English Pronunciation Made Easy

Timothy D. Boyle

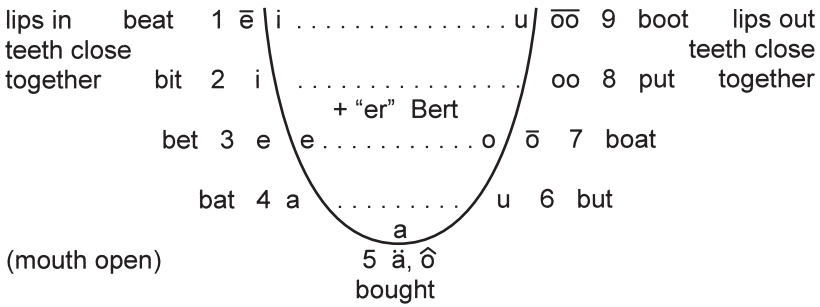
The following is a simplified system I have developed that is designed to help non-native speakers of English better understand how vowels and consonants are pronounced in standard American English. While one can't easily demonstrate sounds via written symbols, I will attempt to lay out the basics of this system in hopes that other teachers of English as a foreign language can benefit from this system in order to help those learning English better visualize what is going on when they try to pronounce English sounds. In the first half of this essay, I will deal with vowel sounds, followed in the second half by methods I have found helpful in teaching Japanese to pronounce the several consonant sounds important to English that are not part of the Japanese phonetic system.

Vowel Sounds

I have experimented with my vowel pronunciation system in numerous English classes, and have frequently observed that the students find this system much easier to understand and apply than the system used in Japanese schools, which utilizes complex linguistic symbols such as æ and

ə.

In Japanese, there are only 5 vowel sounds (in "romaji," a, i, u, e and o, as shown inside the U-shaped curve below), while there are 9 basic vowel sounds in American English (plus "diphthongs" — combined vowels) and the "er" sound. Arranging these 9 basic vowel sounds along a large "U" shape according to the degree to which the mouth is opened makes it is easier to visualize. The symbols outside the "U" represent the common symbols used in English dictionaries, but I give them numbers from 1 to 9.



The dotted lines between vowels 1 and 9, 2 and 8, 3 and 7, and 4 and 6 indicate that there is a correlation between these sounds, in that the degree of opening of the mouth is the same, but with the lips being pulled inward (against the teeth) for vowels 1 through 4 and thrust out for vowels 6 through 9. I have not been able to discover a set of consonants that are identical for all 9 vowel sounds and the "er" that are actual words, but the "b..t" combination contains 8 words plus 1 name, and the single exception is a very close "p..t".

If one visualizes the U-shaped curve as a continuous line and pronounces all of the 9 vowel sounds in succession from 1 to 9, beginning

with an "m" sound, it resembles a cat's "meow." This is really a multiple diphthong of 1-3-5-7-9 (using the above numbering system), but in effect, one is sliding quickly through all of the sounds along this curve. Actually, all possible vowel sounds essentially fall along this curve somewhere or are combinations of sounds found along this curve. Of course, various slight modifications to these basic sounds can be made by altering nasal qualities and the like, but for the purpose of simply being able to communicate clearly in English, these are unimportant. There is, however, one important exception to this "U-curve" of vowel sounds, and that is where a vowel and consonant sound cannot be separated. In American English, this basically means the "er" sound. There is no way to vocalize separately the vowel and consonant sounds in this case. So, to go along with a "cat's meow" for all the regular vowels, I add a "dog's growl" (Grrrr!!) to illustrate the "er" sound.

I am not a linguist by training, and so I approach this subject with the objective in mind of simply helping English learners who are likewise not approaching their language learning from a formal linguist approach. I certainly do not intend to downplay the importance of linguistics as a discipline of study, but few if any of my students have studied linguistics other than as a pronunciation system for language learning. As English has many more sounds than the 26 letters of the alphabet can easily represent, various linguistic symbols have been devised to make subtle distinctions in pronunciation. It is my opinion, however, that some of these distinctions are not helpful for non-native speakers and simply confuse them. Thus, my approach is to make an "approximation" that utilizes only the basics sounds and make it as simple as possible.

