

吉備国際大学研究紀要
(人文・社会科学系)
増刊号, 115-122, 2017

大学における英語発音授業

イアン・ウィリアム・ウォーナー

Under-Graduate Level English Language Pronunciation Lessons

Ian William Warner

Abstract

The archetypal 'highly competent', 'comprehensively proficient' foreign language learner-practitioner is able to pronounce words 'correctly', in the 'standard', 'received' Anglo and / or American fashion(s) or in ways deemed 'sufficiently similar' to them. Frequent enough failure to pronounce words in this manner will, whenever sufficiently marked - impede and degrade the quality of effective one and two-way oral communication discourse and - in more extreme cases - at least jeopardize its overall viability. Therefore, all non-native English language learner-practitioners - regardless of their 'current ability level' - should accord a high priority to the acquisition, further improvement / development and retention of 'sufficiently advanced and reliable' pronunciation- enunciation skills. This brief paper firstly restates and clarifies the vital need for dedicated, formal English language pronunciation lessons at university under-graduate level in Japan and then proceeds to outline what the author has come to believe constitutes the best, most practical, viable and effective overall strategy for improving student pronunciation accuracy. It concludes that students likely learn and thus progress consciously, semi-consciously and / or sub-consciously while actively engaged in trial-and-error practice that allows them to become progressively more aware and knowledgeable of problems to surmount and goals to attain.

Key words : English Language Pronunciation Tuition

キーワード : 英語発音授業

1) The Necessity for ‘Correct’ Pronunciation

The archetypal ‘highly’ competent, ‘comprehensively proficient’ foreign language learner-practitioner is able to pronounce words ‘correctly’, in the ‘standard’, ‘received’ Anglo and / or American fashion(s) or in ways deemed ‘sufficiently similar’ to them. Frequent enough failure to pronounce words in this manner will, whenever sufficiently marked - impede and degrade the quality of effective one and two-way oral communication discourse and - in more extreme cases - at least jeopardize its overall viability, no matter how interested, aware, attuned, attentive, supportive and outwardly patient listeners may be and remain. Therefore, all non-native English language learner-practitioners - regardless of their ‘current ability level’ - should accord a high priority to the acquisition, further improvement / development and retention of ‘sufficiently advanced and reliable’ pronunciation-enunciation skills.

All English language learner-practitioners must thus strive, as far as is possible, to further improve their capacity to pronounce both already learned and (when reading text or repeating previously heard utterances) new, alien, unknown words, with sufficient ‘precision’ and thus ‘accuracy’ to ensure that their words and sentences will be ‘correctly’, ‘easily’ and immediately understood on a systematic or near-systematic basis, at least by native and advanced non-native speakers.

In light of the foregoing, there is a fundamental and pressing need for English language instructors at Japanese elementary, junior high school, senior high school and - above all - university levels to devote substantial time, resources and energy to sustained, rigorous (and whenever possible, authentically concerted, collegiate) efforts to ensure that the current pronouncing capability (i.e. accuracy) of each and every non-native student of English reaches, and then remains at, a ‘reasonable’ - and thus ‘respectable’ - or higher, more ‘advanced’ level of observable competency.

The central task or mission of instructors entrusted with ensuring elevation of English language learner-practitioner pronunciation performance is therefore to reduce the frequency with which students can objectively be said to fail to pronounce words ‘correctly’, in the ‘standard’, ‘received’ Anglo and / or American fashion(s) or in ways deemed ‘sufficiently similar’ to them. In practice, this necessitates clearly informing students to sufficient extents via verbal-aural tuition about precisely what speech-sounds and combinations of speech sounds to make, when to make them, how loudly they should be made, how long they should be made for, and to what extent - if any - they should each, preferably be stressed.

As to whether - and to what extent - ‘real-world’ English language instructors - working at undergraduate university level - should also attempt to clearly inform students of pronunciation about precisely how they should proceed to actually produce / articulate voice speech-sounds is - in the opinion of the present writer - a moot, debatable point, owing to the frequent inherent difficulty or even infeasibility of doing so effectively in even a semi- time-efficient manner with any hope of comprehensive success and permanent effectiveness (See below).

