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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Pronunciation tasks for academic study skills

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In developing a course to teach academic skills in English, the authors considered that pronunciation was one key area that is often inadequately addressed in study skills courses. Pronunciation practice facilitates comprehension in both productive and receptive academic tasks. This paper outlines some of the specific activities the authors developed to foster greater oral comprehensibility within an English academic skills program, including; word stress, elision, liaison, Japanese English, sentence stress and intonation. Evidence of how students (mis)hear English sentences is provided based on pilot testing of some of the pronunciation activities developed.

英語を用いたアカデミックスキルを養成するコースの開発に際し、筆者らは、従来の同様のコースでは、発音指導や発音の訓練が十分に行われていないと考えた。発音の訓練は、アカデミックな課題のアウトプット・インプットのいずれの側面でも、理解の促進につながる。本稿では、筆者らの開発した、語強勢・脱落・連結・カタカナ英語・文強勢・イントネーションなどの練習を含む自然な発音を身につけるための具体的な活動と、英語のアカデミックスキル養成プログラムにおけるそれらの活用を概観する。その上で、書き取り課題のデータから、母国語話者またはそれに近い発音する話者の発話サンプルが、学生にはどのように聞こえているかを分析する。

**U**niversity educators are increasingly recognizing the need to assist beginning students to develop the academic study skills that are essential for tertiary level research, in both first and additional languages. In developing a course to teach academic skills in English, the authors considered that pronunciation was one key area that is often inadequately addressed in study skills courses, despite the fact that clear pronunciation facilitates comprehension in both productive activities (such as giving academic presentations) and receptive tasks (like listening to a lecture).

This paper will outline some of the specific activities that the authors developed to foster greater oral comprehensibility within an English academic skills program, including word stress, elision, liaison, Japanese English, sentence stress and intonation. While implementing the program it was found that students reacted favourably to such pronunciation tasks because their relation to the broader academic skills program became immediately apparent. The paper will also suggest ways that university educators and language teachers can provide their students with pronunciation practice within the situated context of developing academic study skills in English.

### Background

In conjunction with several colleagues, the authors have been developing resource materials for introducing academic skills in English at the undergraduate level (Yokokawa, Greer, Murakami, Uchida & Yamauchi, 2007). The program covers both language- and IT-related aspects, and includes such research skills as library and online bibliographic searches, note-taking, skimming and scanning, report writing and presentation skills. Over the course of the semester, the students research a self-selected theme and present their research findings to their peers. Despite the fact that skills such as these can be considered the basis for academic scholarship, they are generally under-taught in Japan, where students have largely been left to fend for themselves when it comes to basic research strategies—even in their first language.

Given that academic skills are largely transferable, the authors consider that a focus on study skills during content-

based introductory English classes will provide students with important practical knowledge that can also be used in broader L1 study of their specialist fields.

With an extensive array of skills to cover, it is understandable that many such programs elect not to focus on pronunciation and intonation. Although pronunciation skills are obviously non-essential in writing a report, the curriculum design team nonetheless considered pronunciation an important part of oral academic skills, such as giving presentations in English. Naturally, comprehensible output will facilitate audience understanding when a learner of English delivers a report, or answers participants' questions during a poster session. Moreover, pronunciation practice also develops receptive fluency (Acton, 1997; Pattimore, 1999), so devoting time to the study of English phonology and intonation can help learners to better understand what speakers are saying. This will ultimately impact on other essential academic competencies such as note-taking and discussion skills.

### *Incorporating pronunciation into the program*

So while pronunciation and intonation practice were deemed appropriate for the program, the overall focus was still to be on teaching academic skills in English. What then was the most appropriate way of incorporating pronunciation into the syllabus?

We decided to start with a form-focused approach, that gradually led students to use the target pronunciation point in communicative academic skill-developing activities. Each of the ten units began with a “Sound Focus” section in which

key elements of pronunciation and intonation skills are explained. Such areas included;

- word stress
- elision
- liaison
- Japanese English
- sentence stress
- intonation

This section made use of choral repetition, dictation activities and situated listening contexts to allow students to practice the target skill. The audio files featured male and female voices and included both native and near-native speakers, in order to encourage students to model their speech not only on so-called ‘correct’ English, but also on more achievable yet comprehensible near-peer exemplars. The Sound Focus section also included explanatory notes in Japanese, so that the pronunciation tasks could be completed independently prior to class if necessary.

