

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Introducing accents

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Reference data:

Bell, L., & O'Dwyer, F. (2008). Introducing accents.

In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

EFL learners in Japan are highly likely to be exposed to Standard American English (SAE) during the course of their studies. Consequently teachers with an accent that is different to SAE often spend the beginning phase of an academic course familiarizing learners with said accent. This process of familiarization particularly involves lessening the anxiety learners may have in regard to a non-SAE accent. This paper presents a series of receptive and productive activities which can be used to minimize the time spent achieving this end. These activities also aim to raise learners' awareness of world English accents and increase the learners' confidence in engaging with English that is spoken in an unfamiliar way.

アクセントの強い言葉話す教員は、しばしば授業の初期段階において生徒達をその強いアクセントに慣れさせようとしている自分に気づく。この記事は、こんな時間を最小限にする為に使われる感受性に富んだ(リスニング/リーディング)、また生産的な(スピーキング/ライティング)方法の一連を紹介しています。これらの方法は世界英語としてのアクセントに対する生徒の好奇心をかきたて、生徒達の苦手意識を取り払う事ができるでしょう。最終的には、この方法により今までと違った方法で話される英語に触れているという生徒の自信が増長される。

Standard American English (SAE) serves as a reference and target norm in formal situations and as a model in the teaching of English in many countries. SAE itself is an idealization and not defined precisely but the model for SAE pronunciation as presented by Kortmann & Schneider (2004) is composed of features that most highly-educated American speakers of English would not recognize as regionally or socially identifiable. Matsuda's (2002) study of seven Japan Ministry of Education-approved EFL seventh grade textbooks found that SAE had almost exclusive representation. From the beginning of English language education through to university level Japanese learners are exposed to SAE with little awareness of the multitude of other varieties of English spoken around the world. Goddard (2001) argues that since most of our learners here in Japan have likely been taught that American English is *the* acceptable English standard, unfamiliar varieties are likely to be seen as *wrong* by learners.

Moreover, the authors have observed that beginning and intermediate Japanese EFL learners are generally not consciously aware of the concept of accents. Such unfamiliarity with accents in the target language can substantially increase learner anxiety, previously unmet, in an EFL classroom situation. The authors, coming from non-SAE linguistic communities (Brisbane, Australia and Dublin, Ireland), have witnessed such phenomenon repeatedly throughout their teaching careers.

The primary cause of this anxiety is the learner's inability to comprehend sometimes even the smallest unit of the authors' spoken English. For example, once a learner repeatedly wrote the letter "a" rather than "r" when the learner was writing a word being spelt out by the Australian author! Telling is that while learners' comprehension of the authors' English was less than satisfactory, the same learners had far less difficulty when exposed to native speakers of English who spoke with an SAE accent.

Further problems caused by English spoken in a non-SAE accent manifested themselves outside of the classroom environment. Both administration and peer difficulties with comprehending the authors' English have led to many misunderstandings. Put simply, this means that other native speakers of English have also experienced difficulty understanding the authors' non-SAE accents. Some have even absurdly ventured that for this to occur the authors must be speaking a different language! However this is not the case – this problem is solely due to the use of a non-SAE accent. Such an absolute is supported by the countless times a native speaker who is familiar with, but does not use, the non-SAE accent "translates" verbatim what the

non-SAE accent user has just said into an SAE accent that is instantly comprehended. One native speaker of English who experienced this commented that peers "don't try to understand anymore" when encountering a non-SAE accent.

Such a reaction from a native speaker of English gives a good indication as to how an EFL learner may feel when confronted with a non-SAE accent for the first time. It also suggests a tendency to tune out input that could be comprehensible, due to heightened anxiety, due to unfamiliarity with varieties of English other than SAE.

The authors have found it is possible to avoid many of the perils of this debilitating situation for EFL learners through the completion of the following very simple orientation activities. The goal of these activities is to raise awareness of accents. It is hoped that by achieving this goal any anxiety toward English spoken with accents unfamiliar to the learner will be lessened, if not eliminated completely.

The activities will present three non-standard accents in a comprehensible (in that the learners are being asked to comprehend what an accent is during these activities) and learner-friendly fashion. Consequently the activities are, by design, not academically orientated. The difference between an EFL activity that is academically orientated and one that is not is that the former could include forays into linguistic quagmires such as phonetics, phonemics and sociolinguistics. The authors felt that attempting to introduce accents in such an academic fashion would only serve to raise even more anxiety in learners.