In checking "Webster's New World Dictionary of the American

Language," for instance, I notice that they make subtle distinctions between certain vowel sounds that are so slight I can hardly distinguish the difference. For instance, the "a" in "father" and the "aw" (written with the symbol "o") in "law" are so close in my way of thinking (and pronunciation) as to be indistinguishable. Of course, if a British style of pronunciation is used, then the vowels sounds in these two words are quite distinct, which is why these symbols can be quite confusing even for native speakers of English. (Which version of "English" is "native?")

Likewise, Webster's makes a distinction between the "u" in "use" (referred to with the symbol "y$\overline{oo}$") and the "u" in "united" (referred to with the symbol "yoo"). They sound identical to me, as both are diphthongs produced by running together the basic sounds #1 and #9 in the chart above. Perhaps some Americans might make a subtle distinction by pronouncing "united" with a diphthong of #1 and #8, which apparently corresponds to Webster's "yoo," but it sounds unnatural to me, and the distinction is not necessary for communication (which in the final analysis is all that is important anyway).

Also, a distinction is made between the "r-colored vowel" sound in "perforate," written with the symbol "$\underline{u}$r," and the similar sound in "perform," written with the symbol "ər." The only difference I can hear is that the "per" in "perforate" is accented, while that in "perform," is not. Thus, I feel that the use of such linguistic symbols unnecessarily complicates the issue.

I maintain, therefore, that there are only 9 basic sounds plus the "rcolored vowel" (er) that need to be mastered in order to pronounce English vowels properly. All words pronounced in standard American English are made up of these 10 basic vowels sounds plus diphthong

combinations, such as in "bait" (b31t), "boys" (b71z), "slouch" (sl49ch), and "nice" (n51s). Combining with various consonant sounds (which is an additional aspect non-native speakers need to master) and modifying with stress accents completes the picture.

There are numerous variations in pronunciation of words even within the American context, and then when other English-speaking countries are added in, the differences become even greater. They all, however, can be quite closely approximated using the numbering system portrayed in the above diagram. For instance, while Americans generally pronounce "bought" with vowel #5 (b5t), the standard British pronunciation uses a diphthong that can be approximated by the combination 7-6 (b76t). Japanese typically have learned to pronounce this word more like the British way, but have trouble distinguishing between "boat" (b7t) and "bought," which ends up the same "b7t," given there is no #6 vowel sound in Japanese.

As a bridge to consonants, I want to briefly deal with the "y" and "w" sounds, which can be referred to as "hybrid" vowel-consonants. The "y" sound is very similar to the #1 vowel sound, and similarly, "w" is like the #9 vowel. Nevertheless, while approximating "w" as the #9 vowel works well for words on the left side of the "U" vowel chart (e.g. "wheat" (91t), "wit" (92t) and "wet" (93t)), an adjustment is needed for words such as "woo," "wood," and "woe." Expressing "woo" as "99" does not work well, since that would simply be the #9 vowel stretched out, as in an expression of delight, "ooh!" In fact, that is how the Hitachi TV brand "Woo" is pronounced in their Japanese commercials. In spite of the fact that they have the "wa" syllable in their phonetic system (which is basically a "95" diphthong), they have trouble extending that to other vowel sounds. For instance, Japanese have great difficulty in pronouncing "wood" and "wool."

While these can be written in my system as “98d” and “98l,” it is probably better to just leave them as “w8d” and “w8l,” as the “w” sound involves extending the lips out further than the #9 vowel sound to get a true “w” sound.

The same is true of the “y” sound. Approximating it with vowel #1 works well for the opposite side of the “U,” such as in “youth,” which in my system could be represented by “19th.” In fact, it works well for everything other than vowel #1 itself. Otherwise, there would be no way of distinguishing between “yeast” and "east." So, leaving “yeast” as “y1st” and “east” as “1st” seems to be the best way to maintain consistency. So, while “y” and “w” can be thought of as equivalent to vowels #1 and #9, I think it is better to teach them as consonants.

