Why is their pronunciation so good?

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Reference data:

This paper will discuss the results of a questionnaire conducted on university students about factors that affect learning pronunciation, ideas students with "excellent" pronunciation are likely to share about learning English pronunciation, as well as implications for teaching and learning English pronunciation especially at university level. Several native speaker teachers were asked to choose students whose overall English pronunciation they consider "excellent" through daily interactions with them in and out of class. The term "excellent" is used to choose students whose pronunciation is not only intelligible but "outstanding or well above average" compared to others. The rational for asking native speakers will be discussed later but for the rest of the paper the term "excellent" will be used to refer to such nuance. A common observation is some students who have never lived in an English-speaking country have such "excellent" pronunciation. Furthermore, some students whose overall proficiency in English is not high can sometimes surprise their English teacher by demonstrating such "excellent" pronunciation. Another observation is that students with similar overall proficiency differ in their intelligibility level. The aim of this research is not to test students' pronunciation, but to collect students' opinion on factors that affect intelligibility level even though they share the same Japanese EFL context with other students. The focus is on students' views or attitudes about learning English pronunciation rather than measuring levels of pronunciation, which has been conducted in various research elsewhere (Kawagishi & Snyder, 2004; Suter, 1976).

　本研究においては、学生によるアンケートの結果をもとに発音の「優れた」学生はどのような要素を共有しているか、さらに、特に大学の段階において発音を学んだり教えたりする際どのようなことに注目すべきかを考察する。数人の英語を母国語とする英語教師が授業内外での日常的な会話を通して発音の「優れた」と考える学生を抽出するよう依頼される。ここで「優れた」とは単に通じるということではなく他の学生と比べ「抜きん出ているもしくは優に平均を超えている」ということを意味する。英語を母国語とする教師に学生の抽出を依頼する理由については後述するが、本稿においては「優れた」という語はそのような語感であるというものとする。英語圏の国へ出た経験のない学生の英語の発音が「優れた」ものであったり、英語力そのものが全体的に高くないにもかかわらず、発音は例外的に良いといった学生がいるということは珍しいことではない。また、教室において学生全体としての英語力の差はあまりないにもかかわらず、各学生の発音にはかなりの差があるということもしばしば観察されることである。本研究の目的は学生の発音をテストするのではなく、日本において外国語として英語を学ぶ状況を共有しながらも、ある学生の発音はなぜ良いのかということを探ることにある。学生の発音の正確さを評価するというよりもむしろ彼らが発音学習に関してどのような考え方や態度を持っているかということが焦点となっている。

Kikuchi (2005) has shown that despite recent changes in English education in Japan such as the introduction of a new series of subjects called "Oral Communication" and "The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme," first-year university students generally feel that they did not

get enough instruction on pronunciation in junior and senior high school. The study also shows that even if many of the students do not have confidence in their pronunciation they are motivated to improve their pronunciation and, to some extent, they are willing to spend extra time practicing their pronunciation. These findings suggest that there is much room for improving students' pronunciation. A common observation in classroom is the noticeable differences in the accuracy of pronunciation among university students. At the same time, some students show drastic improvement in pronunciation after they enter university while others remain fossilized. The aim of this study is to explore factors that lead to these differences. By using data from students with "excellent" pronunciation, it is possible to show that some learners can certainly acquire "excellent" pronunciation in a purely EFL context as Japan. Implications for teaching at university level will also be discussed.

Review of literature

Factors that affect pronunciation learning

Individual differences in the accuracy of pronunciation have been discussed in past research (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Suter, 1976). Among these factors, Kenworthy (1987) indicates six categories that affect pronunciation learning: (1) native language, (2) age, (3) aptitude for oral mimicry, (4) amount of exposure to the language, (5) attitude and identity, and (6) motivation and concern for good pronunciation. Of all these factors, teachers usually have no control over the learners' native language, age and aptitude for oral mimicry. The researcher has excluded these items from the questionnaire. The other factors will be discussed briefly below.