Outline of activities

Dialect vs. accent

The authors found it very useful to illustrate the difference between dialects and accents when introducing accents. Dialect is based on the words used and accent is based on pronunciation (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2007). The idea of dialect or *ben* in Japanese is familiar to most of the learners and provides a very good lead-in for the introduction of non-SAE accents.

A DVD clip taken from the NHK educational channel *Nihongo de Asobou* children's programme is shown to introduce dialects around Japan. This clip has people from different prefectures greeting old friends using the phrase "long time, no see" in their local Japanese language dialect. After viewing this clip, learners are simply told that what they have just seen are examples of dialects and not examples of accents. It is impressed upon learners that the ensuing material is not concerned with dialects, nor is the new teacher using a different dialect!

Japanese accents

The target topic of accents is then introduced through a series of PowerPoint™ slides and sound files created by the authors. The learners are first shown a simple map of Japan (Figure 1) while listening to sound files embedded into the slide. Prefectures are clearly defined by the use of different colors, with six sound buttons for each speaker, one from each of four selected prefectures (Kyoto, Okinawa, Kagawa and Hiroshima). Three of these buttons are for individual words – *atama* (head), *kokoro* (heart) and *niwatori* (chicken).

These are represented in Chinese characters to facilitate instant recognition. The remaining buttons are for examples of these words being used in sentences. Each bank of six buttons plays the same words or sentences but spoken with an accent corresponding to the region. For example, an instructor using this slide could click on the word *atama* (head) for all four speakers/prefectures thereby enabling learners to listen to the differences in accents. This tool provides enough material for the instructor to show examples of the differences in accents in Japanese and consequently show learners that they most likely already have an idea of what an accent is.

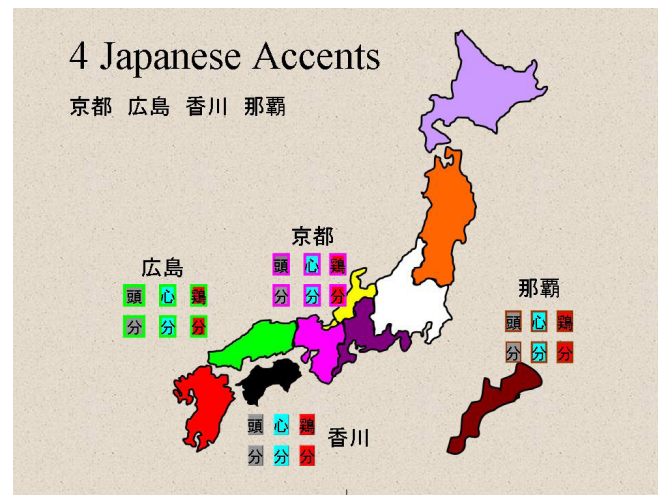


Figure 1. Japanese accents slide, with sound buttons

Different English accents

The next stage is the introduction of six selected accents in the English language (Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Japan and the U.S.) using the previous map-based activity as a template. British and American accents were selected as they represent the main varieties of the “inner circle” of the traditional and linguistic bases of English (Kachru, 1982) that learners will most likely encounter. Likewise learners will have many opportunities to be in contact with Canadian accents. Irish and Australian accents were selected as they are the authors’ accents. A Japanese speaker of English was selected in order to impress upon learners that non-native speaker accents of English are legitimate. It is made clear to the learners that the accents included during this stage are indeed merely selections from a broad range of accents within each country.

The learners are first shown a simple map of the world (Figure 2) while listening to sound files embedded into the slide. The regions are clearly defined by the use of different colors, with six sound buttons for the speaker of each selected accent. Three of these buttons are for individual words – *head*, *heart* and *chicken*. These are represented in Chinese characters, in the same format as the previous activity, for ease of presentation and to facilitate instant recognition and comprehension. The remaining buttons are for sentences using these words. Each bank of six buttons plays the same words or sentences, but spoken in an accent corresponding to the region. For example, an instructor using this slide could click on the word *head* for all six speakers, enabling learners to listen to the differences in accents. This activity gives multiple examples of the differences in accents



Figure 2. Six world English accents slide, with sound buttons

across the globe and consequently raises learners’ awareness of the many varieties of English that exist.

Complementing an awareness of non-SAE accents is an attempt to make learners comfortable when in contact with said accents. In order to do this, the authors used three specific accents as models. The accents were chosen simply on the basis of each author’s non-SAE accent shown in relief against the familiar SAE accent.