Consonant Sounds

Without a doubt, the two most important consonant sounds that Japanese learners of English have trouble with are “r” versus “l” and “sh” versus “s.” The latter is usually only a problem when combined with the vowel sound #1 (“she” vs. “see”), but as there are many similar words in English that are distinguished from each other only by this sh — s distinction, it is a very important point to work on. Below, I will give some pointers as to what I’ve found helpful to use as exercises when working with Japanese students on this distinction.

First, however, let’s deal with the sound that is most difficult for Japanese to master — namely the “r” versus “l” distinction. Native speakers of English find it hard to imagine why Japanese have so much trouble distinguishing between these two sounds, as they are so very different. The

problem, of course, is that neither of these sounds exist in Japanese, but there is a consonant sound that is more or less in between them, namely the consonant sound that goes with the 5 basic Japanese syllables ら, り, る, れ, and ろ (ra, ri, ru, re, ro). It is unfortunate that the alphabet letter chosen to represent this sound in "romaji" (Japanese written in the western alphabet) was "r," as the Japanese sound is actually closer to an "l" than an "r." Thus, native speakers of English who are unfamiliar with the Japanese language tend to pronounce Japanese words with a strong "r" sound, since that is the way they are spelled in roman letters. A name such as 木村 (Kimura) is typically pronounced by an American "k2m9r5" (with a strong "r" and accent on "m9"), but if the name had been spelled "Kimula," it would actually sound closer to the correct Japanese pronunciation. As we do not have the luxury of being able to change history and redo "romaji" with an "l" instead, the best we can do is simply point out the issue.

As a practice tool, I use the words "rice" and "lice" (along with a joke about the similarity in size and color, with the latter simply have 6 small appendages sticking out from the "grain"). I pronounce the two words in random order asking the students to indicate with one or two fingers which one they hear. I also throw in a "ライス" (raisu) with the Japanese "r" ("l") sound to see if they catch it, which they almost never do. Typically, they indicate they heard "lice," thus confirming that using an "l" in "romaji" ("lomaji") would have been better.

Helping Japanese understand the mechanics involved in producing an English "r" sound is no easy task. I try to get them to mimic an American dog growl "Grrrrr!" (Japanese dogs go "Uuuu!" — vowel 9 lengthened out, the same as Hitachi's "Woo" TV.) If vowels sounds are added to this "er" sound, you get "rrraw," "rrrow" etc. I attempt to draw a diagram of

a cross-section of a mouth, with the tongue placement for “r” and “l” (“r” scrunched up in the back of the mouth, while for “l,” the tongue is curled up with the bottom of the tongue shoved forward against the back of the upper front teeth), contrasting that with the tongue placement in a Japanese “r” (tip of tongue lightly pressed against the roof of the mouth just behind the front teeth). When, for instance, the English word “raw” is pronounced, air is pushed out of the mouth with enough force to be felt if you hold your hand in front of your mouth. However, when “law” is pronounced, there is no sensation of air hitting the hand (which is also the case for the Japanese “ra” sound). Thus, this is a useful way for them to check their progress in imitating an English “r” sound. Can the student feel air on his or her hand when close to the mouth and saying English words such as “role” and “rice?”

Now let’s tackle the “she — see” problem. This one is a bit mystifying to native English speakers, because in the Japanese phonetic system, there is no issue with distinguishing “saw” (s5) from “shah” (sh5), “sow” (s7) from “show” (sh7) or “sue” (s9) from “shoe” (sh9). In fact, these syllables are written differently: さ - しゃ , そ - しょ , す - しゅ. And while there is no “sh3” in native Japanese words, they do use it for words imported from English or other foreign languages, and so they have no problem with distinguishing between “s3” and “sh3” either. When it comes to “s1” versus “sh1” (“see” vs. “she”), however, Japanese struggle mightily, typically reverting to the “sh1” sound for both. It has been so ingrained in their minds from the Japanese language, that it takes constant reminding for them to correct it. One useful practice technique is the following “tonguetwister” : “She sells seashells by the seashore.”