Amount of exposure to the language. Many researchers point out the amount of exposure to the target language as one of the factors that affect pronunciation accuracy (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Kenworthy, 1987; Suter, 1976). Especially in an EFL situation, where opportunity to native input is limited, it is significant for teachers to provide an adequate model of the target language in and outside of classroom (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996).

Motivation and concern: Concern for good pronunciation has been considered to affect pronunciation accuracy (Celce-Murcia, et al, 1996; Sutter, 1976). Kenworthy (1987) stresses that a concern on the part of the teacher can instill a similar concern among the learners.

Attitude and identity: Kenworthy (1987) states that having positive feelings toward people who speak the target language is one of the factors that affect pronunciation accuracy. The study indicates that such feelings relate highly to integrative motivation, explaining that learners are willing to identify themselves with people who speak the target language.

Practical issues in Japan

The following section will discuss some problems and specific issues relevant to teaching and learning English pronunciation in the Japanese context.

Phonetic alphabet

The ability to read and understand the phonetic alphabet is a frequently asked question (Kikuchi, 2005; Tanabe, 1992; Usuda, 2000). This is especially important in order to understand how students learn pronunciation in junior and

senior high school level. The issue is significant considering that the revised guidelines by the Ministry of Education (1989) recommend teaching it.

Peer pressure

For returnees, sounding like native speakers can be a source of "harassment" (Tobin, 1995). Moreover, Stevick (1978) points out that peer pressure from other students can hinder students from acquiring accurate pronunciation.

The goal of pronunciation

Intelligible rather than native-like pronunciation is generally recommended as the goal of pronunciation (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Gimson, 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Kenworthy, 1987). However, Hirano (1996) reports that her Japanese students do not seem to recognize the difference between a model and a goal. She further explains that they tend to construct stigmatized views about their English pronunciation by recognizing a wide gap between their own pronunciation and that of native speakers.

Confidence in pronunciation

Hirano (1996) reports that many students, even those whose major is English, enter the university without much confidence in their pronunciation. Some of the reasons pointed out are insufficient training on pronunciation up to the high school level, and the students' recognition of the big difference between their pronunciation and that of native speakers.

Importance of pronunciation for effective and competent communicators

Morely (1994) indicates that intelligible pronunciation is important in order for non-native speakers to become effective and competent oral communicators.

Image of poor pronunciation of Japanese learners of English

The poor or inaccurate (unintelligible) pronunciation problem of Japanese learners has been discussed in several researches in the past (Evans, 1993; Pennington, 1987; Suter, 1976). Hirano (1996), in particular, reports that her students indicate poor or inaccurate pronunciation as a typical characteristic of Japanese learners.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are 59 students in different year levels from national and private universities. Native English teachers were asked to recommend students with "excellent" English pronunciation. The rational for asking native speaker English teachers to choose students is based on the idea that they have intuition to intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000). In addition, the researcher asked them to choose students not through a kind of pronunciation test but through daily interactions with them in and out of class because such interactions are likely to include free discourse, which is considered essential for assessing intelligibility or acceptability of students' performance (Gimson, 2001). Kenworthy (1987) also claims that such impressionistic assessments are accurate and dependable. Since the nature of the study is exploratory, returnee students were not included, to avoid bias results.

Questionnaire

The participants answered a questionnaire distributed by the researcher during the period of July and August in 2005. The students answered the questionnaire anonymously. Some of the questions in the questionnaire are the same as the ones in the researcher's previous research (Kikuchi, 2005) in which he asks 294 first year students with different majors of study some questions regarding learning English. This is discussed below. Pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility vary considerably since the students have different English proficiency. In the previous study, the researcher asks questions regarding the students' past learning experience as well as present situation. For this study, the researcher has chosen questions that deal with the present learning situation since the focus is on what are the common ideas shared by learners with "excellent" pronunciation. The researcher categorized the responses into two groups: Group A, the 294 first year students in the previous study, (Kikuchi, 2005) and Group B, the 59 students chosen in the present study.

