Improving Receptive Phonological Accommodation in Monolingual EFL Classrooms

Sean Burgoine

Kochi University

Unlike multilingual classrooms, where the variety of L1 backgrounds contributes to phonological diversity, monolingual classrooms require artificial input in the form of either explicit or implicit instruction to prepare students for "real world" international communication. Such input not only increases the intelligibility of non-standard accents but also promotes greater tolerance for the diversity of World Englishes. This paper highlights the need to introduce non-standard accents into monolingual classrooms to improve receptive phonological accommodation and presents four learning activities designed for this purpose and adaptable for learners at various L2 proficiency levels.

　さまざまな第一言語を有する学習者がいる教室では、音韻的な多様性は確保されているが、第一言語が同じ学習者の教室においては、「実社会」での国際コミュニケーションに備えるために、明示的あるいは暗示的な指導方法で、英語の変種発音を生徒に人為的に提供する必要がある。そのようなインプットは、標準的ではないアクセント（訛り）の理解度を高めるだけでなく、World Englishesの多様性に対する寛容度を促進することになる。本論は、受容面での音韻論的適応力を向上させるために、第一言語が同じ学習者の教室に標準的でないアクセントを導入する必要性を強調し、また、この目的のためにデザインされた様々なL2レベルの学習者に適応可能な4つの活動を紹介する。

Crystal (2008) estimated there to be two billion non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, by far exceeding the number of native speakers (NSs), and this number continues to grow. As such, now more than ever, EFL learners need exposure to the rich variety of World Englishes to prepare them for the "real" global communication they are likely to encounter outside the classroom. There is now a greater need to ensure that L1 influences do not impede intelligibility, especially with regard to receptive skills. While explicit instruction in productive phonological accommodation and negotiation of meaning are widely recognized as important to proficient lingua franca use, receptive phonological accommodation often receives less teaching attention. This paper seeks to address this imbalance by advocating the need for a pedagogic focus on receptive phonological accommodation and presenting four learning activities to achieve it.

The Challenge of Monolingual Classrooms

There is a vast difference in the pedagogical approaches required in multilingual and monolingual settings, the latter of which, such as EFL contexts like Japan, are at a distinct disadvantage. In the multilingual classroom, which comprises a greater diversity of learner L1s, activities such as student-student dictation or information gap activities will obviously expose the learners to a variety of accents. As Jenkins (2000) states, "Where teaching takes place in multilingual environments, the competence-through-exposure process will, to some extent, occur naturally, if slowly" (p. 190). However, unlike the multilingual class, where to attain the highest degree of intelligibility possible students will make both productive and receptive adjustments approximating international norms, in monolingual classes the opposite occurs. To be better understood in the monolingual classroom, students conform their L2 phonology with that of their shared L1 (Walker, 2010). This tendency leads students further away from the intelligibility goals required to effectively participate in interactions with speakers not sharing the same L1 and attests to the need to foster greater communicative competence among less proficient English speakers in monolingual settings (see Tsang, 2021). As Jenkins (2000) notes, in the monolingual classroom, the type of interaction that occurs in the multilingual classroom is "impossible" to recreate, and students there are less motivated to adjust their listening or speaking to international standards to be understood. Research by Bent and Bradlow (2003) reinforces this idea, presenting evidence of an interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit. Their findings show that L2 speakers with a shared L1 understand each other better than those without. For a summary of this situation, see Figure 1.

Figure 1

Comparative Process of Intelligibility Outcomes for Multi-/Monolingual Classrooms, Adapted from Jenkins (2000, p. 192)

Multilingual classrooms	Need to communicate and convergence of common pronunciation	→	Replacement of L1 features	→	International intelligibility and reinforced target-like pronunciation
Monolingual classrooms	Need to communicate and convergence of common pronunciation	→	Non-replacement of L1 features	→	Context-specific intelligibility and reinforced L1 features

What is Receptive Phonological Accommodation?

The term "accommodate," although originating in the 1970s, has gained greater prominence since its inclusion in Jenkins' (2000) seminal work detailing the Lingua Franca Core, where she discusses its importance for negotiating intelligibility, most commonly between English speakers who do not share the same L1. *Productive phonological accommodation* refers to the adjustments necessary for effective communication when producing speech. In English, this may involve more clearly enunciating troublesome consonants such as /l/ or /r/ or taking care to pronounce consonant clusters at the end of a word. *Receptive phonological accommodation*, however, refers to the tolerance and adjustments required by L1 or L2 English speakers when listening to the speech of an L2 English speaker, such as modifying one's expectations or "accommodating" for any transfer of L1-influenced pronunciation "errors" or other features of speech that interfere with intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000). Receptive phonological accommodation entails a more flexible approach to listening, one in which there is a greater acceptance of the existence of a variety of different accents.

