

Current University Students' Views on Learning Pronunciation

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Reference Data:

Kikuchi, T. (2005). Current University Students' Views on Learning Pronunciation. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

It has often been pointed out that after several years of formal instruction many Japanese learners of English have noticeably poor pronunciation and they often find it hard to hold even a short conversation in English. The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent and in what way such views hold true for first year university students. The participants in this study are 294 first year national university students of assorted majors. The presenter asked them questions about learning pronunciation in a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire asked the students about their past experience of learning pronunciation. The second part of the questionnaire asked the students about their current views regarding various aspects of pronunciation. The results of the questionnaire study will be presented and pedagogical implications for teaching pronunciation in the Japanese EFL situation will be explored.

何年も英語教育を受けていながら日本人の英語の発音は明らかに悪く、ちょっとした会話を英語で交わすことさえ難しいと指摘されている。本研究の目的は最近の大学生にとってそのような指摘がどの程度あてはまるのかということ調べることにある。対象となった学生は専攻の異なる294名の国立大学の一年生である。筆者はアンケートの形で英語の発音の学習について尋ねている。アンケートの前半の部分は大学入学前における発音の学習状況について尋ね、後半部分は発音についての様々な事柄について現在の考えを尋ねている。アンケートの結果に基づき、英語を外国語として学ぶ日本の状況においてどのような配慮がなされるべきか考察する。

Several studies in the past such as Tanabe (1992) and Hirano (1996) surveyed how college students learned pronunciation before they entered university and showed that many students did not get enough instruction on pronunciation at junior and senior high school. Especially, Hirano (1996) discussed how such an experience caused her students to hold stigmatized views regarding their English pronunciation and, consequently, lead to their willingness to improve pronunciation after they entered university. In the meantime, the revisions of guidelines by the Ministry of Education (1989), which were effectively implemented in 1994, included the introduction of a new series of subjects called “Oral Communication” in order to improve the oral proficiency of students. Moreover, “The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme” has brought a growing number of native speakers of English to Japanese classrooms since its introduction in 1987 and as of 2004 there are over 6100 assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent such changes have influenced the way pronunciation is taught in Japanese junior and senior high schools and, consequently, what kind of views Japanese university students have with regard to learning English pronunciation. Although the

questionnaire focused on both past leaning experience and current views, the researcher would like to focus primarily on the latter because of the limitation of space. Study of current views has significantly more relevance for students' current learning environment. Knowing students' current views on learning pronunciation can be quite meaningful because, as Horwitz (1988) claimed, investigating learner beliefs is necessary for successful classes.

Method

The participants in this study were first year university students of various majors (humanity studies, education, technology, science, and agriculture). I selected first year students because of the assumption that their memories of junior and senior high school would be more vivid than those of older students. Students were asked to answer a questionnaire distributed by me and colleagues during the period of January and February in 2004. The students answered the questionnaire unanimously. In addition, they answered almost all the questions but there were a small number of survey participants who did not answer some of the questions. Therefore, some of the responses in the data do not add up to 100%. Also, in some sections where students were asked to write comments, responses were summarized into categories that basically have the same characteristics and indicate the number of students who reflect those categories.

Results and Interpretations

What was their past experience of learning English pronunciation like?

Did they receive enough instruction in junior and senior high school?

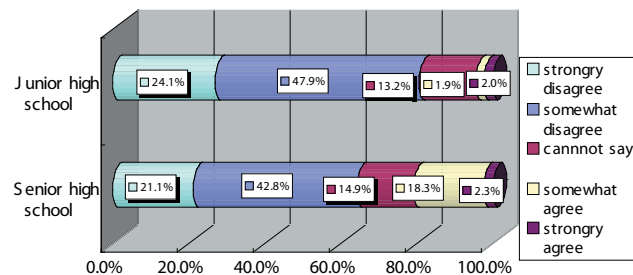


Figure 1. Do you think you had enough instruction in junior or senior high school?

As Figure 1 shows, most of the students believed they did not receive enough instruction on pronunciation both in junior and senior high school. However, more students agree that to some extent they received enough instruction on pronunciation in senior high school (18.3%).

Did they learn the phonetic alphabet?

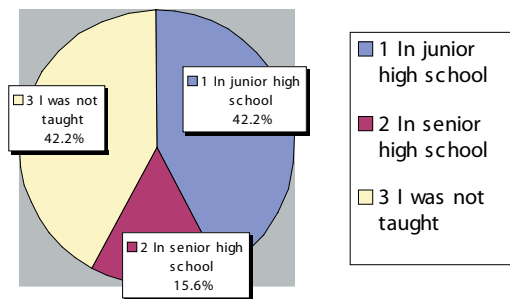


Figure 2. When were you taught the phonetic alphabet?

