Investigating Phonological Changes Following English Speech Contest Participation in Japan

Philip Head
Kochi City Board of Education

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English language speech contests are popular in Japan. However, although most participants show improvement in their pronunciation of a particular speech, it is unknown if these phonological improvements are transferable to students' general speaking abilities. To test this, a longitudinal analysis of the pronunciation errors of Japanese junior high school students (18 speech contest participants and 12 controls) was undertaken. The results show a significant reduction in the number of *th* errors (/ð/ and /θ/) made by students following speech contest participation. However, there was no significant reduction found in the other types of common pronunciation errors examined. There was also a significant increase in the number of /ð/ errors made by speech contest participants between the completion of a speech contest and the following semester.

英語スピーチコンテストは日本で人気がある。しかし、多くの参加者が特定のスピーチの発音においては進歩がみられるという一方、生徒の全体的なスピーキング能力において彼らの音声学上の進歩の推移については知られていない。これを調べるため、日本の中学生（18人のスピーチコンテスト参加者と12人の非参加者）の発音エラーについて長期的な分析を行った。結果、スピーチコンテスト参加後の生徒には「th」の発音エラーの著しい減少がみられたが、その他の典型的な発音エラーには有意な減少は見られなかった。また、次の学期になるとコンテスト参加者の「ð」のエラーの数は著しく増加した。

As an assistant language teacher (ALT) in several public junior high schools in Japan, one of my principle responsibilities outside the classroom has been to help students prepare for speech contests. In my experience, I have found that over the course of many hours of practice it was possible for my students to present a speech in English with near perfect pronunciation. However, although their improvement in the presentation of the speech they had practiced was clearly visible, I wondered how useful those hours of practice really were. Would the phonological training students received during practice carry over to non-speech contest contexts? Are any improvements in a student's pronunciation temporary, or are they maintained after active speech contest practice has ended? In order to answer these questions, I set out to systematically evaluate changes over time in students' pronunciation of an English passage that they had not previously practiced.

Junior High School English Speech Contests in Japan

English speech contests for Japanese junior high school students have a long history in Japan and there are national contests as well as many local and regional contests that students can participate

in. Speech contest judges evaluate participants in relation to native speaker phonology as well as aspects such as body language and voice volume. Phonology can be broken down into segmental and suprasegmental components. In this paper, I will use pronunciation to refer to segmentals and intonation to refer to suprasegmentals. I have chosen to focus on the pronunciation aspects of speech as these are easier to quantify and identify than intonation and rhythm (although pronunciation is still inherently subjective).

It should be noted that there is no fundamentally "correct" pronunciation, as there are numerous varieties of English. However, in Japan there is a clear preference for what Kachru (1985) calls *inner-circle* countries where English is traditionally the first language, such as America, over accents from *outer-circle* countries where English is widely spoken as a second language, such as India. This is reflected in the origin of ALTs on the government JET programme, with the vast majority coming from inner circle countries and over half coming from the United States (CLAIR, 2014). Furthermore, there is a preference for American English in textbooks, making this the phonology that students will attempt to emulate.

Phonology and the Critical Period Hypothesis

Although EFL students in Japan are continually taught English pronunciation during classes, and speech contest practice focuses heavily on pronunciation, the *critical period hypothesis* (CPH; Lenneberg, cited in Brown, 2007) questions whether it is possible for these students to obtain native-like pronunciation. Scovel (cited in Brown, 2007) proposed that prior to puberty the brain is more malleable, but afterwards lateralization is completed and focuses language to the left hemisphere of the brain. Thus, after puberty, it is very difficult to acquire native-like pronunciation. Walsh and Diller (cited in Brown 2007) claimed that language-learning aspects like pronunciation are particularly difficult to learn after childhood (when the brain is still maturing). Nonetheless, speech contests are judged strongly on aspects such as native-like or "natural" pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm—precisely the types of skills thought to be most difficult if not impossible to master outside of this prepubescent critical period. Junior high school students (grades 7-9, ages 12 to 16) would likely be at the very end of this critical period, as most will have already entered puberty by this stage. Perhaps the difficulty in learning pronunciation at a postpubescent age results in the selection or self-selection of speech contest participants according to their pre-existing pronunciation competence, which calls into question how pedagogically useful speech contests are.

