

Is explicit English pronunciation teaching necessary for Japanese college students?

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is becoming the mainstream teaching approach in oral communication classes in Japan, where fluency training is focused upon, while accuracy training in pronunciation is rather neglected in many cases. Explicit pronunciation teaching, such as the Audiolingual method, is not widely seen since it is considered old-fashioned or ineffective, which may not be the case. This paper proposes an intervention study in Japanese EFL college classrooms to examine whether or not such explicit pronunciation instruction can help improve the intelligibility of college students' English pronunciation. The study will compare a treatment group, which is to receive both teacher-centered pronunciation training and CLT, and a control group, which is to receive CLT only, in order to evaluate whether and how accuracy-focused pronunciation training is necessary for learners to produce more intelligible pronunciation of English.

0. Introduction

Today, English teachers in Japan are expected to improve students' communicative abilities. According to a report published on March 3, 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has proposed several measures, such as the revision of the Ministry's Courses of Study with a further focus on cultivating students' basic and practical communication abilities. It also states that the overall objective of foreign language study at upper secondary schools is "to develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (The Course of Study of Foreign Languages). In addition to such governmental efforts to improve oral communication abilities as above, learners themselves

are motivated to be able to speak English (Kozuge p.10, Makino p.15, Arimoto p.27). This is also supported by the results of an informal survey that I conducted in my college English classes.

While oral communication is considered as important as other forms of communication now, pronunciation instruction has been peripheral in English teaching in Japan, partly because teachers do not know how to teach it, do not find it important, or because many of the high stake entrance examinations do not impose listening/speaking tests, although a listening section has been introduced to the Center Examination recently. This does not mean, however, that pronunciation teaching is unnecessary. Lack of basic pronunciation skills sometimes leads to humiliating situations such as when native speakers do not understand what non-native speakers are saying (Goodwin p.117).

If pronunciation skills are essential to a learner's ability to communicate effectively, and teaching such skills has played a minor role in oral communication classes on many Japanese college campuses, then several questions need to be explored to bring pronunciation teaching to the forefront. Such questions as the following can help guide the process of integrating pronunciation skills into the classroom. How should pronunciation teaching be conducted in the classroom? What types of instructions would be more effective in a three-month semester Japanese college English course, which typically takes place only once or twice a week? Following an overview of previously proposed instructions, I will propose an intervention study to find out if and how important teaching pronunciation is in order to make learners more intelligible and what types of instruction would be more effective.

1. Overview of Language Teaching

1.1. Explicit and implicit instructions

In the past two decades, research that addresses the effectiveness of various types of L2 instruction has arisen. The studies show "superiority of explicit over implicit processes in second language learning at least for certain rules and certain learners" (DeKeyser p.196). Although there are many eclectic approaches and methods for ESL/EFL teaching, the approaches that will be discussed in this paper are Audiolingualism, the Natural Approach, and Focus on Form. The most extreme teaching approaches in terms of explicitness of instruction would be Audiolingualism and Natural Approach, with Focus on Form in the middle.

In Audiolingualism, "the target linguistic system will be learned through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system" (Finocchiaro and Brumfit p.92). The target pronunciation features are taught explicitly by making use of information from phonetics (Celce-Murcia p.3), for instance. This approach incorporates principles from behavioral psychology, and one of the most central principles is that "foreign

language learning is basically a process of mechanical habit formation” (Richards & Rodgers p.20). Therefore, the learners are engaged in “reinforcement” activities such as repetitive minimal pair drills, memorizing dialogs, and performing pattern drills to reach automatic production and comprehension of utterances (R & R p. 57).

The Natural Approach, which is the other extreme of explicit teaching, “conforms to the principles of naturalistic language learning in young children” (R & R p.179). The approach is based on the assumption that in order to acquire a foreign language, learners need to undergo processes that are similar to L1 acquisition, and to try to interact in the target language for communication. However, the naturalistic way of learning may not result in fair acquisition of the target language in the case of EFL learners because the learners cannot be exposed to a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input. Krashen, whose views of language acquisition are the base for the Natural Approach theory and research, states that such learning may prompt fossilization. If the only comprehensible input available to learners is filled with ‘errors,’ intermediate or transitional forms and first language influenced errors, and if learners hear enough of it, the learner language will be fossilized (Krashen p.47). This suggests that learners, especially in EFL situations, would benefit from formal teaching not only because they are not in an environment similar to L1 learners of the target language, but also because they can prevent the fossilization due to the controlled error-free input and explicit error correction, which are techniques used typically in Audiolingualism.

