

Approaching Pronunciation in a Japanese University Classroom

シチュール・マーケル

Stew Markel

This article presents several approaches to providing intermediate second language learners with the tools they need to communicate clearly in English. The author gives an overview of one course with the rationale and specific classroom practices for introducing concepts in phonetics and phonology, as well as self-monitoring of pronunciation. The course emphasizes clear and successful communication over native or native-like pronunciation, and students are trained to develop self-monitoring skills in order to improve and refine their English pronunciation outside of class. The author concludes with ideas for future research in the area of pronunciation training for Japanese university students.

Key Words : Pronunciation, Self-Monitoring, Classroom Practice, Materials Development

Introduction

We believe that what the learner does to learn a foreign language is far more important than what the teacher teaches (Hayes et al., 1997).

The teaching of pronunciation has been treated using a number of approaches in a variety of different contexts (Cele-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2014). In many classrooms, English continues to be taught with native or native-like pronunciation as the goal, although research has demonstrated that acquiring this type of pronunciation to be very difficult and perhaps unnecessary (Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). This is especially true for adult learners, for example, students at the university level. This article presents the author's attempt to develop a course that combines the introductory study of linguistic topics (phonology and phonetics) with the practical application of student centered pronunciation training (self-monitoring). Together these two aspects of the course should assist teachers and students approach the teaching and learning of pronunciation from a variety of perspectives, with

the goal of clear communication rather than a strict native or native-like accent.

Special Topics Courses

In the second year of the School of Policy Studies English Language Program (SPS-ELP) upper stream students are able to self-select a Special Topics course which is designed to deliver language instruction through content. Associate Lecturer of English (ALE) instructors are free to organize their courses around specific content while incorporating and reutilizing skills students have learned in the core English Communication (EC) curriculum. Over the past two years these courses have included a number of topics: Anthropology, Environmental Ethics, Art History, Poetry, Future Japan, etc. In theory, students are given the opportunity to self-select the Special Topics course that interests them. In practice, it appears that few students select their course based on their interest level in the subject; other factors, such as individual instructor or peer group may play a larger role. However, the majority of students are simply placed randomly in Special Topics courses

to ensure even class sizes of 25 to 29 students. As a result, ALEs must develop curriculum and materials that can meet a range of proficiency as well as levels of interest. The subject of this article, a Special Topics course titled *The Sounds of English*, was developed in order to address both students interested in linguistics as well as offer practical instruction in pronunciation.

The Sounds of English Course

The Special Topics course discussed in this article attempts to offer students an introduction to some basic concepts in phonology and phonetics at the same time provide practical instruction in listening for particular sounds and practice with the production aspects of pronunciation. The course is centered on how sounds are organized, used, and produced in spoken English. Topics covered include an introduction to linguistics, methods of representing sounds, varieties of English, and the pronunciation differences between English and Japanese. In addition, the course also provides strategies and techniques for the improvement and clarity of spoken English. The course material is centered on the segmentals and suprasegmentals most commonly identified in making speech more understandable (Miller, 2007). These are introduced in the course sequentially in the following order: word stress, consonant sounds, final sounds and linking, thought groups and focus words, sentence stress and unstress, vowel sounds and reductions, and intonation. A special emphasis is given to training students to develop self-monitoring skills in order to improve and refine their English pronunciation outside of class. The goals of the course state that students will be able to: develop new speech habits, understanding that this takes time, patience, and practice; identify and practice word, phrasal and sentence stress, intonation and comprehensible pronunciation; evaluate and prioritize areas of communication to improve through self-monitoring and reflection; create a personalized plan for pronunciation enhancement.

It is important to note that this course is not designed or intended to reduce or eliminate accents. This idea is reinforced with students early in the course by raising awareness of the variety of and differences between dialects of English, as well as emphasizing clear communication over native

or native-like speech. In the very first classroom activity students are asked to consider a list (Miller, 2007) of possible pronunciation goals:

- A. To sound like a native speaker
- B. To communicate in English more clearly and naturally
- C. To speak so that others can understand me easily
- D. To gain confidence when speaking English
- E. To improve my job opportunities or job skills

Students are tasked with identifying which goals are personally important as well as those goals that may be unimportant or unrealistic. It is not surprising that many students self-identify item A as a very reasonable and achievable goal, something most language teachers and the current literature would discourage (Jenkins, 2003; Kang, 2010). Students are reminded throughout the course that native or native-like speech is not necessary or realistic for most second language learners. The purpose of each activity and exercise is to promote clear and successful communication, regardless of accent.

Phonology and Phonetics

Each of the segmentals and suprasegmentals introduced in the course is first discussed from a linguistics perspective. This starts by having students listen to an example recording or the instructor reproducing a particular feature of pronunciation. The example may consist of minimal pairs, asking students to identify the sound differences, or an extended listening segment, which highlights the feature. Depending on the feature being addressed, students may be introduced to basic linguistic terms or concepts, for example, voiced/voiceless consonant sounds, stressed/unstressed syllables, rising/falling intonation, and schwa. Some students may have had exposure to these concepts in previous language learning courses, but even for students unfamiliar with phonology or phonetics hearing the examples will often quickly clarify any misunderstanding. Once students have a clear grasp of the terms/concepts and can identify the feature from a recording or spoken by the instructor, they are asked to try and recreate it for each other. The goal is not perfect replication or choral repetition, but for students to practice their observation skills by

listening for a specific pronunciation feature. This is the first step in implementing the self-monitoring practice mentioned below.