Despite the issues raised regarding the effect of the CPH on accent, in my experience, students can learn how to approximate native-like pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm while practicing for a speech contest, at least for the particular speech that they are practicing. After all, why would students bother to practice their speech if it was impossible to improve? The question in this study is whether or not those improvements in pronunciation of one particular piece of writing translate into general improvements in pronunciation of unrelated material. Although there has been research on Japanese children and adults in an ESL context regarding specific English pronunciation difficulties (Aoyama, Flege, Guion, Akahane-Yamada, & Yamada, 2004; Aoyama, Guion, Flege, Yamada, & Akahane-Yamada, 2008), there is little research in the Japanese EFL context at the junior high school level.

English Pronunciation Difficulties for Japanese Speakers

There are a number of challenges that are particularly troublesome for native-Japanese speakers who wish to obtain native-English sounding pronunciation. It is thought that pronunciation is more challenging for students learning an L2 that has a great deal of distance from their L1 (Bongaerts, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

For Japanese students, attaining native-English pronunciation is particularly challenging as the languages are unrelated.

Riney and Anderson-Hsieh (1993) noted that Japanese syllables are typically open (ending with a vowel) whereas closed syllables (ending in a consonant) are characteristic of English. This can result in Japanese speakers adding a vowel sound to an English word ending with a consonant (Kenworthy, 1987; Thompson, Riney & Anderson-Hsieh, 1993). Another strategy Japanese speakers will use to make English words fit into the Japanese phonological system is simplifying the word by dropping the ending (Saunders, cited in Riney and Anderson-Hsieh, 1993). For example, Japanese speakers will substitute a long vowel when pronouncing words that end in a reduced vowel followed by an /r/ (Carruthers, 2006).

Another challenge for teaching English phonology is that English contains many sounds that are not present in Japanese phonology, although the exact number is subject to some debate. As a result of these additional sounds, learners often adapt foreign words to fit the more restrictive *katakana* (Japanese language syllabary) alphabet, thus changing the phonology of a word by replacing a sound that does not occur in Japanese with one that does. For example, the common English sounds /ð/ (as in father) and /θ/ (as in think) are not present in Japanese. Thus /ð/ is replaced by /d/ or /z/ and /θ/ by /s/, /ʃi/ (as in she) or /t/. There is also no /v/ sound in Japanese, so it is often replaced by /b/.

An additional difficulty is when the Japanese sound system does not distinguish between two distinct English sounds. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) noted, in Japanese there is no clear distinction between the /l/ and /r/ sounds. Although written in the Roman alphabet as *r,* the corresponding Japanese sound (/ɾ/) lies between the English /l/ and /r/. Thus to native English speakers it will sound like an /l/ when it should be an /r/ and vice versa.

Although these and other pronunciation difficulties among Japanese speakers of English are well known, there is little research available regarding the relative frequency of specific pronunciation errors in speech.

Method

A longitudinal study of speech participants (n = 18) and controls (n = 12) at three different junior high schools was conducted as the students prepared for various speech contests in the fall semester. These students were tested on their pronunciation of an original text (Appendix A) near the beginning of practice, immediately after the speech contest, and again the following semester. Permission was sought from the schools, the purpose of the project was explained to the participants, and a research consent form was sent home for the students' parents to sign.

Timeline

In August and September initial recordings (T1) were made of control groups and experimental groups before speech contest practice had begun. A second recording (T2) of both groups was taken during October and November after speech contests were finished. The second recording of both groups was made a little over 6 weeks after the initial recording (control group elapsed time average was 43.75 days [SD = 26.08]; the speech contest participants group elapsed time average was 43.28 days [SD = 15.94]). Final recordings (T3) were made of all students during the following January and February. The average elapsed time between the second and final recording was approximately 12 weeks (83.44 days [SD = 18.62]) for contest participants and approximately 10.5 weeks (73.75 days [SD = 15.69]) for controls.