Focus on Form can be considered to be in the middle of the two extremes in terms of explicitness of instruction. While Audiolingualism is form-centered, and the Natural Approach has a highly communicative framework, Focus on Form arose as an alternative to such extreme ways of teaching (Long p.43). It shares characteristics with the Natural Approach because its “overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long p.46) and with Audiolingualism because teachers “overtly” draw students’ attention to linguistic elements. The syllabus of Focus on Form is communicative while no L2 forms to be learned are preplanned. However, when a form is perceived to be problematic, the teacher and/or other learners may address it explicitly in a variety of ways, such as through direct error correction, rule explanation, modeling, and drilling, to name a few.

1.2. Application of explicit or implicit instructions to pronunciation teaching

The majority of research conducted on the effectiveness of different types of instruction has been focused on morphosyntactics, whether the correct use of definite and indefinite articles can be learned better through systematic article instruction, for example (Master 1994). There is little information available concerning the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction, however. Even experimental studies on

pronunciation instruction differences have provided few useful results. For instance, the MacDonald et al. study (1994) shows that there is no difference among the four conditions, (a) traditional drilling activities (b) self-study with tape recordings (c) interactive activities and (d) no intervention. However, the intervention lasted only 10 to 30 minutes, and it is understandable that none of the instructions resulted in improvement of pronunciation. As far as I investigated, no other studies compared the effectiveness of Audiolingualism, the Natural Approach, and Focus on Form type instructions for learners to acquire pronunciation, nor has any known study provided objective and/or analytical results on the effectiveness of the various approaches.

I believe that it is possible to apply various techniques of morphosyntactic teaching to pronunciation teaching, and to see what techniques would make learners more intelligible. In other words, it would be beneficial to see whether the overall conclusion based on the studies concerning morphosyntax acquisition is applicable to pronunciation learning as well: Do explicit instructions work better than implicit ones for pronunciation training?

The audiolingual approach, which is very explicit instruction, was almost totally abandoned because it was considered boring, behaviorist and ineffective to make learners communicative. However, an EFL learner could learn to produce sounds that do not exist in his/her L1 by having explicit lessons on the articulation as in the audiolingual approach, better than simply practicing through communication, especially when learners are mature enough to understand rules and explanation. Natural Approach types of instruction may not, thus, be suitable for EFL learners because their language may be fossilized at an earlier stage as stated in the review section above. Instead, the experiment here will see whether Audiolingualism techniques are necessary, although they are considered rather old fashioned and neglected. The study here will also examine whether Focus on Form types of instruction are enough for EFL learners to produce intelligible pronunciation. When it comes to Focus on Form, how can the teacher apply techniques used in the approach for pronunciation teaching? Since Focus on Form instruction does not specify how exactly he/she should go about teaching, the teacher can apply procedures used in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), where learners learn a language through using it, while the teacher corrects errors, but only when communication breakdown is going on. The teacher is not a centered authority, but a facilitator. There are other differences as in the following table whose first three and last columns are cited from Celce-Murcia et al. (pp.326-327) and the other three are from Brown (pp.34-35).

	Focus	Tolerance of pronunciation errors	Method used	Learner roles	Teacher roles	Roles of materials	Summary
Audiolingual	Accuracy	Relatively intolerant	Teacher correction Repetition drill and practice in the language lab Minimal pair drill	Organisms that can be directed by skilled training techniques to produce correct responses	Central and active teacher-dominated method. Provides model, controls direction and pace.	Primarily teacher-oriented. Tapes and visuals, language lab often used	Pronunciation is emphasized and taught from the beginning.
Communicative Language Teaching	Fluency obligatory; accuracy optional	Relatively tolerant	Learner engagement in authentic listening and speaking tasks	Learner as negotiator, interactor, giving as well as taking	Facilitator of the communication process, participants' tasks, and texts; needs analyst, counselor, process manager.	Primary role in promoting communicative language use; task-based materials; authentic.	Communicatively adequate pronunciation is generally assumed to be a by-product of appropriate practice over a sufficient period of time.

Thus, the proposed intervention study here is to examine the effects on pronunciation intelligibility from the combination of explicit and context-embedded pronunciation teaching, which incorporates techniques both of the audiolingual approach and of CLT, and context-embedded CLT only. I hypothesize that techniques of Audiolingualism such as explicit explanation and repetitive drills play a significant role in improving learners' intelligible production of English sounds, and that EFL learners, at least adult learners like college students, cannot attain pronunciation improvement as satisfactorily when they receive only unsystematic, occasional explicit pronunciation instructions as they can with systematic and pre-planned training such as pattern practice and drills of critical phonetic features that do not exist in their L1 but do in the L2.