As stated earlier, a non-academic approach was taken for these activities. Consequently, very general and easy to understand phonological characteristics of each accent were given to the learners. While the authors made use of

backslashes to denote the sound of the phoneme, they did not use standard phonological transcription. While there are many accent variables to choose from, the authors chose general representative features that carry a relatively heavy functional load. The target accents and characteristics were introduced to learners by a PowerPoint™ slide and spoken examples, given here in brackets with phonological transcription:

Australian: A relaxed /r/ sound – similar to /a/ (e.g. the final [ʌ] of *letter* or *beer*);

Irish: Tongue not put between the teeth for /th/ (e.g. [ð] in *bath*, *thought* or *thirty*); a very deep /u/ – similar to /oo/ (e.g. [ʊ] in *done* or *Dublin*);

U.S.: A strong /r/ sound (e.g. [ɹ] in *letter* or *beer*).

Five class activities were developed. Initially there are three relatively easy receptive activities (minimal pairs) followed by two productive activities (controlled and then freer production).

Minimal pairs activity

The first activity introduces the concept of phonemes and how to use the numbered and lettered “tree” (see Figure 3), which is loosely based on material from Hancock (2002). This forms the basis for the receptive part of the lesson. First, learners are given a worksheet with a tree and a list of phonemes (i.e. Figure 3 with a blank tree and without the flags). The learners listen to a recording of a native speaker saying four sets of lexis twice each. On the left and right extremities of the tree are lists of six minimal pairs. Starting from the bottom of the tree, the learners must choose to go left or right, depending on what word they think the speaker

has said – if they think the word spoken is in the word list on the right, the learners go right (e.g. the recording enunciates “bus”), but, if left, the learners go left (e.g. the recording enunciates “bath”). The activity ends after the final pair has been spoken and the learner has arrived at a letter at the top of the tree. Each recording is replayed and instructors check the answers with the learners by revealing the route on the PowerPoint™ slide. For example, for a recording saying “bath – berry – mouse – vote” the correct letter is F. The sole purpose of this activity is to familiarize learners with how such a phoneme tree activity is executed.

In the next stage, the three target accents are introduced, using the Figure 3 slide. The previous activity is repeated with recordings of speakers from Australia, Ireland and the U.S. saying four sentences each, each sentence containing a minimal pair word. Learners must again arrive at a letter. For example, if the U.S. speaker enunciates “bath – very – mouse – boat” the correct letter is D (the answer is revealed through the red arrows on Figure 3). The purpose of this is to re-familiarize learners with the target accents and features.

Accent reinforcement

The learners go on to attempt to differentiate accents. A handout of the slide in Figure 4 is used. Learners listen to four sentences spoken by two speakers. Learners choose the route by going left or right depending on the perceived accent spoken and flag location (e.g. left for an Australian accent and right for a U.S. accent). The example in Figure 4 is for a recording featuring 1) an utterance by a U.S. speaker, 2) an utterance by an Australian speaker, 3) an utterance by a U.S. speaker, and 4) an utterance by a U.S. speaker

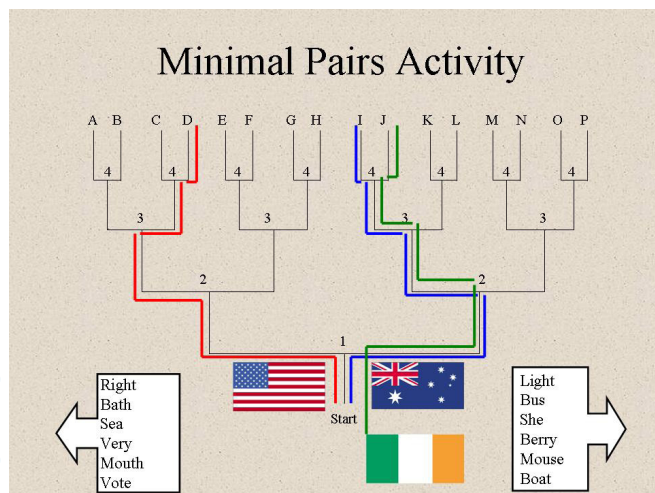


Figure 3. Minimal pairs activity with answers

– leading the learner to the letter L. Three permutations are accommodated – U.S. and Australian, U.S. and Irish, Irish and Australian. This activity is relatively easy, as the listeners may differentiate between the individual speakers rather than their accents, but this does contribute to building learner confidence, which in turn contributes to lowered learner anxiety toward accents.