Reading Test

Pronunciation was tested by having the students read a monologue, rather than a list of individual isolated words. This was done

because when words are isolated the pronunciation can change slightly as sounds are influenced by their surroundings through processes such as liaison or linking. This process is an important part of natural sounding speech and thus should be included in evaluations of phonology. The piece (Appendix A) is 123 words long and was based on the *Sunshine English Course 1* (Kairyudo, 2012) 1st year junior high school textbook vocabulary list so that the students would likely be familiar with the words in the passage. Words with /ð/, /θ/, /l/, /r/, /v/, and /ər/ sounds were included as often as possible, because in my experience, these often present challenges to Japanese learners. Both the type of errors and their frequency were recorded. The number of instances of each sound in the text is as follows: /ð/ (11), /θ/ (3), /ər/ (24), /l/ (22), /r/ (12), /v/ (5).

Students were given up to 5 minutes to practice reading the passage aloud, but no teacher help or modeling was given before recordings were made, and the passages were taken away from the student reader immediately after recording. Video recordings of the students reading aloud were taken and later analyzed. For analysis, the text was transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in order to easily highlight the specific pronunciation errors of each student's recording. The recordings were listened to multiple times (until I was satisfied that all errors had been detected and had been recorded consistently within the recording and between different recordings). If a participant made an error but then self-corrected it, the error was not counted. If a word was skipped or substituted with a different word, it was recorded as misread. The errors were broken into the following types /ð/, /θ/, /ər/, /l/, /r/, /v/, other pronunciation errors (any pronunciation error not included in the previous categories), and misread words.

Although it was not possible in all cases to obtain a recording of participants before any practice had started due to scheduling conflicts, the T1 recordings were obtained as close to the beginning of practice as possible and the T2 recordings were either obtained on the day of the contest, or within a week of the contest finishing.

The students in the control group were selected largely from the same classes as the speech contest participants in order to minimize the effect of having a different teacher or classroom environment on any improvements in pronunciation. When possible, the control group students were selected from English club members. Control groups were recorded at the same time as the participant groups when possible, in order to have accurate comparisons in terms of elapsed time. However, there is variation between subjects in terms of the time period of practice as well as the number of hours spent practicing within that time period. A total of 18 speech contest participants and 12 control group students from three different schools participated in the study.

Results

Pronunciation Results

Japanese students are exposed to teachers from multiple linguistic backgrounds. However, when native English speakers speak, they will still sound "natural" to most other native speakers, despite slight pronunciation differences, whereas nonnative speaker pronunciation differences will likely sound "unnatural." For example, although there can be differences between British and North American pronunciation of the /ər/ sound, in this study when the students' teachers read the same passage no pronunciation errors were detected despite the different linguistic backgrounds. It should also be noted that most textbooks in Japan use an American accent that includes the /ər/ sound. Thus, although the analysis of pronunciation errors must be acknowledged as subjective and based on my Canadian perspective, it remains valid and I feel that the errors identified were based on problems arising from Japanese L1 interference rather than the dialect of the students' respective English instructors.

Comparison of the Average Total Number of Errors Made by the Experimental and Control Groups

Figure 1 shows that the average total number of pronunciation errors made by the experimental group is consistently lower than the average totals of the control group. The overall trend for the experimental group appears to be a large decrease in errors between the T1 and T2 recordings, followed by a slight rebound in the number of errors in the T3 recording. The control group appears to show a continual decrease in errors over this same time period.

To better understand the changes in the experimental group's errors over the three periods, Figure 2 shows that there was a decrease in the total number of errors of all types between the T1 and T2 recordings. The /ər/ and /l/ errors continued to decrease between the T2 and T3. However, there is an increase in the T3 recording in the total number of errors in the /ð/, /θ/, /r/, /v/, and "misread" categories although the number of errors remained lower in the T3 recording compared to the T1 recording with the exception of the /v/ category.

Although Figure 2 shows that /ð/, /ər/, and /l/ made up the majority of the errors, Figure 3 shows that the *th* sounds /ð/ and /θ/ are, on average, the most likely for participants in this study to mispronounce when encountered. The sounds /ð/ and /θ/ also show the largest drop in error rate between T1 and T2 (after speech contest participation), followed by the largest rebound (along with /v/) at T3.

