

# The Necessity of the Pronunciation Training

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**Abstract:** I asked my students whether they want to speak English or not. Most of them answered 'yes,' and they have been thinking that they need to study English. In my class, the students can understand written English rather well, but they have some difficulties in speaking and listening to English. This makes students disappointed and some of them gradually do not want to learn English any more although they have known it is one of the common languages in the world and is very useful. So I would like to tell you the necessity of the training for making the English sounds. As you can see, English as a language and Japanese are completely different from each other. Of course, the sounds of them are quite different. Because there are no English sounds in Japanese, Japanese students should learn the English sounds with special care. It must not be allowed to replace the English sounds with the Japanese sounds. So far, the students have had very few chances to listen to the English sounds and to speak English even in class. Therefore, the teachers should give them more chances to get familiar with the English sounds. The students need more opportunities to produce the English sounds and listen to them. To understand or to be understood in English, they must acquire the right sounds. It is impossible to learn the accurate sounds unless the students are taught how to make them and practice to make them. Certainly, it will take a long time and a lot of patience to acquire them, but the training will help the students to improve their speaking and listening abilities step by step. When the students acquire the accurate sounds, they will surely have interests in learning English more and also have fun to communicate with one another by using English, a foreign language.

## 1. Introduction

When we begin to learn English for the first time at school, for most of the Japanese people it is at junior high school, perhaps all of us are very excited about getting to know the new language. It is possible to say that almost all of us expect that ultimately we can speak it fluently and read it without any difficulties like we can do in Japanese. But in reality, it may happen that our abilities do not improve as we wish and we would be depressed. And unfortunately, some of us would lose our interest in learning English forever. As one of the teachers, I would like to prevent this sad situation. It is really fun to know other people's opinion and tell them what he or she is thinking about by using a foreign language. I am sure that if students will have more chances to practice saying the English sounds and the sentences, they must have confidence to speak in English and become to like using English. This will lead them to learn more as it is often said that the more we know, the more we want to learn.

Japanese as a language and English are completely different from each other. The differences of them are too many to count one by one. As some of the remarkable differences, there are the pronunciation, the grammar, and the words order. There are four skills to command a language. They are the reading ability, the writing ability, the speaking ability, and the listening ability. It is necessary for us to have them when we read and talk. In reading or talking, we give and receive a lot of information. At the same moment, we have to understand them, develop them in our brain, and think and say the right comments about them. If we want or need to do the things which are written above, we must acquire the four skills. I would like to say with the special emphasis that the *four* skills are needed. It is not good to lose any one of them. They are all required. Even though we can read and write in a language, that is not sufficient to communicate by using that language. We do not communicate with one another only by writing or the e-mails all the time. When people get together, what do they do? Do you think that they keep quiet? They surely begin to

enjoy talking. That means they are speaking and listening to the language. To accept and receive it properly, we should practice to make and say the accurate sounds.

The Japanese people tend to be better at reading and writing in English than speaking and listening to it. One of the main reasons is, perhaps, that at school they have the English classes in which all students have to do is just translating English into Japanese. In that kind of lessons, unfortunately, they have only a few chances to listen to the English sounds and much less to speak English.

In Japan, it is possible to live without using English. But looking at the world around us, we can see that this is not the time to sit back and relax and think that we do not have to understand English. English as a language is used everywhere. And we end up finding it useful to understand English. Actually, we are surrounded by English; in the computers' screens, at the offices, in the industrial fields, and any places.

## 2. The Students in My Class's Case

I have been teaching the students of the 1B, the 2B, and the 3B. I asked my students some questions at the first lesson. The questions are like the following; “(1) Do you like to study English?”, “(2) Do you want to speak English?”, and “(3) Do you think that we need to study English?” The question (1) and (2) were given to the students of the 1B only, while the question (3) was given to all the students. The percentages given here are the rates of the students who answered ‘yes.’ Their answers are shown below.