This more flexible approach is best achieved by greater exposure to non-standard accents. As one activity to promote receptive accommodation in multilingual classrooms, Jenkins (2000) suggests student-student dictation. To improve receptive phonological accommodation in a monolingual EFL classroom, where students share a common accent, dictation activities could instead use recordings of non-standard accents (see Activity 2 for useful online resources).

Why Incorporate Receptive Phonological Accommodation in Japanese EFL Classes?

As outlined above, the pronunciations of other World Englishes are absent from the monolingual classroom and must therefore be artificially introduced if receptive phonological accommodation skills are to be improved. Yet why is this necessary?

Firstly, as most English interactions now take place between NNSs, Japanese learners of English are more likely, in the future, to interact with other NNSs of English than with NSs. Yet Japanese junior high and high school English education leaves students ill prepared for this. The JET Programme, which provides schools with ALTs (i.e., Assistant Language Teachers), leans heavily towards employing NS teachers, amongst which there is an additional bias towards those with a North American accent (JET Programme: Participating Countries, 2019, pp. 1-4). Textbook listening materials also lack a diversity of accents. In an examination of six government-approved textbooks for Japanese junior high schools, Sugimoto and Uchida (2016) discovered that despite the 50 characters featured in the listening material coming from a variety of backgrounds, 46 of them had North American accents, with the remaining four being NSs as well. These hiring practices and materials are not conducive to educating students of English for current "real world" English usage situations or for improving their listening in such situations. As Walker (2017) argues, students need to be familiarized with different accents to improve their listening abilities: "If we want our learners to improve their receptive accommodation, that is, to improve their ability to understand English spoken with different non-standard accents, we need to expose them to these accents" (p. 4). In an examination of 37 L2 English learners and 10 L1 English-speaking American undergraduate students, Scales et al. (2006) also found interesting results that highlight the importance of introducing different accents into the classroom. In addition to the high priority that learners place on listening skills (also relevant to this argument), they found that the easier an accent was to understand, the more preferred it was. They therefore concluded that it was important for language learners to "hear, analyze and compare key features among a variety of accents" (p. 735) to address intelligibility and listening comprehension and to promote respect for accent diversity.

Implicit and Explicit Instruction

Research into L1 English speakers' comprehension of foreign-accented speech strongly suggests that explicit instruction familiarizing learners with the speech characteristics of English L2 speakers is effective in improving receptive abilities and thereby improving receptive phonological accommodation. Exploring the results of providing explicit instruction on Vietnamese-accented speech for English NSs, Derwing et al. (2002) found that not only did comprehension of Vietnamese-accented English improve, but so did ability to understand foreign-accented speech in general. Methods included instruction on specific pronunciation features, such as reduced consonant clusters and the deletion of final consonants. Lindemann et al. (2016) also describe positive results after explicitly instructing L1 English speakers on features of Korean English. It would therefore appear logical to incorporate such bottom-up accent familiarization activities into EFL classes, especially monolingual ones, which lack the dynamics of their multilingual counterparts. Although it is impossible to include every variety of World English in the limited time frame of a university semester, it may be valuable to identify the one or two varieties students are likely to encounter most often and study these exclusively. In the case of Japan, good candidates might be Korean English or Chinese English. An alternative instructional approach would be to provide students with self-access materials on particular accents in case of future need.

Not all foreign accent instruction, however, need necessarily be explicit. In fact, research has shown positive results for implicit learning as well, provided the right types of activities are used. For instance, a survey of the literature on NS comprehension abilities of NNS accents suggests that with exposure to individual accents, combined with transcription activities and subsequent feedback, comprehension improves. Not only have groups with such exposure shown greater word recognition, but their transcription accuracy is also 5-10% higher (Subtirelu & Lindeman, 2016).

Activities for the Monolingual Classroom

Jenkins (2000) states that preparing students in monolingual classrooms for interactions with students from a variety of L1 backgrounds could be minimally achieved "to some extent by playing tapes of L2 English speakers from a variety of L1s" (p. 192). Fortunately, with the development of internet resources and the advent of smartphones, there is much more that can now be done in the monolingual classroom to improve receptive pho-nological accommodation that does not involve "playing tapes."