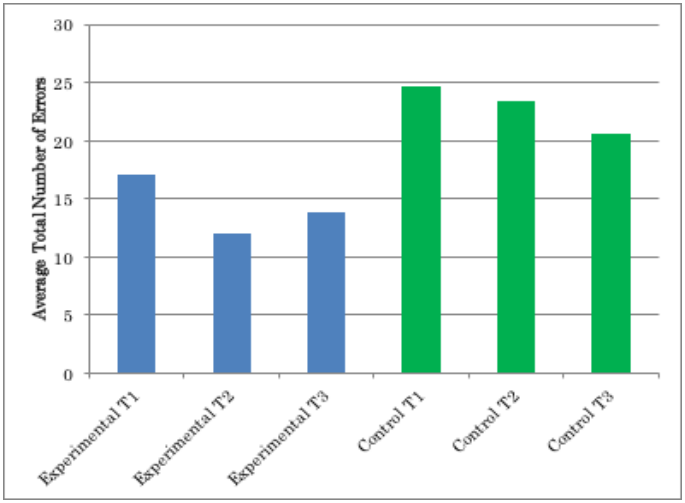

Figure 1. The average total number of errors made by the experimental group (n = 18) and control group (n = 12) over three time points.

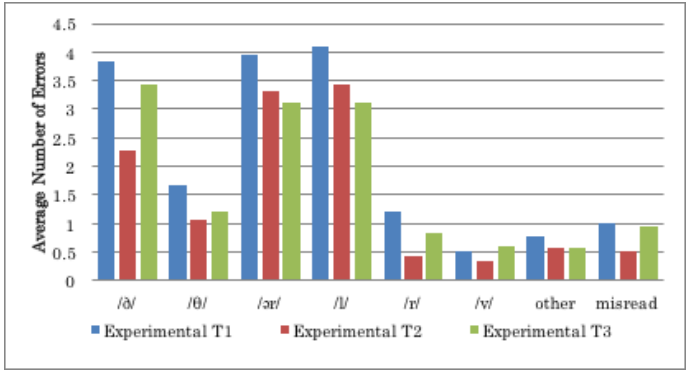

Figure 2. The average number and type of pronunciation errors made by speech contest participants (n = 18) at three time points.

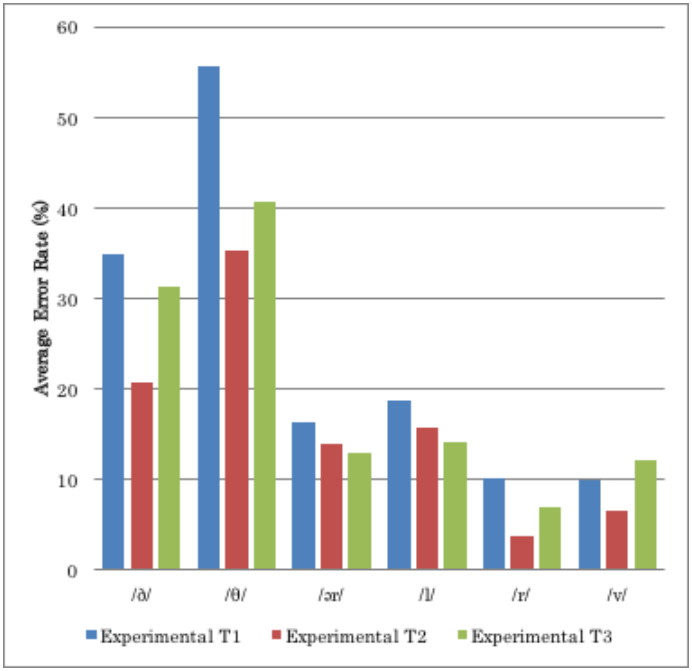

Figure 3. The error rate of specific sounds for speech contest participants (n = 18) at three time points.

In regards to the control group errors, Figure 4 shows that there was a decrease in the average number of /θ/, /ər/, /l/, /v/, and "misread" errors, whereas there was an increase in the average number of /ð/, /r/, and "other" errors in the T2 recording. However, there was a decrease in all but the /θ/ and /l/ errors at T3 (the semester following the end of speech contest practice). There does not appear to be any one type of any other error that showed a large change, unlike the /ð/ and /θ/ types shown in Figures 2 and 3.