2. Experiment

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study will consist of 50 college students enrolled in about 12 weekly EFL classes (90 minutes per week) at a private college in Japan. Each student has completed 6 years of English learning prior to entering the college. They all take a TOEIC test when they enter the college as a placement test for their required English courses. I expect the participants' score will range from approximately 450 to 500. All are Japanese native speakers aged from 18 to 20. They are the researcher's

students.

The combination group will comprise of 25 students who are to receive both audiolingual pronunciation training and CLT in class. Another group of 25 students who will serve as a control group are to be engaged only in communicative activities. Both groups will be taught by the researcher. The selection of students will be made carefully so that there will be no significant difference between the two groups in the results of the pretest and of the TOEIC placement test.

2.2. The combination group

For the combination group, explicit and systematic pronunciation training is introduced in the first half of each lesson. In the latter half, the students will be engaged in communicative activities, which will be discussed later.

2.3. The control group

For the control group, only the communicative activities will be introduced. The students will spend the whole class working on communicative tasks. No pronunciation teaching will be given unless asked for or the teacher finds communication breakdown happening due to pronunciation errors. The teacher will be tolerant of errors most of the time.

2.4. Pronunciation teaching

2.4.1. Overall design

Based on the techniques and practices which Celce-Murcia et al. provided, a list of steps for teaching pronunciation in the classroom is being made and organized. The steps shift from strict audiolingual techniques to more communicative ones. They will be flexibly modified according to students' progress.

1. Model presentation, Listening and Imitation

Students listen to a teacher-provided model and repeat or imitate it.

2. Description and Analysis

Articulatory descriptions, articulatory diagrams and phonetic alphabets are used occasionally for better clarification of problematic sounds to the learners.

3. Controlled practice (e.g. minimal pair drills)

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Students distinguish similar and problematic sounds through listening and speaking, starting with word-level drills and moving on to sentence-level drills.

4. Guided practice (e.g. information gap activities)

Students work on structured communication exercises that enable them to monitor for the specified feature.

5. Communicative practice

Students are given less structured activities that require them to attend to both form and content of utterances.

2.4.2. Teaching suprasegmental and segmental features of English sounds

In the pronunciation teaching of this study, both segmental and suprasegmental features will be dealt with. Segmental features, vowels and consonants, are important because they are building blocks of speaking. In this study, only the segmental features that are considered to require the most attention for Japanese English learners will be treated, based on Kenworthy's list of features problematic to Japanese learners (pp.149-151).

The following are the English segmental phonological features that are hard for Japanese learners to acquire: /f/ /v/, /θ//ð/, /l/ /r/, /i/ in 'fit', /i/ in 'feet', /æ/ in 'cap', /ə/ ¹ in 'cup' and /ɑ/ in 'carp.'

Moreover, suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm and intonation) are vital in communication. Wong gave an example to show that English speakers pay attention to the rhythm more than to the individual sounds (p.45). "A San Francisco newspaper columnist reported that a student went to the library to ask for a copy of John Steinbeck's novel, *Of My Cement*. When we compare the rhythm of this mishearing to the rhythm of the actual title, *Of Mice and Men*, we can see that they are identical." Celce-Murcia et al. state, "learners who use incorrect rhythm patterns or who do not connect words together are at best frustrating to the native-speaking listener" (p.131). As for the improper intonation counter, the learner may be perceived as abrupt or even rude. If the stress and rhythm patterns are too nonnative-like, the users may not be understood at all (p.131).

Since Japanese is a syllable-timing language, in which each syllable is given equal time, all the characteristics that consist of a stress-timing language are problematic. Among such characteristics, linking

¹ This symbol will be used in the classroom to show the sound both in stressed and unstressed positions. In other words, the underlined vowels in "understand" (unstressed) and "cup" will be treated (stressed) as the same vowel in quality.

and deletion are rather easier to learn and effective to use for the participants of the study. Therefore, I add training featuring the two items in the teaching plan. In addition, a problematic segmental feature “schwa” in suprasegmental ‘weak form’ is included because teaching the schwa sound in words and sentences will be more practical than treating it by itself.

2.5. Communicative Language Teaching-communicative tasks

In order for learners to practice using a foreign language in a meaningful context, realistic tasks should be provided. Based on the experience of teaching college students in Japan for more than ten years, I believe that they would like to learn “survival English for traveling” such as greetings, shopping and getting directions. The students do not foresee using English for academics or work. Rather, they are interested in being able to speak English in order to travel abroad. I will not hesitate to change the task topics if it turns out that the participants have very different objectives for learning English after conducting a survey immediately prior to the research.