[Data A]

(1) 68.3 %

(2) 85.4 %

(3) 92.7 % (1B), 100 % (2B), 92.1 % (3B)

As the main reasons for studying English, the following things were given.

- They can talk with many people in the world because English is spoken all over the world.
- They will need to use English when they work in the future.
- They want to visit foreign countries.
- It is fun to speak English.
- The number of the foreign people who live in Japan is increasing.
- English as a language is useful everywhere.
- Internationalization is widespread.
- They can deal with any troubles when they are in the foreign countries.

On the contrary, there are some reasons why they do not think they need to study English.

- It is possible for them to live in Japan without using English.
- They have no intention of going abroad.

As it is shown in the data, most of the students want to speak English and find it is important to learn it whether or not they like to study it. They have already known that English is one of the common languages in the world and it gives them various chances to make their life rich and very fruitful. Indeed, it is clear that English is one of the keys to bring us a lot of advantages to enjoy our life in this advanced and technological world. Because the students expect to communicate in English, the teachers have to make a great effort to let their wish come true. So I claim that the trainings for producing the correct English sounds and saying their opinion in English are also needed in the English lessons as well as the reading and the writing trainings.

In my class, I spend quite a long time to make and say the English sounds. First, I write a couple of sentences on the board every lesson. And I read them aloud, show my lips' formation to my students, and also explain the position or the movement of the teeth and the tongue. If it is difficult to understand by the simple explanation, I would draw a cross sectional picture of the mouth and explain how to make the sounds in detail again. I read the sentences aloud in rather exaggerated way at least three times and make my students listen to me. And then, I draw the colored lines under the target sounds which I want my students

to concentrate on and to produce accurately. After these processes, now I let them repeat after me. First, I divide the sentences into rather short pieces. If my students seem to have any difficulties in pronouncing words, I stop proceeding, show the proper sound, and let them repeat after me again.

Almost 100 percent of my students are puzzled by my way of leading the lesson at first. This is because they have never or rarely had the lesson to focus on making the sounds. So far, even in class, the students in Japan have very few chances to make or listen to the English sounds although they are surrounded by the written English. Therefore we, teachers should let them have much more chances to get familiar with the English sounds. It is certain that the more chances they have, the easier they will be engrossed in learning English. And it is also helpful for the slow learners because the sounds become the good clew for understanding.

Not all the students in my class move their lips and say the sounds I show. I try not to force them to say the sounds but encourage them to look at my mouth and listen to me very carefully. I think it is sometimes all right to depend on their will. It is surely exciting to find their lips moving slightly after a few lessons. I love this moment. Perhaps I am always waiting for this moment. As you can see, in Japan, the students are not accustomed to expressing themselves in the class, even their own opinions. So it is natural for them to hesitate to make sounds in front of other students. I tell them like the following things; There are many things they can practice in Japan without moving abroad; Before traveling foreign countries, they can learn and acquire a lot of skills in Japan; Of course they can get to know many new things leaving from Japan, but the things they could know would be much more when they are studying very hard in my class. And I often tell them that I know that they feel uncomfortable to make strange sounds for them, but it is stranger or more shameful to make the wrong sounds.

I can say with a great confidence that the students who are trying to produce the accurate sounds and move their pronunciation organs rightly look so cheerful and bright. Although at first, they show some difficulties in making the proper formation of the lips, the tongue, and the teeth, their pronunciation improves gradually. Without this process, no one can make any progress.

Most of the students in Japan can read and write in English rather well at certain degree. And they would translate English into Japanese as a matter of course. But once they have to say what is written or what they are writing, they hesitate. As one of the reasons, they are not taught how to produce the English sounds and have not done enough training for making them. It is quite natural that we can not do what we do not know. Teaching English means that teachers help their students to understand in English and, at the same time, to be understood in English. Therefore it is not good enough for the teachers to teach only reading and writing. The other two skills, the speaking ability and the listening ability, are also needed.