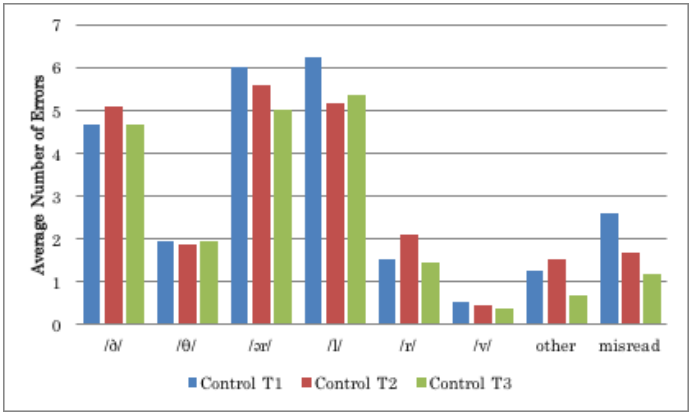

Figure 4. The average number and type of pronunciation errors made by the control group (n = 12) at three time points.

Figure 5 about the control group shows that /ð/ and /θ/ are the most likely sounds for Japanese students to mispronounce when encountered, as did Figure 3 about the experimental group. However, the large changes in the rate of /ð/ and /θ/ errors seen in the experimental group are not present in the control group.

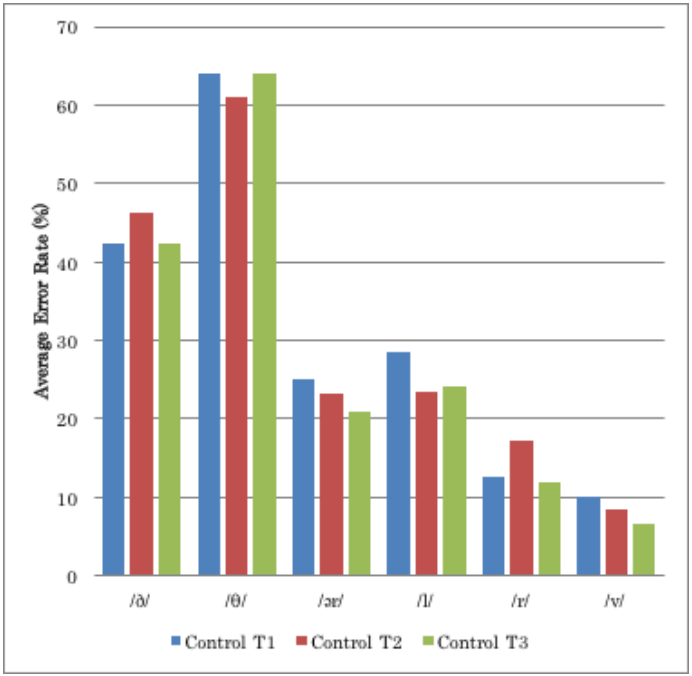

Figure 5. The average error rate for different sounds at three time points for the control group (n = 12).

Paired T-Test Results

A series of paired samples t tests were performed to look for statistically significant changes in the number of pronunciation errors made by individual students over time. Effect size was calculated using Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988). Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Mean of Different Types of Errors Made by the Experimental (n = 18) and Control (n = 12) Groups at Three Time Points

Type of error	Group	T1 mean (*SD*)	T2 mean (*SD*)	T3 mean (*SD*)
/ð/	Experimental	3.83 (3.222)	2.28 (2.244)	3.44 (3.148)
	Control	4.67 (2.425)	5.08 (2.644)	4.67 (1.875)
/θ/	Experimental	1.67 (1.328)	1.06 (1.211)	1.22 (1.166)
	Control	1.92 (.996)	1.83 (1.267)	1.92 (1.084)
/ər/	Experimental	3.94 (3.638)	3.33 (3.565)	3.11 (2.908)
	Control	6.00 (4.328)	5.58 (3.655)	5.00 (3.766)
/l/	Experimental	4.11 (4.676)	3.44 (3.914)	3.11 (3.894)
	Control	6.25 (3.745)	5.17 (4.108)	5.33 (3.985)
/r/	Experimental	1.22 (1.896)	0.44 (.984)	0.83 (1.505)
	Control	1.50 (1.679)	2.08 (2.065)	1.42 (1.379)
/v/	Experimental	.50 (.707)	0.33 (.686)	0.61 (.850)
	Control	.50 (.905)	0.42 (.669)	0.33 (.492)
Other	Experimental	1.00 (1.328)	0.50 (.857)	0.94 (1.259)
	Control	2.58 (3.655)	1.67 (3.114)	1.17 (1.467)
Misread	Experimental	.78 (1.166)	0.56 (.922)	0.56 (.784)
	Control	1.25 (2.179)	1.50 (1.732)	0.67 (.985)
Total	Experimental	17.00 (8.595)	11.94 (8.003)	13.83 (8.893)
	Control	24.67 (7.165)	23.33 (6.893)	20.50 (4.927)