Questions

The following questions, except for the last two, were part of the previous questionnaire. The researcher added the last two questions in order to collect data from Group B students with regard to "attitude and identity" and "the amount of exposure to the target language." All of the questions are related either to factors that affect pronunciation accuracy or to the practical issues discussed above. By comparing the responses of Group A and those of Group B to the same questions, it is possible to see what ideas and opinions students with excellent pronunciation have in common. The questions asked are the following.

(1) Can you read the phonetic alphabet?

(2) Do you have confidence in your pronunciation?

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

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

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

(6) Do you think that Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?

(7) 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?

(8) As your goal for English pronunciation, what kind of English pronunciation do you want to learn?

(9) Do you try to have time to talk with native speakers of English?

(10) Do you try to have as much time as possible to listen to English through TV, radio, etc?

(Please refer to the Appendix for a brief description of the questionnaire.)

Results and interpretations

Can students read the phonetic alphabet?

This question is about the relation between being able to read phonetic alphabet and its relevance to the accuracy of students' pronunciation. Figure 1 shows that only 43% of Group A students said they are able to read phonetic alphabet and only 7% said they are able to read it fairly well. On the other hand, Fig. 2 shows that the percentage of students who are able to read phonetic alphabet is much bigger in Group B. Moreover, more students are able to read the phonetic alphabet fairly well in Group B (19%) compared to Group A. This seems to indicate that being able to read phonetic alphabet can be one of the positive factors of "excellent" pronunciation. About one third of Group B students say that they are able to read a little of the phonetic alphabet. The result suggests that many students are able to pronounce English well without dependence on the phonetic alphabet. Being able to read the phonetic alphabet can be helpful but it may not be necessary.
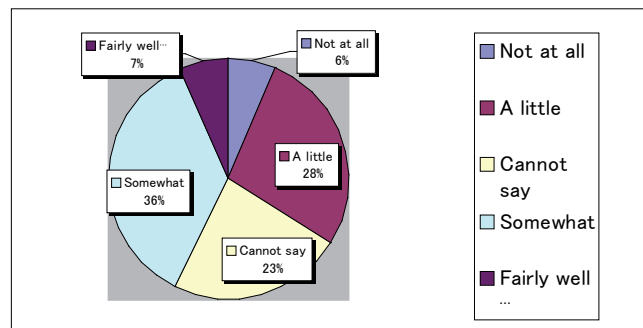

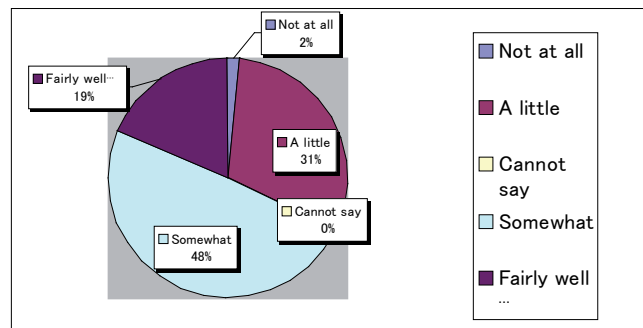**Figure 1: Can you read the phonetic alphabet? (Group A)**

Figure 2: Can you read the phonetic alphabet? (Group B)

Issues about learning pronunciation

Are students concerned about their pronunciation when they speak English?