2) Pronunciation Practice: Basic Purpose

As a vital first step, it is absolutely necessary for university level English language instructors to try to properly ensure, as far as is feasible, that their pronouncing course students become and / or remain at least ‘reasonably competent’ and ‘proficient’ regarding the correct (or satisfactory) pronunciation of each of the 44 or so English language phonemes (schwa and allophones included) at least whenever they see their corresponding graphemes contained in the great majority of common, one, two, three, four and five syllable printed words. As such, all university level English language students thus

need to be assisted flexibly, in ways that will most effectively and rapidly permit them to acquire and / or further enhance the requisite phonetic / phonemic familiarization knowledge required to ensure this. In sum, the fundamental purpose of entry-level pronunciation lessons and courses must be to strengthen student capacity to firstly correctly equate specific printed (written) graphemes with the corresponding speech-sounds they denote and then secondly to correctly orally reproduce the latter, at least as regards shorter, easier, known and unknown words.

Once pronunciation class students are considered generally, 'for the most part' or 'sufficiently' able to correctly (or satisfactorily) pronounce-enunciate all vowel, r-dominated vowel, consonant and digraph sounds not only whenever they are heard but whenever they are merely seen in printed form and read, instructors can then progress students to more advanced, ambitious and demanding levels of authentic, 'real-life' oriented reciting-based practice, centering on the correct (or satisfactory) pronunciation of similarly common and important but longer and more challenging words. Doing so is likely to build confidence, at least over time.

The current English language pronouncing ability (and associated degree of pronouncing confidence) of new university entrants in Japan can doubtless be said to generally or very frequently vary to a great extent, especially where no student streaming or ability-based selection is carried out, but it is, more often than not, most likely to range from 'high intermediate' or 'low intermediate' to 'elementary' or 'poor' in nature rather than downright 'abysmal' or 'virtually non-existent'. Only very small minorities of university entrants who intend to study English regularly for extended periods of time are likely to fall into either of the last two categories. This being the most likely state of affairs pertaining at most institutions of higher learning in Japan, the exact duration

of the key first stage of any pronunciation course need not be so lengthy. The exact length can and should - of course - always reflect the current ability range of the particular students concerned and ought to be adjusted on a discretionary, class-by-class, semester-to-semester and / or yearly basis, as instructors see fit. Clearly, great care must be taken not to advance too rapidly or too slowly: Doing the former will likely result in one or more currently less able students correctly perceiving themselves to have been wrongly pushed too far, too fast and consequently 'out-of-their-depth' by a misguided or incompetent instructor, while the latter will likely cause one or more currently more able students to conclude with similar justice that they are being 'held back' pointlessly and counter-productively by persons insufficiently cognizant of and / or sensitive to their actual present-day abilities and concomitant educational needs. On the other hand, it is a truism that students are not necessarily or even frequently the best judges of what is best for them - academically speaking - at any given point in time and should themselves feel able and willing to invest some adequate quantity of faith - at least initially - in their instructor's capacity for sound judgment. This being so, pronunciation instructors should take care not to be unduly perturbed the moment they observe what appears to be real actual student unease or discomfort with the perceived excessive difficulty or ease of lesson time instruction, advice, materials, assignments and feedback. Rather, they should determine the appropriateness of their decision and conduct not for the most part on the apparent mood and attitudes of perhaps fickle students but in authentically objective and concrete qualitative and quantitative data and impressions amassed via rigorous monitoring and assessment of actual student pronouncing performances.

When comparatively more advanced students of pronunciation are clearly known to comprise a large class-room majority, initial efforts to ensure correct (or satisfactorily) pronunciation

of all vowel, r-dominated vowel, consonant and digraph sounds not only whenever they are heard but whenever they are merely seen in printed form and read aloud, can be kept quite brief and, to a perhaps great extent, amount to an exploratory diagnostic review and revision stage for instructors and students alike.

Since there is little or no point in giving pronunciation students practice materials that are too easy (or difficult) and insufficiently (or excessively) challenging, I contend that it is best practice - at university level - to employ standard English language foreign newspaper and / or magazine reports and article texts (be they presented in original or abridged and perhaps simplified form) and generally have students read them out aloud for pronunciation assessment and improvement purposes because it is exactly these products that constitute the kind of suitably rich repositories of intermediate and advanced-level vocabulary that approximates ideal material for post-senior high school and university level pronunciation practice.