One question raised in the materials development process was whether to require students to know and use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). While the IPA is a good resource for describing and explaining many of the phonemes of spoken language, implementing it in the classroom proved difficult. The first problem was the variety of modified IPA symbols used in student's dictionaries and previous textbooks. Secondly, although some Japanese students are familiar with the IPA from previous coursework, many were not. The IPA is briefly previewed as part of the course along with other systems for representing phonemes, but none are required learning. The author found The Color Vowel Chart, which allows for discussion and description of vowel phonemes without the use of symbols to be particularly effective. Utilizing colors and key words to illustrate the vowel phonemes of English, this tool offers students an alternative way to identify sounds (Thompson & Taylor, n.d.).

Self-Monitoring

Improving both the receptive skill of listening and production skill of speaking can be a challenging task for any second language learner. This can be further complicated by variations in accent and dialect. Self-monitoring is a method students can use to focus attention and build understanding of some features of the language they are learning. Research has demonstrated that self-monitoring not only gives students important feedback concerning the specifics of second language production, it can also encourage a student's motivation and confidence (Ellis & Zimmerman, 2001). While all learners may use self-monitoring to some degree, this course is intended to benefit students by utilizing self-monitoring skills to become more confident and effective speakers through first listening and then modifying the sounds and rhythm patterns of their spoken language. Utilizing self-monitoring techniques is one option instructors can use to assist students outside the classroom. By influencing what students do independently teachers can help students make significant and long-term modifications to their pronunciation.

Implementing effective self-monitoring requires learners to process information through a feedback loop (Zimmerman, 1989). For this course students are introduced to the model outlined in Figure 1. While this is not an innovative model for developing self-monitoring in second language learners, university language courses rarely present it overtly. This course explicitly asks students to understand the cycle in terms of overall L2 development and then specifically apply it to themselves. Initially students are tasked with understanding and practicing the *listen* and *analyze* steps. As mentioned above, in class students are asked to listen and analyze recordings or the instructor's replication of pronunciation features. Next, students listen to each other recreate the feature and use their analytical skills to attempt to differentiate between two contrasting features. This implements the *speak* step of the feedback loop. For example, if the feature being addressed is word stress, Student A is given the choice to say one of two words, similar except for the syllable stress pattern. Student B then must determine which of the words was said and give an appropriate response. It is important for the instructor to remind students that they should not simply guess, but ask their partner to repeat if necessary. Thus, asking students to practice the *correct* step of the self-monitoring cycle.

At the end of each lesson students are reminded of the self-monitoring feedback loop and tasked with using it outside the classroom. The challenge is having students produce and listen to their own language in order to analyze and make corrections to their pronunciation. One suggested activity is

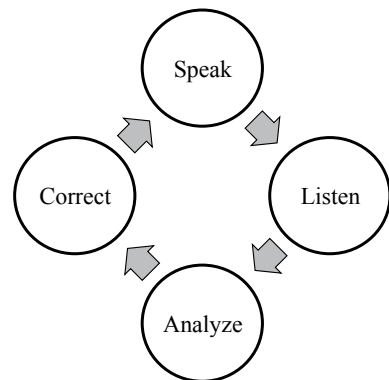


Figure 1: Self-monitoring cycle introduced for the development of spoken language.

for students is to record themselves using a smart-phone or voice recorder, and listen to the playback monitoring for specific pronunciation features. The author has used this type of *audio journal* activity in the past with some positive results. Unfortunately, class sizes (25-29 students) prohibit the instructor from implementing this assignment in an SPS-ELP Special Topics course. However, getting students to focus on their own spoken language and demonstrate their attentiveness to the fundamentals of self-monitoring was seen as important when developing the assignments and assessments for this course.

Assignments and Assessments

Rather than strictly measuring student achievement with assessments that grade improvements to pronunciation, assignments in this course were developed with both learning and demonstration of self-monitoring techniques in mind. Assessment in this course consists of five homework assignments, three speaking tests, two writing assignments, and a student participation grade. The homework assignments are audio recordings asking students to complete worksheets connected with the in-class activities of identifying (*listen*) and differentiating (*analyze*) between pronunciation features. Students are graded on correctly recognizing minimal pairs, completing cloze texts, or similar activities. The speaking tests consist of pair or group discussions monitored by the instructor. Predetermined test questions ask students to elicit (*speak*) concepts from the course related to linguistics as well as self-monitoring. Test takers are asked to monitor (*listen*) and reflect on each other's pronunciation (*analyze*) while the instructor will ask for clarification of targeted pronunciation features (*correct*). The writing assignments are multi-paragraph personal essays asking students to reflect on short and long-term goals for improving their English early in the course, and their progress in English at the end of the course. Finally, the student participation score is the same as found across all SPS-ELP courses and utilizes two components: attendance, worth 20% of the score; and learning behaviors, worth 80% of the score. Consistent attendance and positive learning behaviors in class are seen as critical to building the self-monitoring skills outlined above.

Conclusion

The course described in this article is presented as one example of incorporating phonology and phonetics into the training of speaking for English language learners. The unique circumstances presented by the SPS-ELP Special Topics course allowed the author to attempt to integrate concepts of linguistics while also providing students with opportunities to develop and practice their English pronunciation. Self-monitoring is introduced as the primary method students can utilize to work on issues of clarity and pronunciation outside of class. Throughout the course clear communication is emphasized over native or native-like accent. The author believes that students who have some understanding of basic phonetics and phonology concepts, as well as training and practice in self-monitoring, will be better prepared to continue improving their overall communication skills, including pronunciation. One important issue not significantly addressed here is the subject of Japanese student's beliefs and attitudes towards learning English pronunciation and their own pronunciation of English. Previous research suggests that students around the world place a high value on pronunciation training and perceive particular accents as ideal models (Nowacka, 2012). Furthermore, research in Japan has looked at university students' feelings toward varieties of English and examined their approaches to both native and nonnative accents (Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995). The author plans to conduct further research in these areas in order to compare the results of students in this class to English language learners in other regions as well as the previous research on Japanese students.

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