Assuming that possible participants have such goals for learning English as above, I referred to a “survival language learning syllabus for foreign travel” by Nation and Crabbe. They conducted a needs analysis asking 10 people who traveled to a foreign country with whom they used the foreign language, in what situations, and what was said. They also provided a list of words and vocabulary for the situation. However, both the situation and the vocabulary list needed to be adapted to fit the study here. For example, a section “reading signs” is not necessary for speaking. They have a section for finding accommodation, but for the participants of this study, the situation is not realistic because I assume that they usually make reservations for a hotel before traveling. Rather than knowing how to find accommodation, they should learn how to check in and check out.

Therefore, a new list of situations, words, and phrases for traveling is being compiled for the study. The following are the tasks that will be taught to the participants in this study: “Answering questions at immigration”, “Ordering food at a fast-food restaurant”, “Ordering food at a restaurant”, “Going shopping”, “Getting directions”, “Using transportation”, “Checking-in/out”, “Making complaints”, and “Making small talk.”

2.6. Syllabus structure

This is what the two groups will learn in ten classes out of twelve in a semester. The remaining two classes will be used for an introductory class and a final test, which are not discussed here. The control group will be engaged in only CLT activities. The detailed activities are now being created.

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Class	Explicit Pronunciation Training		Communicative Activities
	Segmental	Suprasegmental	
1	f/v	word stress	answering questions at immigration
2	θ/ð	sentence stress	ordering food at a fast food restaurant
3	l/r	linking	ordering food at a restaurant
4	ɪ/i	deletion	Going shopping
5	æ/ə/ɑ	consonant clusters	getting directions
6	f/v	weak forms	Using transportation
7	θ/ð	word & sentence stress	making complaints
8	l/r	linking/deletion	checking in/out at a hotel
9	review	consonant clusters/weak forms	making small talk
10	review	review	Review

2.7. Assessment

In order to evaluate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of explicit pronunciation instructions, a valid assessment will be conducted before and after the experiment. Many of the past studies on pronunciation instruction effectiveness used holistic assessment to measure the pronunciation improvement. An analytical assessment is desirable because it will show what features are improved and which features are not improved. Yoshida's tool should serve the purpose of the study here because it is proven to be reliable and valid for assessing the pronunciation ability of Japanese EFL college students. Those who are interested can access information on the assessment procedures electronically, but this information cannot be placed in this paper due to the limited space.

3. Future tasks

The results of the study will show if explicit audiolingual type repetitive practices make Japanese English learners more intelligible speakers. I expect the experiment to prove that such techniques are effective. After the experiment, I plan to make public exactly what kind of tasks and activities are used, as well as detailed assessment results. In the remaining section, I would like to mention some questions that should be addressed concerning pronunciation instruction.

First, how long will the learners retain their improved pronunciation after classroom learning? Producing foreign language sounds requires different muscular movements from those of their L1. Unless the learners practice these movements by themselves, their newly acquired pronunciation will soon be lost. I believe if they know that the more they practice, the more improvement they can attain, the learners will be motivated to practice outside the classroom.

Secondly, will the learners be more confident in their speaking and more willing to speak? I consider that pronunciation instruction has a positive psychological influence on learners. They will be less fearful of speaking the language.

Thirdly, how intelligible will their English have to be? It is widely known that to make learners speak like native English speakers is considered unrealistic and unnecessary, but it does not mean that they can produce any English they want. If there is a threshold between speech that can be understood and not understood, then where is it? What features have to be learned vigorously? In this day and age when English is being more widely used by L2 speakers than by L1 speakers of English, more people regard English accented with speakers' L1 to be acceptable, or sometimes even appreciable since it shows the speakers' identity. Jennifer Jenkins proposes 'the Lingua Franca Core', which is a "pedagogical core of phonological intelligibility for speakers of EIL"² (p.123). It has far fewer items to be taught in pronunciation instruction than other published manuals and textbooks "by removing from the syllabus many time-consuming items which are either unteachable or irrelevant for EIL (p.160)." Although the core looks practical, there are some questions to be answered before implementing it in the classroom: Will the students be satisfied with lower but more realistic goals of achievement of pronunciation? Will they have more chances to communicate in English with non-native speakers of English in the future than with native speakers? What kind of modifications should be made to the current assessment tool to measure the intelligibility of EIL?

Designing a pronunciation instruction beneficial to L2 learners is a challenging task. In addition to considering the above questions, one has to take into account different variables such as learners' age, L1, and motivation level, in order to design a pronunciation instruction syllabus that will help learners to make themselves understood. It is, however, important to move forward one step at a time. I hope that the proposed experiment here will help learners to communicate in English effectively and willingly, and it will help to build student confidence in their L2, as well.

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