That the great majority of words contained in the aforementioned media materials may well be new, alien, unknown or, at best, only barely known to students goes without saying and is, in any case, essentially irrelevant as regards the basic reason and theoretical justification for the provision of pronunciation practice. That said, for the sake of clarity and to minimize the potential for misunderstanding, pronunciation lesson students should never be left in any doubt about this very fact. Rather, they ought therefore to certainly be informed and thereafter frequently reminded, in crystal clear language, that correct word, clause, sentence and overall text comprehension are - by definition - in no way any kind of intended or required pronunciation lesson objective.

Pronunciation lesson instructors need to ensure that their students are left in no doubt whatsoever that their sole task

or objective is to improve (and, in the process, honestly reveal at frequent intervals) the extent and accuracy of their phonetic-phonemic knowledge and resultant capacity to output 'standard', 'received' Anglo and / or American style pronunciation - or something deemed 'sufficiently akin to them - so as to be 'tolerable' and thus 'acceptable' to any properly objective but discerning arbiter. However, this certainly is not to say that the most advanced students cannot ever be permitted to attempt to comprehend - at appropriate times - roughly or perhaps even exactly what their pronunciation practice materials actually say and mean, either on a casual, occasional or more regular and systematic basis. They can do so if they wish, voluntarily, as a secondary and unassessed pursuit, outside of lesson time and/or after - and only after - they have comprehensively demonstrated - 'realistically' and 'satisfactorily' - in the considered opinions of those supervising, advising and assessing them, how precisely, accurately and thus competently they can currently pronounce aloud all assigned practice exercise content.

The Nitty Gritty:

Regardless of the complexity level, precisely what does 'best-quality' pronunciation tuition and practice entail and amount to? In the opinion of this writer, the answer is elementary: regardless of particular exercise / activity, it must centre on and revolve around the following core activities: a) the requiring of students to recite aloud in hopefully increasingly confident, bold, audible and assertive fashion (collectively, in groups, pairs and especially solo) - progressively more demanding and challenging printed materials that, nevertheless, at all times can be shown to remain entirely compatible and commensurate with the median degree of class progress hitherto observed; b) the constant identification and correction (via 'model' demonstration) by instructors of 'unacceptably deficient' pronunciation; c) the demonstrating (via 'model' demonstration) by (ideally native) instructors of 'received'

pronunciation; d) the immediately subsequent re-attempt by students to correctly pronounce previously mispronounced target word-sounds.

Whenever - as is usually the case - students initially have, and then manage to retain, 'sufficient' interest and motivation vis-a-vis succeeding in the task at hand, this approach seems on the whole to work well, above all when class sizes are small or medium-sized and each student is consequently guaranteed to be able to do more solo reciting, endure shorter waiting times and receive consequently a greater amount of instructor attention, scrutiny, advice and feedback.

Reference and Text Book Resources:

In the opinion of this writer, the single most important reference publication for persons charged with the improvement of pronouncing accuracy is the latest, 18th edition of Daniel Jones's comprehensive guide to contemporary English pronunciation¹, since it exhaustively catalogues sounds and spellings. The present author rates textbook use as advisable, especially at the initial stage of pronunciation study, but less important and beneficial than aforementioned newspaper and magazine resource utilization. In both instances, careful, judicious content selection and employment is a must.

The Importance of Honest Feedback:

As always, the issuing by instructors of timely, adequate, realistic, measured and appropriately-worded praise, encouragement, chivvying and criticism in response to student pronouncing performance and associated conduct is surely sensible and advisable since it may well serve to raise or maintain spirits and reduce the likelihood of student interest

deflation and disengagement.