The teachers must encourage their students, so that the students may not hesitate nor be depressed. As the data shows, the students are eager to speak English. Here again, I would like to emphasize that the Japanese sounds and the English sounds are not at all the same things. It is obvious that it takes quite a long time for both the teachers and the students to teach or acquire the English sounds. It is expected that they must need much patience. We must train over and over again because the movement of the muscles, the tongue, and the lips or the formation of the mouth are not familiar to us. It is impossible for us to acquire the right sounds unless we practice very hard.

I give the pronunciation training to my university students, too. They also know that learning and acquiring English is necessary for them. However, for me, it seems that they do not know how and what to study. It is painful that even if they want to learn, they do not know what to do and they are at a loss. Fortunately, my students are docile and listen to me carefully. I repeatedly explain how to make the English sounds, let my students look at my mouth, and pronounce them in rather exaggerated way before they actually say them. My students try to imitate the way in which I produce the sounds. They concentrate their mind on moving their pronunciation organs. Although they are older than my students of the 1B, the 2B, and the 3B, they need to train from the beginning in order to make the English sounds. The pronunciation training is necessary regardless of age, and a little care makes our pronunciation much better.

### 3. The Teachers' Case

I attended the teaching English training program for teachers in Karatsu, Saga from August 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> in 2004. The lecturer was Dr. Yukiko Shima from Tokyo University of Science, Yamaguchi. I was there as her assistant. During the three days, she explained the importance of pronunciation to be understood in English and gave the teachers a large amount of opportunities to practice the English sounds. Especially, she explained the necessity of the training for making the consonant sounds. A Japanese sound consists of a vowel and a consonant except the sounds of 'a', 'i', 'u', 'e', 'o', and 'n'. On the other hand, in English, a consonant has its own sound. In short, a vowel sound and a consonant sound are independent sounds.

And the alphabet is just the name of a letter. Let us suppose a word, cat. We never read this word, [si:], [eI], [ti:]. Hence, one by one, we have to learn the own sounds which the letters have themselves. Let us think of a couple of words and count each of the vowel letters and the consonant letters in those words. Which letters are more, the vowel or the consonant? We can find that the consonant sounds have the larger part in most of the words. So it is clear that if we practice to make the consonant sounds hard, we can be understood much better. To be able to produce the right sounds means to have the ability to tell the sounds correctly.

Firstly, if we can say the accurate sounds, they are acquired and are already put in our brain properly. Therefore, we can tell them exactly. And then, we can define that the speaking ability and the listening ability are connected closely. Secondly, when we know how to make the sounds, it helps us to read and write very easily. The sounds become the good clue for writing and reading. A word is made of the continuation of the sounds. Since we have already had the ability to tell the sounds, all we have to do is just write them on the paper.

However, there is one thing to remember. Once we have the wrong habit of making a sound, it is very hard and we need a lot of repetitions of training and much time to correct it. Although the training done in Karatsu was only for three days, it proved that even the teachers can not correct their wrong habits of pronunciation so quickly. So the teachers must not let their students have any opportunities to make the wrong sounds. If they produce the wrong sound, the teachers have to show the accurate sound immediately.

Almost all the teachers at the program were so surprised to know how to produce the English sounds. For most of them, it was the first experience to have the sound training in particular. Since teachers themselves have not ever had this kind of lesson, it is reasonable for them that they never think of giving their students the training for producing the English sounds. We can say that the training for just a short period of time is not sufficient. Our training in Karatsu was really an intensive one, but that was not good enough. Because even the teachers had difficulties to acquire the right sounds, their students would have much more difficulties.