This question is important to find out the relevance of motivation to the students' concern for good pronunciation. The results show a difference between Group A and Group B. According to Fig. 3, many students in Group A (61.8%) are concerned about their pronunciation. However, according to Fig. 4, there are students in Group B (86.2%) who are concerned about it. More than thirty-seven percent of students in Group B are strongly concerned about their pronunciation, compared to only 8.8% of students in Group A. The result seems to justify the idea that concern for pronunciation is a factor that affects pronunciation accuracy. A pedagogical implication would be that teachers have a significant role to encourage students to be concerned about their English pronunciation through various classroom activities.
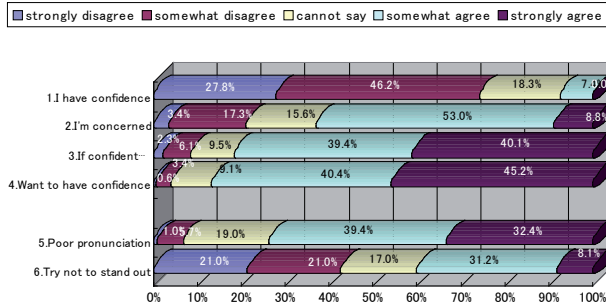
legend: ■ strongly disagree ■ somewhat disagree □ cannot say □ somewhat agree ■ strongly agree

Figure 3: Issues about learning pronunciation (Group A)

legend: ■ strongly disagree ■ somewhat disagree □ cannot say □ somewhat agree ■ strongly agree
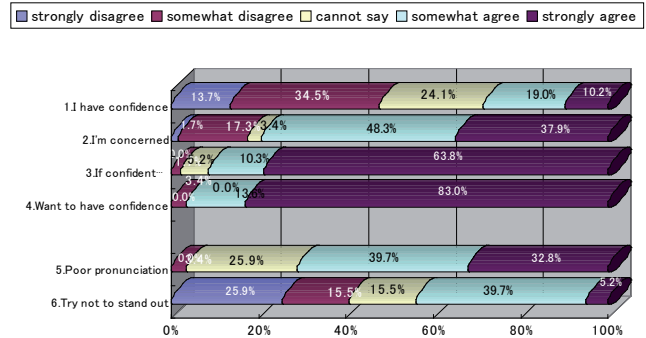
Figure 4: Issues about learning pronunciation (Group B)

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

The aim of this question is to ask students to what extent confidence in pronunciation has any relevance to effective and competent speaker. Most students in Group A (79.5%) answered that they would have confidence in speaking English if they were confident in their pronunciation. (See item 3 in Figure 3). Meanwhile, 74.4% of students in Group B answered in the same way. (See item 3 in Figure 4). It seems that for both groups, confidence in pronunciation is a contributing factor to confidence in speaking English. As to the degree or intensity of feeling, there is a big difference between the two groups. As many as 63.8% of Group B students say that they strongly feel confidence in pronunciation can lead to confidence in speaking English

compared to 40.1% in Group. The result shows that students with *excellent* pronunciation tend to feel more strongly that pronunciation and confidence in speaking English are related factors.

Do students want to have confidence in their pronunciation?

The researcher has raised this question to ask what students want to do about their pronunciation. This question also relevance to motivation and concern for good pronunciation. How students view having confidence in pronunciation leads to confidence in speaking English is well reflected on how the students surveyed want to have confidence in their pronunciation. For both groups having confidence in pronunciation is quite important although more students in Group B students agree with this view (See item 4 in Figure 3 and item 4 in Figure 4). What makes a clear difference between the two groups is that in Group B many more students have a strong desire to develop confidence in their pronunciation (See item 4 in Figure 4). The result suggests that the stronger the desire to improve pronunciation is, the more excellent students' pronunciation is likely to be.

Do students think Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?

This question asks students to what extent they have constructed an image of generally poor pronunciation of Japanese learners of English. With regard to the question "Do you think Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?", there was no difference in the responses of the two groups. Most of the students think Japanese people have poor English pronunciation. The result indicates that students with "excellent" pronunciation share the view that Japanese people's English pronunciation is generally poor but they do not have a particularly negative view toward English pronunciation of Japanese learners.

Do students try to avoid sounding like native speakers during class?

This question is about peer pressure. Returnee students were not asked the question because the question is intended for students in Japanese EFL situation. The result shows that more students in Group B (44.9%) are concerned about sounding like native speakers of English (See item 5 in Figure 5) than Group A (39.3%) are (See item 5 in Figure 4). In addition, more students in Group B (25.9%) do not mind sounding like native speakers of English than Group A (21.0%). The differences may show that Group B students tend to react more sensitively to peer pressure than Group A students. However, the differences are not particularly big.