Activity 1: NNS Interviews

To provide students with a "real life" experience outside the classroom that incorporates NNS receptive phonological accommodation, projects can be set up where students conduct interviews with NNSs of English in their school community. Although this type of activity is more appropriate for intermediate or higher-level students who have the confidence to interact one on one with an interviewee, it is one way of providing a "multilingual" element to what is essentially a monolingual class. To implement this type of activity, it is important first to instruct students on the etiquette and methods of conducting interviews and then carefully supervise the formulation of their questions. Interviews can be conducted by students either in person or through video conferencing platforms. Although there are no restrictions as to the themes of the interviews, an interviewee's experiences learning languages and living in Japan are topics that have worked well for me in the past. With regard to the receptive skills required for this project, not only is listening needed in order to ask follow-up questions during the interview, but the post-interview transcription of the recorded interview data offers an opportunity to analyse features of the interviewee's NNS language sample and, thus, build noticing skills. As a final activity that can be graded, students can present to the class on both the content of the interview and the features of the interviewee's language.

Activity 2: Transcription

In situations where an interview project is not possible, transcription of NNS speech samples is another method of exposing students to NNS accents. Websites where such samples can be found include the *Speech Accent Archive* (Weinberger, 2015), *International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA)* (Meier, 2022), and *English Listening Lesson Library Online (ELLLO)* (Beuckens, 2016). Students requiring more challenging material may also choose from the many NNS TED talks that are available online. Although discussion of receptive phonological accommodation generally centers on L2 speaker accents, less commonly taught NS pronunciations could also be included here, such as those of Australian English and Irish English. Transcription can be done individually, but in my experience, the students become more engaged in the activity when working in pairs.

Activity 3: Accent Awareness

This activity is an adaptation of accent awareness activities in Walker's (2010) *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*. It focuses on identifying and presenting on features of NNS accents. Students choose an NNS speech sample from either the *Speech Accent Archive* or *IDEA* and read the text first to familiarize themselves with the content. This step can be done with a single speech sample or many, depending on class language proficiency level. Students next listen to the speech samples, taking note of the features that distinguish the speaker's accent. It is suggested that students have their own listening device—a smartphone is sufficient—and, if possible, earphones to reduce classroom noise. Having individual devices allows students to listen to the speech sample multiple times to identify particular speech features, and there is bottom-up listening value in repeated playbacks focusing on the actual linguistic signal. It is important to stress to students that this is an exercise in finding particularities of speech, not "wrong" pronunciation. As noted on its website, the purpose of the *Speech Accent Archive* is to demonstrate that "accents are systematic rather than merely mistaken speech" (Weinberger, 2015, About section, para. 3). One reason for directing students to these sites is that they provide texts of the speech samples. *IDEA* additionally features "scholarly comment" and "general comment" sections, and the *Speech Accent Archive* includes a "generalizations" section to further help students in identifying an accent's distinguishing features. Questions that students should answer in their presentations include the following: "What features contribute to the speaker's intelligibility?" "What features negatively impact the speaker's intelligibility?" and "What features make this accent different from the accent of your country?"

Activity 4: *ELLLO* Online Listening Activities

Unlike the *Speech Accent Archive* and *IDEA*, which were not originally intended for English study, *ELLLO* is a site aimed specifically at English learners. Its highly numerous graded conversations include NNS and NS speakers with many different standard and non-standard accents. Students can work through the activities at their own pace on any computing device, using transcribed texts to check answers. In contrast to the activities described above, which are more suited to intermediate and advanced students, *ELLLO* is appropriate for lower-level students as there are many conversations suitable for beginners. Activities that I have found successful with such students in the past are the cloze test followed by the quiz. These activities can be found in the free downloadable book from the *ELLLO* website. Students first listen to the conversation a number of times, filling in the blanks. Answers can be checked with the online transcript. A quiz on the content of the conversation is also available. Students complete the quiz after listening to the conversation and then check their answers online. These activities provide an opportunity for students to listen to non-standard accents in spontaneous conversations without the demands of transcription or analysis.

Conclusion

To better prepare Japanese EFL learners for the interactions that they are now more likely to experience with other NNSs, it is important to introduce a variety of non-standard accents into the monolingual classroom. Familiarization with these accents may take the form of explicit learning, such as by studying the unique features of a specific language, or more implicit learning, where listening activities such as transcription are involved. As the lives of Japanese English learners become increasingly internationalized, with greater opportunities to study abroad as well as meet more students from abroad studying in Japan, so too has instructional attention in this important area of receptive phonological accommodation become all the more necessary. Not only would such attention lead to greater international intelligibility for listeners, but it would also help learners better appreciate and understand the diversity of World Englishes that feature in today's global communication.