Accent test

This next receptive activity is in the same format, but learners listen to four words, rather than sentences, spoken by two speakers. This is a much more difficult activity and further encourages learners to note the differences in accents.

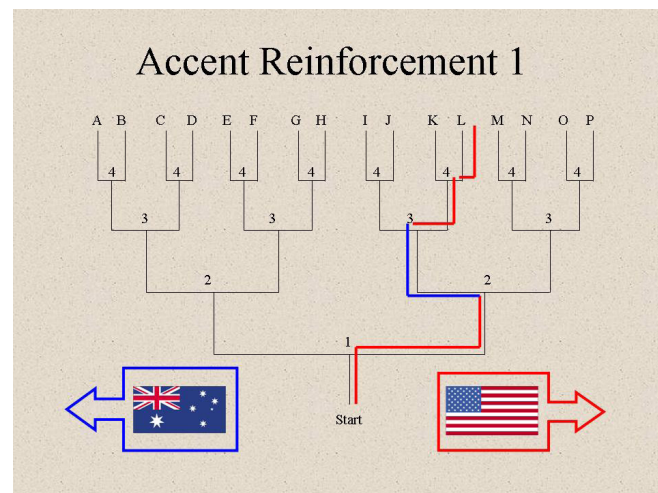


Figure 4. Accent reinforcement activity with answers

An interesting side effect is that the learners appreciate that listening to *more* of the target language is desirable.

Controlled accent production

This is a variation of a mass “gap fill” activity, used frequently in class by one of the authors, known as a “Battlegrid.” In this activity, learners practice accents using given examples. A “Battlegrid” is a B4 print given to two competing learners. Each print is exactly the same and has a collection of 15 numbered boxes in a grid form on the right side of the page. Each of these boxes is further divided into three subsections – U.S., Irish and Australian. In each of

these three subsections there is a word. Thus each of the 15 boxes is rendered unique by virtue of the accent used for the word in each of its three subsections.

Each learner must choose one of the 15 boxes in secret. The aim of the game is for each learner to find out which box his opponent has chosen. This is done via the learners asking each other in turns the given question “What do you want?” Learners asked this question must answer using a word and *using an accent* from a subsection of their box. For example, a learner who chose a box with *bath* in the U.S. subsection, *beer* in the Australian subsection, and *bath* in the Irish subsection will answer this question by attempting to say one of these words in its target accent. The questions are asked back and forth until one of the learners has eliminated all but one possible number for their partner’s “secret box”. This learner has one chance to ask “Are you number xxxx?” As with the aim of all the activities presented here, this productive activity seeks to further lower anxiety to non-SAE accents by leading learners away from having little awareness of accents to producing accents in a controlled and lighthearted manner.

Freer accent production

Learners then produce their own “phoneme tree” activity for their partners. On the same worksheets used for the original minimal pairs receptive activity, learners attempt to guide their partners to a desired letter by producing minimal pairs in a chosen accent. Learners can choose the accents and phonemes from the previous receptive phoneme activities and/or the controlled practice. While this is difficult even for a native speaker of English, the goal is to engage with non-SAE in a stress-free way.

Evaluation of the activities

The writers found the activities achieved the stated goals well and are an effective tool in introducing accents. The receptive activities are not difficult and consequently help reduce anxiety. The controlled accent production promotes learners’ thinking about accents and pronunciation. While the freer accent production is challenging it is also (judging from learners’ reactions) enjoyable. In classes and the JALT2007 presentation, participants were able to have fun throughout said activities. This indicates that the ultimate goal of lowering anxiety toward accents has been achieved. While this activity cannot prepare learners for the multifarious range of world English accents, it does create a willingness not to be overwhelmed when encountering English spoken in an unfamiliar accent.

Future developments

The authors feel that this material could be used as a template to create supplemental materials that can be incorporated into classes to introduce different accents. Ideally, these activities could be used at the discretion of the instructor in combination with a pronunciation activity, as a regular supplement to a standard course or as a once-off introduction to the topic. The option to develop follow-on lessons that introduce the cultures of the chosen regions is also available.

Conclusion

The authors have used the given approach to introduce accents to great effect in their classes. The easiest measure of success is seen in the dramatic decrease in time taken for learners to relax around their new teacher. An unexpected side effect of higher learner awareness of world English accents has been the number of learners who have approached the instructors out of class time and talked about different accents they have encountered. This is especially pleasing as these learners have spoken about how phonemes are pronounced differently in the “new” accent – further evidence that the idea of a new accent is no longer something to be anxious about, but rather something of interest to an EFL learner.

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