As shown in Figure 2, nearly half (42.2%) of the students surveyed were not taught the phonetic alphabet. The percentage is somewhat smaller than those in studies conducted by Tanabe (1992) or Usuda (2000), but it can still be said that quite a few students were not taught the phonetic alphabet, although the revised guidelines by the Ministry of Education (1989) recommend teaching it.

Were they taught "Oral Communication" in high school?

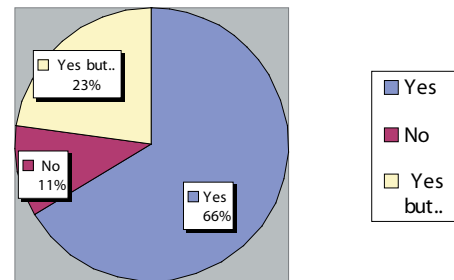


Figure3. Were you taught "Oral Communication" in high school?

This researcher asked about "Oral Communication" because many aspects of pronunciation are most likely to be dealt with in this subject. Nearly 90% of the students said that they took this subject. However, 23% of the students said that what was actually taught was not really "Oral Communication" but other skills such as reading and grammar.

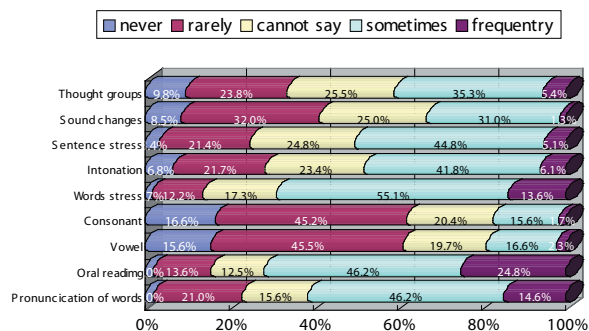
What elements of pronunciation did they learn?

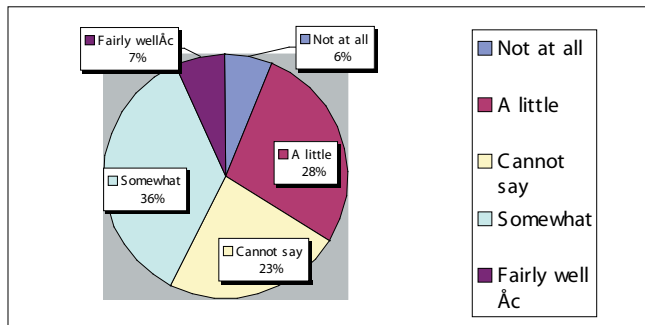
Figure 4. Activities or items related to pronunciation

The most frequent activity the students engaged in was oral reading of textbooks. The total response of “sometimes” and “frequently” comes up to 71%. However, as this researcher has shown above, many students responded that they did not get enough instruction on pronunciation and it implies that, at least on the part of the students, oral reading was not useful to improve their pronunciation. Moreover, only 32.3% of the students feel they were either “sometimes” or “frequently” taught sound changes such as linking, elision, weakening, and assimilation. This implies that the focus of oral reading was principally on pronouncing each word accurately, which Tenma (1982) points out as an advantage of oral reading. Such a tendency is likely to explain the frequently observed phenomena of students stressing each word, pronouncing each word without linking other words,

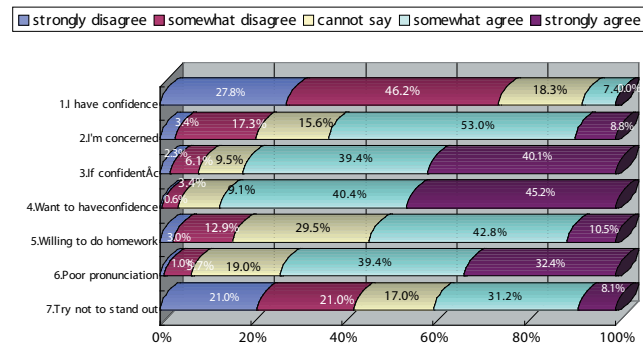
and pronouncing each syllable with equal timing regardless of sentence stress (Watanabe, 1994).

The indication that not much focus was given to each vowel and consonant may reflect the recent trend of teaching pronunciation from “top-down” rather than “bottom-up” (Kono, 2002). However, the data indicate that not much focus is given to aspects like sentence stress, intonation, pausing, or sound changes, which are closely connected with suprasegmentals. Therefore, it is questionable if the top down approach is generally applied in high school. The reality seems to be that even the basic articulation of vowels and consonants was not taught at school, since nearly half the students indicated they did not learn the phonetic alphabet.