References

Bent, T., & Bradlow, A. (2003). The interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, *114*(3), 1600-1610. https://doi.org/10.1121/1.1603234

Beuckens, T. (2016). *English Listening Lesson Library Online (ELLLO)*. https://www.elllo.org/index.htm

Crystal, D. (2008). Two thousand million? *English Today, 24*(1), 3–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078408000023

Derwing, T. M., Rossiter, M. J., & Munro, M. J. (2002). Teaching native speakers to listen to foreign-accented speech, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 23*(4), 245–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630208666468

Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language.* Oxford University Press.

JET Programme (2019). The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme: Participating Countries. http://jetprogramme.org/en/countries/

Lindemann, S., Campbell, M.-A., Litzenberg, J., & Subtirelu, N.C. (2016). Explicit and implicit training methods for improving native English speakers' comprehension of nonnative speech. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, *2*(1), 93–108. https://doi.org/10.1075/jslp.2.1.04lin

Meier, P. (2022). *International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA).* https://www.dialectsarchive.com

Scales, J., Wennerstrom, A., Richard, D., & Wu, S. H. (2006) Language learners' perceptions of accent. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(4), 715–738. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264305

Subtirelu, N. C., & Lindeman, S. (2016). Teaching first language speakers to communicate across linguistic difference: Addressing attitudes, comprehension, and strategies. *Applied Linguistics, 37*(6), 765–783. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu068

Sugimoto, J. & Uchida, Y. (2016). A variety of English accents used in teaching materials targeting Japanese learners. *ISAPh 2016 International Symposium on Applied Phonetics* (pp. 43–47). Nagoya, Japan. https://doi.org/10.21437/ISAPh.2016-9

Tsang, A. (2021). A neglected facet in ELT: Communication with less proficient speakers. *English Teaching Professional, 133*, 39-41. https://www.modernenglishteacher.com/interacting-with-less-proficient-speakers

Walker, R. (2010). *Teaching the pronunciation of English as a lingua franca.* Oxford University Press.

Walker, R. (2017). Accent, accommodation and intelligibility in ELF. *Modern English Teacher*, *26*(4), 4–7.

Weinberger, S. (2015). *Speech Accent Archive*. George Mason University. http://accent.gmu.edu

Sean Burgoine is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the International Studies Course at Kochi University, Japan. His research interests include pedagogic phonetics and phonology, World Englishes, and the use of English as a lingua franca.

JALT2022 – Learning from Students, Educating Teachers: Research and Practice

Fukuoka • Friday, Nov. 11 to Monday, Nov. 14 2022

KYOTO SANGYO UNIVERSITY

PanSIG 2023

LOOKING Forward

MAY 12TH-14TH

What is the PanSIG Conference?

PanSIG is an annual conference organized by many of the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). The conference brings together leading scholars and practitioners in language education from Japan, Asia, and throughout the world. It is a smaller, more intimate conference than the annual international JALT conference, and is a place where SIG members can network with each other.

PanSIG 2023 Conference

The PanSIG 2023 Conference will take place from May 12 to 14 2023 at Kyoto Sangyo University (京都産業大学) in Kyoto. It will be a face-to-face event with a solid hybrid component. The theme for PanSIG 2023 is "*Looking Forward*". The goal of the conference is to establish and foster connections between people and with other contemporary conference themes, such as (re)imagining education (PanSIG 2022) and "*Designing Future Society for Our Lives*" (2025 World Expo in Osaka). Based on what we have learned through the experiences of recent years, we feel it is time to look forward and focus on what lies ahead, both in terms of expectations and planning.

Call for Presentations

The call for presentations will be open from November 15, 2022 to January 15, 2023, at 11:59 pm JST. Presenters will have the opportunity of presenting live face-to-face at the venue or uploading pre-recorded presentations on the online platform. Proposals should reflect the aims of the conference and be related to the particular interests of a specific JALT Special Interest Group (SIG) https://jalt.org/main/groups. Abstracts regarding research items or projects which are still incomplete at the time of submission are also accepted. We also encourage first-time presenters—abstract writing support events take place monthly and are open to everyone. Submissions can be in English and Japanese, as well as Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Mandarin-Chinese, Papiamentu, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Thai. For more information about the conference, please visit our website: https://pansig.org/ or follow us on our social network channels.