In the experimental group, there was a significant decrease in the number of /ð/ errors between the T1 and T2 recordings: t (17) = 3.072, p = 0.007. The number of /θ/ errors also saw a significant decrease between T1 and T2 recordings: t (17) = 3.335, p = 0.004. In addition, the total number of errors decreased significantly between the T1 and T2 recordings: t (17) = 5.674, p = 0.000. There is also a significant increase in /ð/ pronunciation errors between the T2 and T3 recordings: t (17) = -2.581, p = 0.019. In addition, there is a significant decrease in /θ/ pronunciation errors between the T1 and

T3 recordings: t (17) = 2.675, p = 0.016. Finally, total pronunciation errors showed a significant decrease between the T1 and T2 recordings: t (17) = 3.319, p = 0.004. All of the above results had a large effect size, and no significant differences were detected between the three time points for the other categories of errors in the experimental group.

In the control group, the only significant change was a decrease in the total number of errors between the T1 and T3 recordings: t (11) = 2.503, p = 0.030.

Discussion

Overall Pronunciation

One of the findings of this research is that those students who participate in speech contests already possess superior English pronunciation abilities in comparison to the control group (see Figure 1). This is unsurprising as the goal of entering a speech contest is to win and thus teachers would be wise to invest their time in training students who will require less help with pronunciation. Also, students who feel more confident about their existing pronunciation will likely be more inclined to participate in an event in which their speaking abilities will be publicly evaluated. Furthermore, the continual decrease in the total number of errors shown in the control group is expected as the students will have become more familiar with the content of the written test over time and they will have continued to study, and hopefully improve, English in their regular classes. Although the control group only saw a significant decrease in total number of errors between the T1 and T3 recordings, the experimental group saw a significant decrease between the T1 and T2 recordings. This would appear to suggest that speech contest practice increases the pace of pronunciation improvement in students, but that once practice stops so does the improvement.

However, it is important to note that the total scores include misread words in addition to pronunciation errors and, when the pronunciation errors are broken down into their individual types, only /ð/ and /θ/ pronunciation errors show significant differences.

Pronunciation Errors of /ð/ and /θ/

In this study /θ/ errors were identified as the most frequent error, and /ð/ pronunciation errors the second most frequent type of error to be made by both the experimental and control groups when encountered in the text (see Figures 3 and 5).

That Japanese students would have difficulty pronouncing these sounds is not unexpected, as they are not found in Japanese phonology. Although no significant difference in error frequency was observed for the control group, the experimental group saw a significant decrease in /ð/ errors following speech contest participation (T2), followed by a significant increase in errors when recorded again the following semester (T3). Thus, although /ð/ pronunciation appears to have been improved by speech contest participation, the effect was not maintained and there was no significant difference detected in the number of /ð/ errors between the beginning of speech contest practice (T1) and the semester following the speech contest (T3).

This initially appears to be the case with /θ/ errors as well, as the experimental group also shows a significant decrease in /θ/ errors after speech contest completion. However, although there was also a rebound in /θ/ errors the following semester (Figures 2 and 3), it was not statistically significant and /θ/ errors remained significantly fewer than before speech contest practice began. Why /θ/ errors do not increase to the same extent as /ð/ errors do the following semester is unclear as the two sounds differ only in the fact that /ð/ is voiced (vocal cords vibrate) and /θ/ is unvoiced. However, one possible explanation is that there are fewer words containing /θ/ than /ð/ for students to encounter in the reading test and thus improvement of one word containing /θ/ could have a larger overall effect.

