

Native-like Pronunciation versus Comprehensibility:

Teaching Japanese Learners English Pronunciation

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In a world that is becoming more globally connected and has the need to communicate through English, the question arises of what needs to be taught in consideration to English. Trends show that in the 1980s and 1990s, British English pronunciation was the preferred instruction, while now it has switched to American English pronunciation (Kang, 2015). Berns (1995) questions if English belongs to native speakers or to anyone who uses it. If English belongs to anyone who uses it then one specific kind of pronunciation should not be taught.

However, 85% of Japanese and South Korean speakers express their interest to sound like a native speaker (Kang, 2015). Teachers then need to consider how to balance native like pronunciation and comprehensibility. First, Japanese patterns of English will be highlighted, next pronunciation and comprehensibility and then applications for teachers.

Japanese Patterns of English

The Japanese language contains the adoption of *katakana* which simulates English (Smith, 2012). Japanese students may believe they are correctly pronouncing English words when they speak *katakana* words. However, *katakana* words may actually hinder communication, because the English words have less vowel sounds and less syllables

than *katakana* words. For example, *chocolate* in English has two or three syllables, (depending on the way in which you pronounce the word!) but in Japanese there are four syllables. Students say *cho-ko-ra-te*, instead of *choc-late* or *cho-co-late*. Even though *katakana* puts English words directly into Japanese, the pronunciation is often different.

Vowels are central in the Japanese language, while consonant sounds are not, with a total of about 15, while English has 24 consonant sounds. It becomes difficult for Japanese learners to end English words in a *w*, *d*, *t* or *k* sound in particular, as these letters are never in a final position in Japanese (Smith, 2012).

Some English consonant sounds that cause difficulty include /l/ and /r/, which is one combined sound in Japanese. Students may confuse minimal pairs such as *rice* and *lice* or *room* and *loom*. Both /th/ sounds are difficult as well as /v/, which may be pronounced as /b/ (Thompson, 2001). A cause for difficulty in producing these English sounds is partly due to tongue placement and the difficulty for Japanese speakers to get their tongue in the correct position (Smith, 2012).

Looking at suprasegmental aspects, stress is a main feature. Stressed parts of words are longer, louder and higher in pitch. In English, stress is very important, but in Japanese the focus is only on high or low tones (Smith, 2012). It is difficult for Japanese speakers to use stress, so both English intonation and stress patterns must be learned and practiced (Thompson, 2001).

Pronunciation versus Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility is the focus on meaning in communication (Jung, 2010).

It relates to the level of difficulty a listener has to understand the speaker (Derwing & Munro, 2009). While pronunciation focuses on producing the correct sound for each letter, comprehensibility focuses on the meaning as a whole. Students may not be able to pronounce every letter correctly, but if their speech is comprehensible to the listener, it really does not matter if a sound is incorrect to the ears of the listener.

There is a link between pronunciation and comprehensibility, though. Sometimes in order to be comprehensible, correct pronunciation is necessary. A study by Saito (2011) revealed that explicit letter sound instruction did improve the students' comprehensibility. However, the students did not sound more native like, though their pronunciation was better.

In another study by Tominaga (2011), Japanese students who were considered to have successful pronunciation skills, were rated by both native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES) based on suprasegmentals of pronunciation, including stress, rhythm and intonation, as well as voice quality and sound change in the beginning or end of sentences. The NES rated the students 7.13 on a scale of 10 while the NNES rated the students a 5.27 on a scale of 10. NES actually rated the Japanese students about two points higher than the NNES, so NES are not so focused on perfect pronunciation, in terms of suprasegmentals.

Global English

Global English is the background of teaching pronunciation and considering what aspects are most important – native-like pronunciation or comprehensibility. Global English is English used when talking to people from other countries for successful communication. In today's world, many NNES to NNES interact (Jung, 2010).

A university professor from Japan wrote about his efforts to help students and in turn Japanese people as a whole realize that native-like fluency is an unrealistic expectation and that special status should not be given to certain countries. Rather, there needs to be acceptance for all kinds of (global) English (Sakai & D'Angelo, 2005) There are many dialects and ways to speak English, which change depending on the context. (Kachru, 1991; Berns, 1995).

Application for Teachers

Saito (2011) states,

“Although some L2 learners who strongly strive for nativeness should not be discouraged to pursue their ambitions, researchers as well as teachers should set realistic goals for L2 learners” (p. 45).

Piske et al. (2001) explains that L2 instruction does not necessarily decrease foreign accent. If teachers are centered on this goal, students with different aims be inhibited from their desired achievements.

Teachers can consider what is important for students to learn about pronunciation in order to become comprehensible. As mentioned, pronunciation of individual sounds can be useful to learn if those particular sounds disrupt comprehension. Suprasegmentals such as stress, tone and intonation help improve comprehensibility as well.

Many Japanese students may want to sound like native speakers but their ability to reach this goal may not be possible, so students need to be taught that it is okay to make mistakes. Negotiating interaction is part of the communication process. It is not just the listener who does not understand the student. The student may not always find input from the listener comprehensible either.

Both the L2 speaker and the listener have a need to negotiate for meaning, through modifications of speech (listener may speak slower and simpler) and corrective feedback (“Do you mean...?” for both the speaker and the listener) in order to communicate (Ellis, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Considering the purpose of the class and what will help the students need to communicate is the key element in this process. In a class of all Japanese learners their needs are fairly similar because they share a common native language. Their plans for their future use of English, such as learning English for fun or learning for academic purposes will change the emphasis on what should be taught explicitly, or not. In a mixed class with speakers from various languages, the teacher may need to focus on several comprehension factors and determine what will benefit the class as a whole, while having the willingness to help individual students with pronunciation.

Japanese Students' Views

Some Japanese students from a small school in the Northwest United States said:

I want to enjoy talking with American.

If we can't speak perfect English pronunciation, we will misunderstand in other word instead of correct word.

Sometimes American can't understand what I want to say. Maybe, my pronunciation is bad. So I want to get perfect English pronunciation and talk more.

Other American can hear my English talking if I can speak perfect English pronunciation.

Perfect English pronunciation can understand easy.

The students recognized that they have a “deficit” in their pronunciation and want to sound better, in order to be understood. Some students mentioned elements that support comprehensibility over perfect pronunciation:

I think we can communicate with American without perfect English pronunciation.

I think that if I can't speak English well, I can communication with other country people.
I think it is okay for me to just conversation.

Perfection isn't important because nothing is perfect. (My language, my pronounce.) I can't speak like Americans.

Language is just a tool, so I think we don't have to be perfect. I think it's more important to be able to have contents rather than just good pronunciation.

(Japanese university students, personal communication, March 2016).

Students need to consider what makes it difficult for them to be understood by both native speakers and speakers from other language and cultural backgrounds. This way, students can set goals that will help them become more comprehensible. Teachers can choose what parts of pronunciation to teach or not, but learners must practice it to improve and set their own goals for improvement, too.

Conclusion

The conclusion that this information arrives at is that some Japanese students desire to speak like a native speaker, but teachers need to consider the importance of comprehensibility over perfect pronunciation. Understanding students' views on their own ability to communicate will help teachers, and students, develop goals that are realistic for themselves and their future plans. Additionally, teachers need a high degree of knowledge about their students' native language, as it pertains to teaching English pronunciation.

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