Use of Audio and Video Recording Equipment:

In the opinion of this writer, the frequent though not 'excessive' use of CALL room and other audio and video recording equipment (when time and circumstances permit) by both pronunciation instructors and directly students themselves constitutes an eminently sound practice since it allows the former to regularly produce a larger quantity of model visual and aural pronouncing aids (that need not all be made or viewed during class time) and - as or more importantly - the latter to regularly save for archival reference purposes (inside and outside lesson time), their latest pronunciation efforts. Exactly how often such equipment ought to be employed is for each respective instructor and / or each set of students to determine. On the one hand, less self-assured and / or more privately-minded students may well, initially or generally, be weary of preserving (actually or supposedly) less than stellar (or even stellar!) pronouncing performances on file on anything more than an occasional basis, at least or especially if their instructors(s) demand to be lent or given copies of such data. On the other hand, few students will fail to recognise the actual or potential utility of recording their own pronouncing efforts so as to enable immediate, medium and / or long-term private and / or joint review, analysis, assessment and evaluation of their best, worst and median performances and progress.

With this in mind, the present writer contends that best practice is probably to let students normally decide for themselves how frequently they wish to record themselves, at least after he or she has gained a good up-to-date appreciation of their current pronouncing ability levels and collected adequate quantities of recorded data. That said, if a larger number of students opt at any one time to record their pronouncing, efforts, instructors should ensure that the remainder who do not feel the same need reconsider their decision and / or proceed to use their resulting

¹ Daniel Jones (2011) *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*, 18th Edition, Eds. Peter Roach, Jane Setter, John Esling (London:Cambridge University Press)

free time constructively.

Phonetic Symbols:

Since a large proportion or majority of younger, entry-level university students are unlikely to be in any way properly and reliably conversant with or even nominally aware of contemporary phonetic symbols and many will not, for whatever reasons, properly master even a fraction of such in any practical time frame, even if directed with the utmost seriousness to do so, this writer contends that less than elite-level students nowadays may well merely need to be made suitably aware of the existence of today's standard phonetic symbols and be made to understand that it would probably be beneficial and thus wise for them - at a minimum - to become basically familiar with them. However, the central preoccupation of pronunciation lessons, in this writer's opinion, to reiterate, should be to greatly or at least moderately improve student ability to pronounce known and new, alien, unknown printed words as a result of correct grapheme-specified speech-sound production. Furthermore, the development and present day ubiquity of digital hardware and software technologies - most notably computer-based recorded and automated 'voices' and, latterly, real-time human voice recognition software - has surely reduced the everyday salience of phonetic symbols for non-phoneticians. Suffice it to say that students should ideally see phonetic symbols at regular intervals but not allow themselves (or, in class-time, be permitted) to be distracted by them from the core task at hand. In real-life, everyday reading and speaking situations we see and hear only words, not phonetic symbols.

The Inadvisability of Extensive, Overt Articulation Practice:

It is surely generally unnecessary (given median student capacity for accurate heard word sound replication) and very frequently counter-productive - and thus wholly inadvisable

- for English language pronunciation instructors to attempt to tell and show all but the most advanced and accomplished under-graduate students i) how and when they ought to articulate their lips, tongues and lower-jaws in optimally correct 'native' ways, conjunctions and sequences and / or ii) how and when they ought to produce and manage air-flows before, during and after doing so. Why? Such instruction, if it is to be delivered with sufficient rigor, is, for the most part, far too ambitious and time consuming and - it is contended - very unlikely to have much in the way of a positive, beneficial, long-term impact. On the contrary, it is far more likely that such instruction will have a manifestly negative, detrimental immediate and even long-term impact, certainly if attempted rigorously and continued for an extended length of time, since it is unlikely that it will be sufficiently well received, understood, attempted, practiced, executed, remembered or adopted by the pronunciation students concerned. Firstly, the likelihood that targeted undergraduate students of 'median calibre' will altogether welcome or properly understand to a sufficient degree the instructions they receive (especially if delivered exclusively in English) is likely to be very low. Secondly, even if the students have indeed managed in full or large part to properly understand the instructions issued, the probability that they will, even after a great deal of coaching and practice, be willing and able to do precisely as they have been instructed is likewise normally very low. Thirdly, the likelihood that the pronunciation student will remember - let alone tend to permanently embrace and routinely deploy - such unfamiliar and quite possibly demanding, awkward-feeling, confidence-depleting physical practices is again normally very low. For these reasons, such instruction is - at best - likely to have little or no positive impact on the 'every day' pronouncing efforts and performance of all but a small minority of relatively interested, well-motivated, eager, alert and probably more gifted, 'elite' students, and may well do far more harm than good. It is liable, in most instances to make students more rather than less

likely to be overly self-conscious, cautious and nervous about ‘pronouncing correctly’, more rather than less likely to be hesitant, circumspect and error-prone and - as a result - more rather than less likely to view any and all lessons dedicated to improving pronunciation accuracy by such - and other - means as being overly pedantic, tedious, taxing and vexatious in nature.