There are many factors that could explain these results. One could be the unfamiliarity of the /ð/ and /θ/ sounds to Japanese speakers. Because teachers are well aware of student difficulties with /ð/ and /θ/, a great deal of time is spent practicing these particular sounds. These sounds are also some of the easier ones to correct due to the fact that the position of the tongue is visible. This allows students to view the teacher's modeling clearly, as well as for teachers to check if the student is making the sound correctly. Students can also use devices such as mirrors to check themselves when practicing individually. Because /ð/ and /θ/ will likely have been explicitly taught during practice, the students' awareness of this sound will have been heightened after the speech contest and thus students will likely have taken greater care in pronouncing it during the second reading test.

Another possible reason that the /ð/ sound sees a particularly strong improvement is that it is very common in English. Thus, it is likely that students were practicing /ð/ sounds more often than the other sounds examined in this study. However, it is possible that after the speech contest has finished, and students no longer constantly practice and get evaluated on their pronunciation, that they will return to their previous pronunciation habits due to a lack of individual correction and reason to practice outside the classroom.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

In terms of the CPH, the improvement in /ð/ pronunciation would seem to contradict the strong position that postpubescent language learners cannot approach native-like pronunciation. However, the subsequent reversal of the pronunciation improvement, along with the lack of statistically significant improvement in the other English sounds examined, calls into question whether the pronunciation training the students received was truly incorporated into their speaking style. Perhaps the best conclusion would be that it is possible for junior high school speech contest students to improve their English pronunciation to some degree, but that continual reinforcement is necessary to maintain the improvement.

Conclusion

The results of this study seem to show that students who practice for speech contests do improve their ability to pronounce English passages that they have not explicitly studied, although the effect appears to be only significant for certain types of sounds. It also appears that the improvements in students' pronunciation are not necessarily maintained, and they can return to making certain errors after they have stopped actively practicing for a contest. Thus, purely from a phonological improvement point of view, the benefits of speech contest participation may not justify the time invested by students and teachers in speech contest practice. However, it must be acknowledged that only one person judged the pronunciation and the conclusion is based on a relatively small group of students. Therefore, further research should be carried out to confirm these findings. Also, pronunciation is not the only type of communicative skill taught during speech contest practice. The students surveyed in this study found that speech contests were a positive experience, so other factors in addition to pronunciation improvement (such as motivation) should be examined by teachers when considering the benefits of training students for a speech contest.

Bio Data

Philip Head is currently an ALT with the Kochi City Board of Education, where he has worked with students from preschool to high school level. His current research interests include English language speech contests, motivation, and writing fluency. <head.philip@gmail.com>

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Appendix

Student Reading Test Text

Regular Version

This morning, my mother and father took me to soccer practice. I practice every Saturday. This November will be the fifth year that I have played soccer. Soccer is very popular in Japan now. I think it's popular because it is so easy to play. You just need a ball and room to run.

After practice I help my mother to clean my clothes and put them away. My soccer uniform is black and yellow. It looks very cool!

I'm a member of the soccer club at my school. I sit in class and think about soccer. My dream is to be a soccer player in the World Cup, so I will work hard every day and learn to be a wonderful player.

IPA Version

ðɪs mɔrnɪŋ, maj məðər ænd fɑðər tʊk mi tu sɑkər præktɪs. aj præktɪs ɛvəri sætərdi. ðɪs novɛmbər wɪl bi ðə fɪfθ jɪr ðæt aj hæv pled sɑkər. sɑkər ɪz vɛri pɑpjələr ɪn dʒəpæn naw. aj θɪŋk ɪts pɑpjələr bɪkɒz ɪt ɪz so izi tu ple. ju dʒəst nid ə bɒl ænd rum tu rən.

æftər præktɪs aj hɛlp maj məðər tu klin maj kloðz ænd pʊt ðɛm əwe. maj sɑkər junəfɔrm ɪz blæk ænd jɛlo. ɪt lʊks vɛri kul!

ajm ə mɛmbər əv ðə sɑkər klʌb æt maj skul. aj sɪt ɪn klæs ænd θɪŋk əbawt sɑkər. maj drim ɪz tu bi ə sɑkər pleər ɪn ðə wərld kəp, so aj wɪl wərk hɑrd ɛvəri de ænd lərn tu bi ə wəndərfəl pleər