With regards to the pronunciation of each word, word stress, and sentence stress, students have been tested in the Center Exam (Kawamura, 2004), which can explain why these items are frequently taught. Indeed, Figure 4 shows that the aspects that are not likely to be tested in entrance examinations (such as sound changes and articulation of vowels and consonants) were not taught frequently.

*What is their current situation?**Can they read the phonetic alphabet?***Figure 5. Can you read the phonetic alphabet?**

To the question whether first year students are able to read the phonetic alphabet or not, only 43% said they are able to read it and only 7% said they are able to read it fairly well or very well. This response is not an unexpected one, considering the small number of students who responded that they learned the phonetic alphabet in junior or senior high school. Although being able to read the phonetic alphabet does not automatically lead to accurate pronunciation, it is possible that not being able to read it has been hindering improvement in pronunciation which, as will be discussed later, can be reflected in lack of confidence regarding pronunciation.

**Figure 6. Issues about learning pronunciation***Do they have confidence in their pronunciation?*

Regarding confidence in pronunciation, as many as 74% of students surveyed said that they do not have much confidence (See 1 in Figure 6). It can be interpreted, as in Hirano (1996), that the students who did not learn enough about English pronunciation at junior or senior high school have entered university without much confidence in their pronunciation.

Are they concerned about their pronunciation when they speak English?

More than half (61.8%) of the students said that they are concerned about their pronunciation (See 2 in Figure 6). This can mean that they are afraid of making pronunciation errors. However, it can also mean that they have potential

to improve their pronunciation because concern for good pronunciation is a factor which affects pronunciation accuracy (Kenworthy, 1987).

Will they be able to speak English if they have confidence in their pronunciation?

Most of the students (79.5%) answered that they would have confidence in speaking English if they were confident in their pronunciation (See 3 in Figure 6). Needless to say, there can be other factors that affect confidence in speaking English. However, lack of confidence in pronunciation is certainly one of the sources that prevent students from speaking English confidently. A pedagogical implication of this result is that building confidence in pronunciation can lead to confidence in speaking English.

Do they want to improve their pronunciation and are they willing to do extra homework?

Lack of confidence in pronunciation may be well reflected in the students' response that they would like to improve their pronunciation. As many as 85.7% of the students said that they would like to improve pronunciation and especially 45.2% of the students showed a strong desire to improve pronunciation (See 4 in Figure 6). Combined with the finding that most students think they will have confidence in speaking English if their pronunciation is better, it is clear that most students want to improve pronunciation in order to speak English with confidence. However, with regard to their willingness to do extra homework or spend extra hours for pronunciation practice, they are slightly reluctant (See 5

in Figure 6). Still, the number of students willing to do extra work is relatively high (53.3%).

Do they think Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?

Table 1. Reasons why Japanese student pronunciation is poor

Reasons	N=492
1 Rare opportunity to speak English	148
2 Not enough instruction in junior and senior high school	140
3 Differences between Japanese and English	80
4 No relevance for entrance examination	64
5 Lack of efforts on the part of learners	43
6 Teachers' poor pronunciation	7
Others	10

Note: As multiple choices were allowed in this section, the number indicates the number of the students who chose the item.

Many students (72%) responded that they think Japanese people have poor English pronunciation (See 6 in Figure 6). This may be influenced by the media but it may also reflect their self-image of not being able to pronounce English. Students indicated the most common reason for poor pronunciation was that they rarely have opportunities to use English (See Table 1). However, as long as students are in Japan, they cannot change the fact that they are EFL learners and it can be difficult for average university students to drastically increase their opportunity to use English. In that sense, it may be that many students feel that it is difficult

to improve their pronunciation as long as they are in Japan. As shown in Table 1, the second most frequent response was that Japanese students do not get enough instruction on pronunciation throughout junior and senior high school. Obviously, such a view reflects their learning experience at junior or senior high school, but from the students' perspective learning pronunciation at this stage is quite important. One surprising comment was that the student's English teacher was actually a teacher of a different subject. Also, as shown in Table 1, seven students pointed out (as an open comment) that many Japanese teachers of English have bad pronunciation. The comment is not insignificant and should not be overlooked because pronunciation teachers are important role models for their students (Gimson, 2001).

During class do they tend to avoid sounding like native speakers?