What should be the goal of students' pronunciation?

The question asks about students' opinion about the goal of pronunciation. This question is intended to find out if students' perception of the goal is related to pronunciation accuracy.
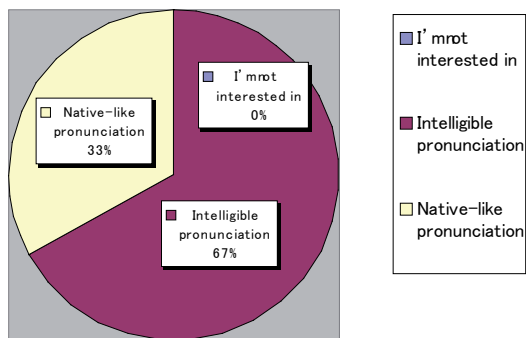
Figure 5: What should be the goal of pronunciation? (Group A)
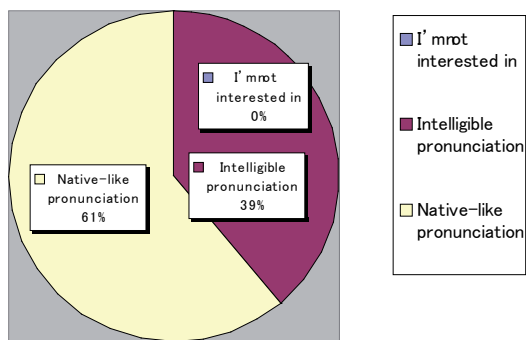

Figure 6: What should be the goal of pronunciation? (Group B)

A comparison between Group A students and Group B students shows that students with *excellent* pronunciation are more likely to choose native-like rather than intelligible pronunciation as their goal for their pronunciation. At the same time, the percentage of such students is not dominant and nearly 40 % of the students of Group B consider intelligible pronunciation as their goal. The result implies that setting native-like pronunciation as a goal is not necessary for "excellent" pronunciation. In addition, for many students, the distinction between pronunciation goal and pronunciation model may not be clear, and it is likely that students with "excellent" pronunciation tend to consider their model as their goal, as pointed out in Hirano (1989). The implication for teaching seems to be that native-like pronunciation can be recommended as a goal of students' pronunciation but it does not have to be imposed upon them since quite a few students with "excellent" pronunciation consider intelligible pronunciation as their goal.

Do students try to have time to talk with native speakers of English?

This question was asked only to Group B students to find out to what extent students try to interact with native speakers of English outside of classroom. The question is related to integrative motivation. Kenworthy (1987) explains learners' positive feelings toward the speakers of the target language are highly related to integrative motivation. Willingness to have time to talk with native speakers of English especially out of class can be considered as one kind of integrative motivation because it is one way of showing positive feelings toward the speakers of the target language. The

question is also related to the amount of exposure to the target language because having time to talk with native speakers increases learners' amount of exposure to the target language.
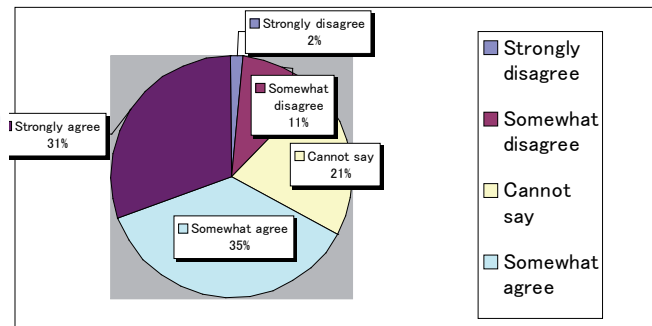
Figure 7: Do you try to have time to talk with native speakers of English?

The result shows that many of the students (66%) surveyed said that they try to have time to talk with native speakers of English. This also indicates that the students' integrative motivation is high and they intend to increase the amount of exposure to the target language through such interactions. The implication for teaching is that it can be indeed helpful to encourage students to have time to talk with native speakers of English in order to improve their pronunciation especially in an EFL situation like Japan.