Throughout the rest of the course, the students would complete a variety of academic skills activities, such as reading papers, writing reports and giving presentations. The curriculum designers felt that one area that was particularly challenging for undergraduate Japanese learners was participating in academic discussions. To this end, the program provided a weekly topic, along with a variety of discussion questions to enable students to practice speaking about the sorts of topics that are appropriate at the university level. Although this was pair-based discussion, a third

student was assigned to monitor each dyad. The task for this student was to listen to take notes on the discussion and then write a summary of it.

These communicative ‘discussions’ were intended as the culminating activity for each class, whereas the initial pronunciation activities in the Sound Focus section constituted far more direct teaching. In order to link the two activities, we included a selection of sentences that (1) built in examples of the target pronunciation point, and (2) provided learners with content that would activate schema to be used in the subsequent paired discussions. For instance, a Sound Focus section on word stress was linked to a paired discussion on tertiary education in Japan by a series of ten sentences that included:

“This university offers attractive courses in engineering and information technology.”

These sentences were intended as read-aloud practice, and were generally completed prior to class as a homework ‘preview’ task. Students were able to practice varying the stress within the words, and also potentially rework part of the content of the sentence into their later discussion. In this way, we hoped to integrate both form-focused and communicative elements into the pronunciation practice.

### *Pilot trial*

During the 2007 academic year, our research team piloted various aspects of the course within our undergraduate general English classes. In the following section we will elaborate on the results on just one of the pronunciation activities within the academic skills course—the dictation exercise.

Although not commonly used in communicative classrooms, dictation is widely used by Japanese teachers of oral English, and appears to be a valid means of determining student comprehension (Takeuchi, 1997). One of the Sound Focus activities in the academic skills course we are designing relies on a contextualized partial dictation exercise. Students are given part of a sentence and upon hearing the complete sentence read on an audio file, they are asked to fill in the missing word or phrase in a cloze approach. For instance, given the following written sentence:

“He is (            ) in (            )”,

the students then hear the complete spoken sentence and fill in the missing words:

“He is (*majoring*) in (*engineering*)”.

This activity underlines the importance of pronunciation knowledge as a receptive skill. While piloting the materials, the authors were astounded by the extent to which their students were mishearing seemingly straight-forward utterances. Whereas a multi-choice task provides students with a finite list of possibilities from which to choose, the dictation activity gave us an insight into the myriad of ways that the sentences were being heard.

The data consist of dictation responses collected from 82 students, all of whom were first year students in a general oral English course at a national university in western Japan. The test was a compilation of dictation exercises taken from throughout the academic skills course and consisted of a total of 90 items. The overall results are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Dictation exercise results**

	Percent
Highest score	86.7%
Lowest score	16.7%
Average score	55.5%

The following section will outline some detailed examples from our data.

### Results

While space limitations do not allow us to undertake a complete analysis of all the dictation items, we would like to examine just a few of those that were of particular note. It is well known that Japanese have trouble hearing and producing certain phonemes like /r/ and /l/, however these were not the focus of our investigation. Instead, we decided to provide the students with opportunities to reflect on the differences in intonation and stress patterns between the two languages, and the ways in which lexical items blend together when produced in natural speech. Therefore, this section will include data from the sections on word stress, sentence stress and liaison.

### Word stress

English is a stress-timed language, while Japanese is often referred to as a syllable-timed language (Acton, 1997; Wells, 2006; Yamauchi, 2006), meaning that the stress in each word is generally consistent, based on the Japanese moraic syllabry. This means that Japanese learners are likely to produce English lexical items in a way that has relatively stable stress on each syllable. On the other hand, they may

have difficulty hearing English words that have both stressed and unstressed syllables, such as the highlighted words in the following sentence:

*Yes, it **includes** a **Korean**-style lunch.*

As can be seen from Figure 1, when this sentence was read to them, less than half of the participants were able to hear the word “includes”. About a third of them heard it as “is”, suggesting that they were able to pick up the first stressed syllable and the final /z/ sound, while 16% of the students made no attempt at a response.