It is reported that in particular returnee students are careful not to stand out by sounding like native speakers of English because it could be a source of "harassment" (Tobin, 1995). However, student tendency to avoid standing out by sounding like native speakers varied (See 7 in Figure 6). This result may reflect individual character rather than a general trend. In addition, as the students surveyed here are university students, they may care less about standing out in class than younger students. Still, the most common response was that students tend not to sound like native speakers of English (39.3%), which shows there is a tendency to try not to stand out. A possible implication of this tendency is that it is necessary for teachers to create an atmosphere where sounding like a native speaker is welcomed. Even if

the goal is understandable pronunciation, not being afraid of sounding like a native speaker is a sign of integrative motivation and is a factor that affects pronunciation accuracy (Kenworthy 1987).

When should Japanese students learn English pronunciation?

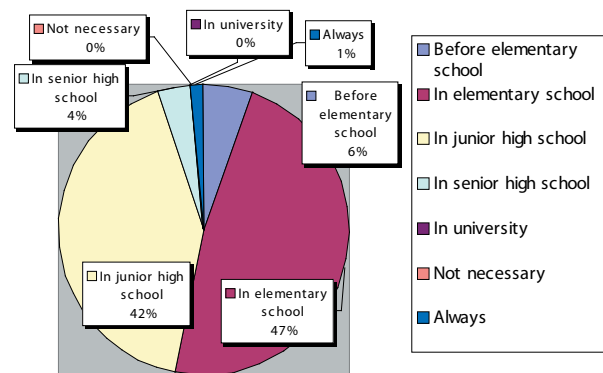


Figure 7. When should pronunciation be taught?

Almost half (47%) the students responded that English pronunciation should be taught in elementary school. Many researchers claim that age is a factor that affects pronunciation accuracy (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Kenworthy, 1987; Suter, 1976) and Leneberg claims (cited in Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996) that it is not possible to attain native-like pronunciation after puberty. Possibly, through

their own experience, the students have learned that in order to acquire good English pronunciation, learning earlier is better.

What should be the goal of their pronunciation?

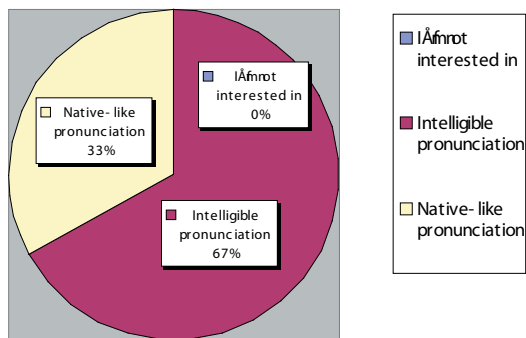


Figure 8. What kind of English pronunciation is your goal?

Recently, intelligible rather than native-like pronunciation is generally recommended as the goal for pronunciation (Kenworthy, 1987; Jenkins, 2000). Hirano (1996) reported that many of her students hold stigmatized views of their pronunciation because of the wide gap between their own pronunciation and that of native speakers, which, they believe, should be their goal. The responses in Figure 8 seem to indicate that the students surveyed have a more realistic view of their pronunciation goals. However, it is understandable how some have already given up

improving their pronunciation, perhaps because they think native-like pronunciation is no longer attainable. It may be worthwhile to further ask students why they think intelligible pronunciation should be their goal.

Open comments about learning pronunciation

Table 2. Summary of open comments about learning pronunciation

Categories and common opinions	N=67
About class	28
(We should learn more about pronunciation.)	(15)
(We should have more opportunities to speak English.)	(10)
When it should be taught	15
(It should be taught early.)	(8)
(It should be taught thoroughly in junior high school.)	(6)
About teachers	10
(Many Japanese teachers have poor English pronunciation.)	(6)
Difficulties involved	6
(I do not know what to do to improve pronunciation.)	(6)
Effects of entrance exam	4
(I tended to neglect it because it was often not the focus.)	(3)
Others	4

Note: Multiple answers were allowed

As Table 2 shows, the researcher has summarized open comments about learning pronunciation into five categories. The most common response concerned how pronunciation should be taught in class, in that the learners surveyed

feel the need for more instruction on pronunciation. The second most commonly selected answer was that learners feel pronunciation should have been taught earlier. In addition, not a small number of students (10) point out their dissatisfaction with their teachers about the way pronunciation was dealt with. Also, six students point out the difficulties involved in learning pronunciation, which implies that in learning pronunciation there are problems students cannot solve by themselves, making teacher guidance necessary.