Just as there is an inconsistency in the “s” category of syllables in the

Japanese phonetic system (さしすせそ = s5, sh1, s9, s3, s7 in the standard order they list these five syllables), there is also an inconsistency in the "t" category as well. In fact, there are 3 separate consonant sounds mixed together. In their standard order, they are: たちつてと = t5, ch1, ts9, t3 and t7, which correspond to the English words: "tall," "cheat," "tsunami" (since there is no native English word with the "ts" consonant), "tell," and "toll." To drive home this point, I have my students repeat the 5 Japanese vowels in their standard order (5-1-9-3-7) with these 5 different consonant sounds (s, sh, t, ch, and ts) preceding them (s5-s1-s9-s3-s7, sh5-sh1-sh9-sh3-sh7, etc.).

A related problem occurs when some of these sounds are changed to the "voiced" form (t→d, etc.). I write the hiragana for "sh1" し and "ch1" ち and ask them if they are the same. Obviously not, as they clearly distinguish these sounds. Then I add the "two dots" to each of these symbols to make them voiced じ and ぢ and ask if they are the same now, to which they say "yes." They pronounce both of these as "j1," but if Japanese were consistent at this point, there should be a distinction, since the unvoiced forms are distinct. To be consistent, じ should be "zh1," but they don't use that sound. For English, of course, this distinction is not so important, as there are few real words that are different only in this sense. Nevertheless, there are two sets that I know of, and perhaps there are a few others as well. This particular distinction is apparent in the difference between "measure" (m31zher) and "major" (m31jer, or perhaps "m31j7r" for some native speakers), as well as "version" (verzh6n) and "virgin" (verj6n or verj2n).

Similarly, while す (s9) and つ (ts9) are distinguished in Japanese, their voiced counterparts are not. ず and づ are both pronounced "z9," with no "dz9" used in standard Japanese pronunciation. I only mention this for

completeness sake, as it is not a distinction used in English.

One other "inconsistency" in the Japanese phonetic system that is problematic with respect to English involves the "h" series. The romanization traditionally used for this category is "ha-hi-fu-he-ho" (h5, h1, f9, h3, h7), with the #9 vowel being written with an "f" instead of an "h." Needless to say, "f9," such as in "Fuji," is not at all like a true English "f" sound. Neither is it an English "h" sound either, even though for the other 4 vowels, it essentially is. If we call the "h" sound in these syllables a "hard h," the sound associated with the #9 vowel is a "soft h," with the lips brought back slightly in instead of extended, as in the English word "who." Likewise, the amount of air expelled from the mouth is less with the Japanese ふ ("fu" or "hu") than with the English "who."

Like the unfortunate choice of "r" instead of "l" when "romaji" was devised for Japanese, "f" was also a problematic choice. "Mt. Huji" (with the "hu" part pronounced like the English "who") is closer that "Mt. Fuji," where the sound is like that in "fool." It was perhaps a "foolish" mistake, but we are stuck with it now. At any rate, the "f" sound, along with its voiced counterpart "v," is something that takes Japanese awhile to get used to.

About the only other common sound in English not covered so far is the "th" sound, such as in "think" (unvoiced th) and "the" (voiced th). These are the only consonant sounds in English for which some sort of adjustment needs to be made in order to represent them with the ordinary alphabet. Webster's makes this distinction by writing the voiced version in italics as "*th*" and the unvoiced version as a regular "th". I suppose the voiced version could be written as "dh" or by adding an extra "t" to make it "tth," but some such way of distinguishing would be necessary to write my system on an ordinary keyboard without the need for any special symbols

to represent proper English pronunciation accurately.

I have found that Japanese learners of English find it easier to understand and apply this system of indicating both vowel and consonant sounds than the numerous formal linguistic symbols they were taught in their English classes in school. At least that's what they tell me, anyway. But then perhaps that is just to flatter their teacher in hopes of a better grade!

I would be interested in receiving feedback from others involved in teaching English as a foreign language to Japanese or other non-native speakers as to what you think of this alternate system. I hope you find it useful. You can contact me at boyle@kwansei.ac.jp