Instructors - and for that matter, pronunciation students themselves - seeking to ensure optimal student advancement as regards pronunciation (and, by extension, Speaking and Listening Comprehension, et al) focus on and surely experiment with articulation-centred tuition at their peril and need to be aware of the fact. The possibility that attempting to do so may well soon directly bring about significant declines in the rate of student pronouncing progress and even median current performance, rather than precipitate improvement, is - it is contended - entirely real and should be recognized. Telling students in a sudden - and, in a real sense, unexpected, ‘out-of-the-blue’ fashion to even only moderately - let alone drastically - adjust or alter the ways in which they have become accustomed, over extended periods of time, to articulate phonemes, and expecting them to implement such instruction immediately or within a comparatively very short period of time, on a permanent basis, is surely an unrealistic and misguided undertaking, especially when the median current ability level of one’s pronunciation students is moderate, class sizes are large and the overall amount of formal and informal tuition time is considered to be less than optimal.

Expensive two and three dimensional educational diagrams, drawings and computer aided design (CAD) generated renderings (which appear to have ever greater educational potential) can doubtless be very useful but many of the more traditional variety are often, in fact, still quite poorly executed and / or annotated and are frequently quite unclear, hard and

confusing for students and even instructors to comprehend and / or utilise. Finally, even the most impressively helpful (and priced) large 3-D ‘working’ models tend to be of limited utility vis-a-vis student enlightenment, even when operated slowly and carefully and / or studied for extended periods, and may well not be deemed affordable.

Spelling Proficiency:

Expecting even very advanced students to be able to demonstrate a marked ability for the correct spelling of at least shorter, ‘easier’, already known, let alone longer, more difficult new, alien, unknown words, is also considered by the present writer to be a logically less important, lower priority, secondary task, if only due to the long established mass availability of - and access to - automatic spell-checking technologies and the surely incontestably real ongoing decline in the need for most people to write extensively in long-hand to any substantial degree. Even if one adopts a resolutely ‘traditionalist’ stance and insists that a ‘reasonably high degree’ of spelling proficiency ought to be encouraged in - and expected from - many or a majority of students, one is unlikely to believe that efforts to bring such to fruition ought take precedence over attempts to enhance core visual / sight-based pronunciation accuracy. The latter should take precedence over spelling because it is far more important.

Principal Conclusions:

Lessons dedicated to elevating under-graduate university level student pronunciation performance - above all in relation to unknown printed words - are vital and should begin with sustained efforts to ensure accurate identification and oral articulation of component phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Thereafter, pronunciation improvement efforts can be expected to be fairly fruitful providing one opts to make (adequately enthused) students recite as much printed native English language newspaper and magazine content as possible and ensures to detect, identify and draw the student’s attention to

each and every instance of 'serious' mispronunciation / error. For most students, notably the keener and more attentive, this will constitute a valid and solidly beneficial skill and confidence bolstering, if often still somewhat perplexing, educational experience. Skills are acquired and honed incrementally, largely or primarily as a result of trail-and-error attempting, experimentation, resultant mistake-making and reflection. Desired skill attainment goals are eventually achieved via repeated correct execution and fine-tuning of specific optimally functional actions and familiarisation with resulting necessary processes. People learn consciously, semi-consciously and sub-

consciously by attempting to understand and do things. Trial-and-error practice allows them to become progressively more familiar, aware, knowledgeable and thus capable.

Tuition aimed explicitly at correcting actual speech sound articulation is risky and usually likely to be counter-productive with currently less advanced students.

All things considered, tuition intended to improve spelling performance should at all times be treated as a desirable but distinctly lesser, secondary, subordinate, less important venture.