Similar results can be seen with the word “Korean”, which appears later in the sentence. While 44% of the students were able to identify it correctly, many others came up with responses like “clean”, “green” and “create”. In fact the word “Korean” exists as a loanword in Japanese, but each syllable is stressed in order to fit with the Japanese mora, making it sound something like “KO-RE-AN” instead of koREan. The fact that the native English audio prompt had only one stressed syllable may have led some students to hear the word as a one syllable word.

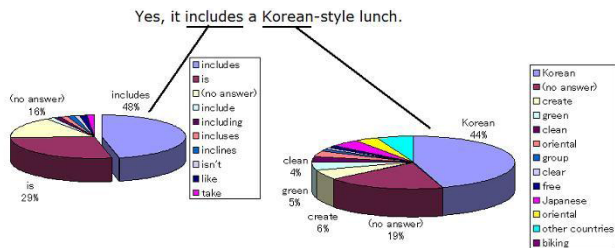


Figure 1. Word stress 1

A similar phenomenon was observed with the word “Asian”, when the following sentence was dictated:

*We’re **engaged** in research on **Asian** culture.*

As shown in Figure 2, many of the participants heard “Asian” as “aging”. Like “Korean”, the former exists as a loanword in Japanese but with three relatively evenly stressed syllables: A-JI-An. When pronounced with an English stress pattern and only two syllables, this word became a source of misunderstanding for two out of three students in our study.

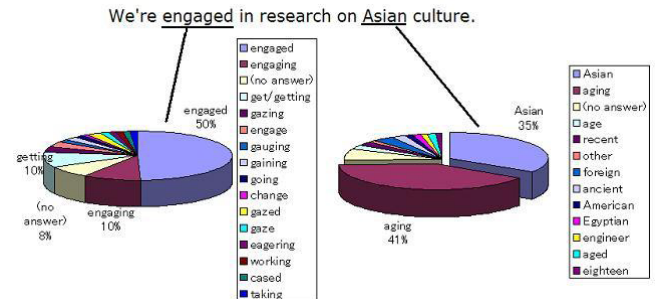


Figure 2. Word stress 2

It would seem that word stress plays a significant role in determining how Japanese students interpret an English utterance. Being made aware of the difference between Japanese English and native-like stress patterns of English will therefore aid in developing better receptive skills.

### Sentence stress

Stress comes into play at the sentence level too. Certain words in a sentence are routinely stressed, which means that Japanese learners of English may experience difficulty in picking up those words that go unstressed. For example in the following question, the first word is usually stressed and the second unstressed:

*Were you surprised?*

During the dictation task, only 12% of the students were able to identify the target words “were you”, despite the fact that they are common lexical items which the entire group could be reasonably expected to know. As shown in Figure 3, over a third of the group heard this sentence as “**We are surprised?**”, while around one in eight heard it as “**Are you surprised?**”

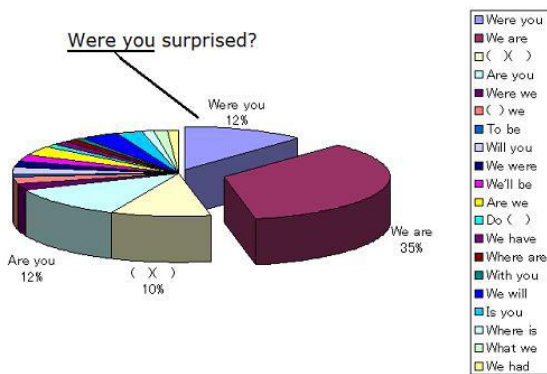


Figure 3. Sentence stress

Only one in eight Japanese university students can comprehend a question like this, not because it is grammatically difficult but because they are unable to process the various stresses placed on key elements of the sentence. So the gap that teachers regularly hear after asking such a question may not be because the student does not know the word “surprised”, but more likely that she cannot figure out the subject or tense of the sentence. This has huge repercussions for the way that teachers of English should be shaping their responses during conversations for learning.