Conclusion

The present study has shown that despite recent changes in English education in Japan, first-year university students felt they did not get enough instruction on pronunciation in junior and senior high school. Consequently, they did not have confidence in their pronunciation, which could have lead to a reluctance to speak English. Still, most of the students indicated their motivation to improve their pronunciation and to some extent they were willing to spend extra time practicing their pronunciation. These findings suggest that especially at the university level it is important to provide students with some pronunciation instruction, although as pointed out in Matsura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt (2001), teachers often tend to consider instruction on pronunciation less important than their students do. Indeed, some studies, such as Nagasawa (1994) and Kawagishi & Snyder (2004), have shown the positive results of teaching pronunciation to university students. As this study aimed at obtaining a general picture of student views on learning pronunciation, further research is necessary to explore

what caused students to construct such views. However, the findings presented here certainly offer a justification for focusing more on pronunciation, particularly since students feel a strong need to confidently communicate in English.

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Appendix 1

Translated version of the questionnaire

A. Questions about students' past experience

- (1) When were you taught phonetic alphabets?
 - 1 In junior high school
 - 2 In senior high school
 - 3 I was not taught (I learned it by myself or at a different place such as a cram school or a prep school)
- (2) Were you taught "oral communication" in high school?
 - 1 Yes (The name of the subject:)
 - 2 No
 - 3 Yes, but what was actually taught was different from "oral communication" (for example, grammar or reading).
 - 4 In that case, what was the content?

(3) Do you think you had enough instruction on pronunciation in junior high school?

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Somewhat disagree
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Strongly agree

(4) Do you think you had enough instruction on pronunciation in senior high school?

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Somewhat disagree
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Strongly agree

(5) With regard to each item, was it taught or did you practice it in high school?

Pronunciation of words

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Sometimes
- 6 Frequently

Oral reading of textbooks

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Cannot say

4 Sometimes

5 Frequently

Pronunciation of each vowel

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Cannot say

4 Sometimes

5 Frequently

Pronunciation of each consonant

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Cannot say

4 Sometimes

5 Frequently

Word stress

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Cannot say

4 Sometimes

5 Frequently

Intonation

1 Never

2 Rarely

3 Cannot say

4 Sometimes

5 Frequently

Sentence Stress

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Sometimes
- 5 Frequently

Sound change

linking (ex. check out), elision (ex. get together),
weakening (ex. I'll let him know.), assimilation (ex. get you,
miss you)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Sometimes
- 5 Frequently

Dividing thought groups in a sentence

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Cannot say
- 4 Sometimes
- 5 Frequently

B. Questions about the students' present situation

(1) Can you read the phonetic alphabet?

- 1 Not at all
- 2 A little
- 3 Cannot say

4 Somewhat

5 Fairly well or very well

(2) Do you have confidence in your pronunciation?

1 Not at all

2 A little

3 Cannot say

4 To some extent

5 Have much confidence

(3) Are you concerned about your pronunciation when you
speak English?

1 Not at all

2 A little

3 Cannot say

4 Somewhat

5 Very

(4) Do you think you will have much confidence in speaking
English if you have confidence in your pronunciation?

1 Strongly disagree

2 Somewhat disagree

3 Cannot say

4 Somewhat agree

5 Strongly agree

(5) Do you want to have more confidence in your
pronunciation or do you want to improve your
pronunciation?

1 Not at all

2 Not really

- 3 Cannot say
 - 4 Somewhat
 - 5 Strongly
- (6) Do you think that you are willing to do extra homework or spend extra time in order to improve your pronunciation?
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Somewhat disagree
 - 3 Cannot say
 - 4 Somewhat agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- (7) Do you think that Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Somewhat disagree
 - 3 Cannot say
 - 4 Somewhat agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- (8) If you answered yes in either 4 or 5, what is the reason? (Multiple choices are possible.)
- 1 We do not get enough instruction on pronunciation throughout junior and senior high school.
 - 2 Difference between Japanese and English
 - 3 Lack of efforts on the part of learners
 - 4 Pronunciation has nothing to do university entrance examination.
 - 5 We rarely have opportunities to speak English.
 - 6 Others
- (9) During class, do you tend to pronounce English with Japanese accent in order to avoid standing out by sounding like a native speaker of English?
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Cannot say
 - 4 Sometimes
 - 5 Frequently
- (10) When do you think pronunciation should be taught?
- 1 In elementary school
 - 2 In junior high school
 - 3 In senior high school
 - 4 In university
 - 5 Not necessary
 - 6 Others
- (11) As your goal for English pronunciation, what kind of English pronunciation do you want to learn?
- 1 I'm not interested in improving English pronunciation (therefore English pronunciation with strong Japanese accent is acceptable).
 - 2 Intelligible pronunciation that does not interfere with communication in spite of some noticeable aspects of Japanese accent
 - 3 Native-like pronunciation
 - 4 Others
- (12) Give your open comments on learning pronunciation.