Do students try to have as much time as possible to listen to English through TV, radio, etc?

This question was asked only to Group B students. The focus is on the amount of exposure to the target language. In an EFL situation like Japan, exposure through interaction with native speakers of English can be limited. Therefore, it is likely that in order to make up for the limited exposure to the target language students try to increase the amount of input through mediums such as TV or radio which are easily available even in an EFL situation.
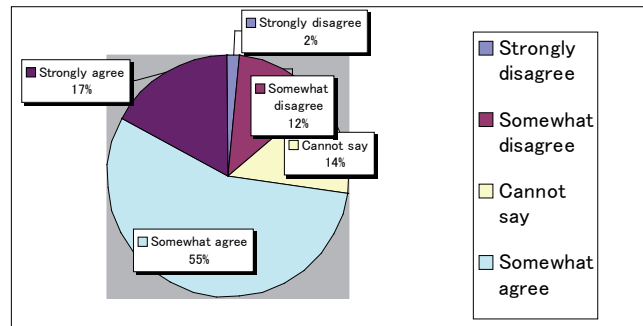
Figure 8: Do students try to have as much time as possible to listen to English through TV, radio, etc.

The result shows that many of the students (72%) indeed try to increase the amount of exposure to English through TV, radio, etc. The implication for teaching would be to encourage students to increase the amount of exposure to

English outside of class through various means in order to improve pronunciation in an EFL situation like Japan.

Conclusion

The present study has tried to show some of the characteristics and ideas that are likely to be shared by students with "excellent" English pronunciation. The results show a profile of such students. Such students are likely to be able to read phonetic alphabet well. They are modestly confident about their pronunciation. They tend to be strongly concerned about their pronunciation and they consider good pronunciation is necessary in order to speak English confidently. Therefore, they tend to be highly motivated to improve their English pronunciation. Their views about Japanese peoples' pronunciation and trying not to sound like native speakers in front of other students are not remarkably different from those of other students. As their goal of pronunciation, they tend to choose native-like pronunciation although it may not be necessary. Their integrative motivation tends to be high and they try to increase the amount of exposure to English through media such as TV and radio. The implication for teaching is that by showing a profile like this teachers can show what can affect pronunciation accuracy in a more a concrete way than, for example, by simply making students do some kind of pronunciation drills. In addition, since the participants of this study are not limited to first year students, it is possible to assume that for some students various experiences or insights they gained while learning at university have been useful for their "excellent" pronunciation.

There are limitations of this study. Although the researcher asked several native speakers of English to choose students with *excellent* pronunciation, there can be differences in the level of judgment. Their intuitive sense is significant but it is possible that one teacher chooses a student that other teachers would not choose. Also, since Group A students are mixed group of students that can include some students with "excellent" English pronunciation, the results might show much clearer differences, if, for example, the group were made up of only students with bad pronunciation. Further study is necessary in order to explore complex nature of describing students with "excellent" pronunciation. However, since it is often the case that many first year university students are motivated to improve their English pronunciation (Kikuchi, 2005), showing them that there are elements likely to be shared by students with "excellent" pronunciation even in Japanese EFL context can be encouraging.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Translated version of the questionnaire

(The original Japanese version has more questions but some of the questions that are irrelevant to this research are not included here)

(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 Japanese people have poor English pronunciation?

    1 Strongly disagree

    2 Somewhat disagree

    3 Cannot say

    4 Somewhat agree

    5 Strongly agree

(7) 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

(8) 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

(9) Do you try to have time to talk with native speakers of English?

1 Strongly disagree

2 Somewhat disagree

3 Cannot say

4 Somewhat agree

5 Strongly agree

(10) Do you try to have as much time as possible to listen to English through TV, radio, etc?

1 Strongly disagree

2 Somewhat disagree

3 Cannot say

4 Somewhat agree

5 Strongly agree