### Liaison

Finally, it is worth taking a look at one further example that caused problems for the students. In the following phrase, the highlighted words are usually produced without a noticeable gap between them:

*You can order **an item** in the morning...*

The consonant at the end of “an” and the vowel at the start of “item” join together so that the pair is produced as something like “aNItem”. This is known as liaison. As shown in Figure 4 below, only a staggering one percent of the participants was able to reproduce this phrase from the dictated prompt.

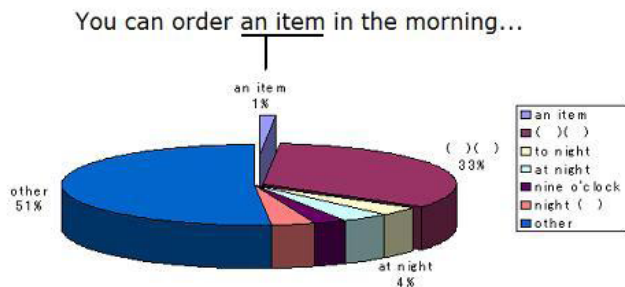


Figure 4. Liaison

Fully one third did not attempt an answer, and, as shown in Table 2, many of those who did write something came up with responses that included the words “night” and “nine”.

When “an” and “item” are produced together, many Japanese students will hear it as “night”, because the /n/ is connected to /ai/, which is the stressed syllable of the second word. In fact, if “an item” were to be written in katakana, the Japanese syllabary which many students use to approximate English, it would look like *アナイテム* which

is understandably similar to the Japanized version of “night” (ナイト). Moreover, the vowel in “an” is also joined to the final /r/ in “order”, and is unstressed, making it difficult for some Japanese learners to pick up this word at all. This is how our students are hearing us, and unfortunately due to the under-emphasis on pronunciation in junior and senior high schools, in many cases this is how they are taught to hear us (Templin, 1997).

### Discussion and conclusion

This paper has outlined the way that pronunciation activities can be integrated into a course of study that focuses on academic skills in English. Pronunciation tasks should be a secondary, yet integral, element of such a program. Attention to pronunciation is of value to students of English academic skills, not only in order to foster production but also in terms of reception.

In piloting a series of dictation activities, for example, the research team found that students were regularly misinterpreting native and native-like English utterances,

Table 2. A selection of the liaison responses

Category	Examples						
<b>nine</b>	till nine	nine o'clock	9 call	to nine	at nine	nine order	nine times
<b>night</b>	the night	night wait	night ( )	night and	last night	night meal	
<b>to + x</b>	to me	to nine	to meet	to go	to call	to take	to it
<b>at + x</b>	at nice	at nine	at night				
<b>Noun guess</b>	a taxi	a coffee	your lunch	your breakfast	the call	a car	the book
<b>Indexical</b>	any thing	any time	the one	for something	of this		
<b>Time word</b>	it early	right away	what time	next Friday			
<b>Verb</b>	see off						
<b>Unknown</b>	make up	the ( )	Art with				



due to an inability to recognize variations in word and sentence stress, elision, liaison and also due to an over-reliance on so-called Katakana English.

Language educators should then recognize the value of including focus-on-form activities even in content-based English programs like the one described above. Ideally such pronunciation tasks should lead seamlessly into more communicative activities.

The current research has been action-based in nature. The study emerged from a perceived student need for oral comprehensibility within the context of English academic study skills. The authors planned a set of dictation tasks and piloted them with a group of university students, in part to ascertain the success of the activities themselves. However, in doing so it became even more apparent that there was a very real necessity for Japanese learners to understand the differences in syllable and stress-timed languages in order to process spoken English at the word and sentence levels. Using dictation activities proved to be a successful means for alerting students to such prosodic differences, as well as informing educators of the way in which their utterances were being (mis)heard.

Since the study represents a first step into the authors' investigation, there are several limits to the current research. More data need to be collected to help verify the results. To date we have not yet gathered feedback from the students themselves on how they felt they progressed or benefited from the dictation activities. In the future, a feedback questionnaire along these lines would provide further insight into the reactions of the students to this approach.

At present our course of study in academic English skills is still in the development stage, but we plan to continue further refining it and hopefully make the activities available for teachers sometime in the near future. Pronunciation tasks will remain an important part of the program.

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