense rounded position of /uw/, and then loosen the muscles and relax the rounded lip position somewhat (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). Have learners practice listening and pronouncing minimal pairs with the audio sounds; for example, *pool* /pul/ vs *pull* /pʊl/, *food* /fud/ vs *foot* /fot/, *suit* /sut/ vs *soot* /sot/. After that, have learners listen to word pairs such as, *good food*, *full room*, *blue book*, and indicate which word contains which sound and read them aloud.

Consonants

The major differences in consonants between Japanese and English are the following three areas: 1) Japanese liquid does not exactly correspond to the English liquid /r/ or /l/ (Ohata, 2004). 2) Voiceless stop consonants are aspirated in English and unaspirated in Japanese (Franklin & McDaniel, 2016). 3) Japanese fricatives do not contain labiodental /f/, /v/ and interdental /θ/, /ð/ (Franklin & McDaniel, 2016). There are 24 consonant phonemes in English while there are only 14-16 consonants in Japanese (Smith, 2012). Although many of the consonants in Japanese are

produced in the same manner as in English, there are key differences in terms of aspiration and tongue position. This results in some significant points of contrast between English and Japanese pronunciation of English (Smith, 2012).

1) /r/ vs /l/

/r/ and /l/ sounds are considered as the toughest to produce and distinguish between two sounds among English consonants for Japanese learners. English /r/ is usually produced without the tip of the tongue coming in contact with the alveolar ridge, while English /l/ is made with the tip of the tongue touching the alveolar ridge. In Japanese consonants, there is no /l/ phoneme, and Japanese /r/ is produced by a very quick tap of the tongue tip on “the post-alveolar ridge” which is also called /ɾ/ “alveolar flap”. This sound is similar to /d/ or /t/ sound in American English because the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge. In other words, the tip of the tongue touches the post-alveolar ridge in Japanese /r/ production which is similar to producing the English /l/. The only difference between these two sounds is the position where the tip of the tongue touches. This results in the great confusion for native English speakers when distinguishing English words produced by Japanese learners such as, *light* vs *right*, *play* vs *pray*.

Effective teaching strategies

First, show Japanese learners the clear difference in the tongue position between /l/ and /r/ and have them compare these two sounds with Japanese /r/ (flap) with the figure of the articulation. In order to produce /r/ sound, have them try to add English /u/ sound quickly before producing /r/, so that Japanese learners can prepare the shape of their mouth easily (e.g., “u”right, “u”rice). Give learners the listening comprehension quiz with sentences that include minimal pairs, for example;

It looks long/wrong to me.

I went for a walk in the lane/rain.

Can you collect/correct the report for me?

Then, have them practice listening and pronouncing minimal pairs such as, *pray* vs *play*, *brush* vs *blush*, *grow* vs *glow* with the audio file.

2) /p/ vs /b/

Since initial voiceless stops are unaspirated in Japanese, Japanese learners tend to confuse initial /b/ in English with Japanese unaspirated /p/. English voiceless stop /p/ sound is usually aspirated in English when it appears at the beginning of the word or at the beginning of a stressed syllable. /p/ is produced with lips closing and then you release the air with a puff /p^h/. On the other hand, Japanese /p/ sound is produced without a puff as an unaspirated sound. Therefore, Japanese tend to substitute the /p/ with the voiced unaspirated /b/ sound in English. Japanese learners may pronounce words such as, *pin* /pɪn/ and *bin* /bɪn/ as in a same manner.

Effective teaching strategies

In order to have Japanese learners understand what a puff of air is, hold a piece of tissue paper in front of their mouth and pronounce /p/ and /b/ one after another. When the learners produce the /p/ sound, they should be able to feel a puff of air and the paper should move. Then, have them do the listening comprehension quiz with the following worksheet (Figure 6). Read each sentence including the words that have either /p/ or /b/ and have them choose which word is pronounced.

<i>/p/ (put) vs /b/ (but)</i>		A	B
1	There was a under the tree.	pear	bear
2	It was a really good	pie	buy
3	There was dirt all over the	peach	beach
4	I'll make sure they're in the	pack	back
5	Can you bring the over here?	pole	bowl
6	He had always hated	peas	bees
7	I've never had a	pet	bet
8	There was a towel lying next to the	path	bath

Figure 6: Practice for /p/ vs /b/

To practice distinguishing between two sounds, have them whisper a /b/ sound to discover a /p/ sound. Start with whispering a word with /b/ such as “bay” and move on to the word with /p/ such as, “pay” (bay-bay-pay-pay). When /b/ sound is pronounced as a whisper, the /p/ sound is produced.

3) Fricatives

In English, there are nine fricatives, while Japanese has only five (Kavanagh, 2007). Japanese fricatives do not contain labiodental /f/, /v/ and interdental /θ/, /ð/ (Franklin & McDaniel, 2016). Therefore, Japanese learners tend to substitute /f/ with Japanese voiceless bilabial fricative /ɸ/, /v/ with /b/, /θ/ with /s/ or /t/, /ð/ with /z/ or /d/. Most Japanese speakers have a great difficulty pronouncing /v/ (Kavanagh, 2007). Japanese has a similar counterpart to the /v/ sound, a bilabial sound /b/, which is produced with both lips. Hence Japanese pronunciation of *very* and *berry* may sound quite similar to a native English speaker.

Effective teaching strategies

To practice the sound of /b/ and /v/, show Japanese learners the figure of the articulation position of /b/ and /v/ and explain that /b/ sound is similar to Japanese ㄅ sound which is pronounced with two lips together in comparison to /v/ sound which is pronounced with the top

teeth touching the bottom lip. After that, have them practice minimal pairs and tongue twisters; for example, *best* /best/ vs *vest* /vest/, *boat* /bout/ vs *vote* /vout/, *ban* /bæn/ vs *van* /væn/ and *Betty loves the velvet vest best.*, *Bobby loves bowling.*

Syllable Types

Differences in syllable types between Japanese and English can cause misunderstanding for native English speakers. English syllable types vary, while Japanese allows open syllables only. English allows a wide variety of syllable types (Ohata, 2004) such as V, CV, CVC, CCVC, CCCVCC, while Japanese has only open syllables, represented as CV (Carruthers, 2006). In addition, Japanese lacks consonant clusters in word-initial or word-final positions. So Japanese learners tend to insert a vowel between consonants or add vowels at the end of English words to approximate Japanese syllables (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). Japanese learners may pronounce English words such as, *play*, *salad*, as *pulei*, *salada*, respectively.

Effective teaching strategies

To avoid the vowel insertion, show Japanese learners the differences between syllable types in English and Japanese with a lot of example words and explain English words can end with both a consonant and a vowel. After that, help them understand how the vowel insertion occurs by showing common mistakes of the vowel insertion by Japanese learners; for example, *play*/plei/- *pulei*, *salad*/sæləd/-*salada*, *sport*/spɔrt/-*supo:tu*. Lastly, have them practice reading sentences that include words that end in a consonant or consonant cluster, such as, *We play tennis.*, *I eat salad at school for lunch.*

Conclusion

To reduce the accent in English, it is important to be aware of possible difficulties and errors of pronunciation for Japanese learners of English with knowledge of phonetic characteristics of

both English and Japanese. It is also important to remember the fact that inaccurate pronunciation can cause miscommunication or misunderstanding. As there are great differences in the shape of mouth and tongue position to produce a sound between English and Japanese, not only auditory materials, but also visual materials can help Japanese learners and instructors overcome these issues.

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