Now, I would like to show the other data. We had the sound recognition test. For the test, Dr. Shima prepared some words printed on the paper. Five or six pairs of words for telling the first sound of a word were given such as light and right, lane and rain, lead and read, led and red, load and road, and leaf and reef for the recognition of the sounds [l] and [r]. She read a pair after another. The teachers listened to her very carefully in order to tell which sound was the beginning of the word she said. Then they circled a word which they thought she read. The number of the teachers who had this test was twenty-six. Their native language was Japanese. And this test was done on August 17<sup>th</sup> and on August 19<sup>th</sup>. The right answer rates are seen in the diagram which is shown below. The rates are said in percentages.

[Data B]

Sounds	The Right Answer Rate (%)	
	August 17th	August 19th
[f] and [wh]	91.4	97.7
[s] and [th]	92	92.3
[s] and [sh]	94.7	98.7
[b] and [v]	89.3	88.7
[d] and [th]	75	97
[m] and [n]	60.7	74.7
[n] and [ng]	97.3	75
[k] and [qu]	100	100
[l] and [r]	86.7	90.3

The result says that not all the teachers are good at listening. As the Data B shows, most of the right answer rates are improved a little, but the rates of the two pairs, [b] and [v] or [n] and [ng], got worse. It is interesting to find that there are sounds which Japanese people can tell rather easily or can not tell so easily. The fact that the teachers' listening ability is not perfect means they also have difficulties in telling the right sounds of English. Besides, we can say that the three days' training was too short to acquire the sounds. It is a pity that the adults have been learning English very hard for a long time but they have not had the chance to study how to produce the sounds of it. We should change this situation right now. It will be good for our students, too.

Some of the teachers said that they did not have much confidence to show the accurate sounds to their students. It will take some time for students to learn the new sounds. Therefore, the teachers do not have to hurry to make the lesson go forward. They should give the lessons step by step making sure that their students are following them. The teachers should take their time for their students. It is useless for the students to have lessons without acquiring anything at all. While the students are learning, the teachers also have chance to study how to make the right sounds of English. So it means that both of them can share the same feelings in learning English.

The teachers should teach their students showing the accurate sounds and leading them to make it properly with special care taking adequate time. In addition, the teachers should encourage them when they are trying to make the correct sounds, but not let them disappointed because they can not say the very right sounds they really want to produce. It is indeed very difficult and challenging for students to learn unfamiliar things. It is natural for students to make a lot of mistakes, hesitate, and need a lot of time and the help by their teacher in learning. The students can enjoy and have a lot of fun as well. They must be very satisfied when they can speak and understand others in English. In fact, they want to do so as the Data A shows.

#### 4. Conclusion

Looking back on the times, ten or twenty years ago, we had fewer chances for listening to the English sounds. Nowadays, we can see the movies, the videos, the DVDs or listen to the CDs which are filled with the English sounds. We can get them very easily even at the local book stores. That means we can listen to the English sounds so easily whenever we want. Although we have much more opportunities to learn English, it is possible to say that there are only a few people who can say that they are very good at speaking and listening to English with the true confidence.

It seems to me that most people do not catch the English sounds correctly. I have many students who like to listen to the English songs. Some of them listen to the songs just to hear the melody or their favorite singers' voices. They do not understand the lyrics because they can not catch the English sounds even if they want to know what the singers are saying. However, some of the students try to imitate the singers' way of saying the English sounds. I think it is very positive attitude towards learning English. But it is not good enough. When I ask them to sing their favorite English songs for me, they sing in the strange

language that I do not know.

I would like to help them acquire the exact sounds of English and I hope they enjoy communicating with each other using the proper sounds of English. All I can do in my class is to tell them how to make the right sounds, to give them a lot of trainings for producing the sounds and to correct their pronunciation every time they make mistakes. Otherwise, who teach them? They have to be taught the right sounds of English because the English sounds and the Japanese sounds are not at all the same things.

Therefore, I urge the necessity of the trainings for producing the right sounds of English. And this will also help the students understand the written English or write in English since the students can learn the rhythms and the patterns of the English sentences by repeating to say the words and the sentences. All the four skills are linked together.