

Pronunciation: How Important Is It?

Recently I asked members of ETJ's mailing list: How important do you consider teaching pronunciation in your classes? How, where, and why do you fit it into your curriculum? Below are some of the responses I received. Thank you to all those who contributed.

Marc Helgesen-

I remember a workshop in which the presenter asked a really important question: Where does pronunciation begin? Since then I've asked the question to many of my own students. The usual response was "the mouth" or to point to their vocal chords. But as that presenter suggested, and I very much agree, pronunciation begins in the mind. Sure, there is a lot of mechanical practice that goes on (such as differentiating between leap/lip, sheep/ship, etc.). But those techniques just don't seem to stick once we are outside of a focused practice session. Instead, I find it much more useful to insert silent steps in pronunciation work. I'll model a sentence. I ask the student to repeat it silently in their minds. They will then check how it sounds using their own voices, but with *my* stress and intonation. By focusing on how they want to say it, they have a clearer model. After saying it silently, they say it aloud. This is very different than the standard "listen and repeat instantly" model, where they are still struggling to figure out the sounds they have just heard and are yet asked to produce those sounds at the same time.

The problem with traditional "mechanical level" pronunciation and recitation work is that it doesn't transfer to anything outside of the "drill room". What I'm suggesting is learners have to work on hearing it and dealing with it mentally before we force production.

Steve Cassidy –

The teaching of pronunciation is not a high priority in my current

teaching situation. I teach as an ALT in public junior high schools. Of course I do lots of "listen and repeat" exercises but I don't check each student's ability to master a sound. If a student is particularly interested in correct pronunciation, I will help them. But generally, I think too much of a focus upon the teaching of pronunciation can cause the students to lose interest in English. My job as an ALT is mostly to motivate and keep the students interested in communication. Therefore I favor a light-hearted, minimalist approach to the teaching of pronunciation.

I would add that consideration of a learners' level is very important too. Most of my students are either very low level adults or junior high students. I think at this stage it is essential to encourage taking risks; not be afraid to make a mistake. Isn't this a common problem for low level Japanese students? They are afraid to attempt self-expression. So, teach pronunciation, yes. But don't let it interfere with the students' desire to communicate. I think the amount of time we spend in a class on teaching pronunciation should increase as the level gets higher.

In a school I taught at last year, the whole curriculum was geared to perfecting pronunciation and recitals. Students were expected to pronounce and enunciate every word perfectly. But, if I were to say more than a simple "Good morning" to the students, they'd panic. They couldn't communicate. And we weren't teaching them communication either because we'd be spending the whole class trying to help them perfect a recital. They were becoming "My Fair Ladies" without any communicative competence.

Peter Warner-

At the initial level of L2 learning (as in teaching children, for example), if the student is speaking in *katakana* English, phonics makes no sense, and therefore neither does

English text. If a learner gains clear pronunciation at an early level, phonetic principles are more readily understood, and reading, writing, and even listening skills benefit.

Language is based upon sounds, and if the student doesn't know the sounds, they can't possibly know the language. English has far more phonemes than Japanese, so the challenge, and importance, of learning correct pronunciation is much greater for Japanese EFL students. If we neglect teaching English sounds to our students, we are denying them the chance to get beyond Japanese.

Kent A. Hill-

I consider pronunciation as a form of grammar, for example: "Gimme (give me)"

In this case the pronunciation blend has created what might be called an "objectified verb." If this is the case it might be possible to suggest that pronunciation underlies grammar and it might also be argued that we should be teaching pronunciation not as a specialist area of applied linguistics but prior to teaching grammar. Consider also lexical chunks and how it is nearly impossible to teach them without pronunciation changes: e.g. "Rock 'n roll."

If students were more aware of these changes, grammar might not pose as much of a difficulty.

Dave Fulvio-

I think that we long-time non-Japanese teachers have to remember that we have developed "Japanese ears". I can understand even the most *katakana*-ized pronunciation and it doesn't really slow me down. But if that same student went to another country, they might not be understood at all!

Of course it all depends on a student's purpose for study too. If they are studying for travel and/or leisure, I think it will serve them better to

have good pronunciation and simple conversation skills than to have terrible pronunciation and higher conversation skills. I also place a good deal of emphasis on not just pronunciation, but also tone, inflection, diction, etc. I feel that for students who want to go abroad, it is of the utmost importance.

Michael Carroll-

If an adult student plans to use English in a particular place, it may be helpful to spend a little time becoming familiar with local pronunciation patterns, but on the whole provided a student's pronunciation falls within a quite widely defined range it's probably not a problem. Before I came to Japan, working with students from many different countries, the Japanese students' pronunciation was very rarely a problem.

On the other hand I've consistently found that it's enormously helpful to teach stress patterns. There is much less variation among English speakers' stress patterns than among their pronunciation. If a student uses stress effectively, even if their pronunciation is hard to catch, they will usually be understood from the context. But if they cannot use stress to convey their meaning, even the clearest pronunciation in the world may not help. I think this is a big part of the problem for many Japanese and it comes from too much focus on isolated sentences and words, and not enough on real communication.

Anthony Deprato-

I have been teaching pronunciation for about 2 years now and I am trying to study this topic constantly. I have been wondering exactly what we need to be teaching and when. For example slang pronunciation and reduced pronunciation form the bulk of daily conversation. And when people travel or work abroad being able to speak slang or reduced form does help them communicate better.

Jane Takizawa-

To be honest, the only group I do any pronunciation work with is children because they have the most

potential to develop native-like pronunciation. Children will look at my funny mouth, and have fun trying to imitate me. We can be crazy and exaggerate with no reservations.

With other classes, such as college classes with fifty or more students, pronunciation practice is very much disliked and it is impossible to check thoroughly. This is also true for company classes, which tend to prefer substance to precision. Adults I've taught pronunciation to have only a limited tolerance for being corrected, and I feel that if I press them for better pronunciation I will only intimidate them.

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Glenn Magee-

In my regular classes we review the student's pronunciation by having a "speaking time" in class. The students read passages from the textbook or from memory in front of the teachers. They are assessed and feedback is given. During the regular course of classes the students are helped with pronunciation by the teacher. Usually the focus is on where the accent is in a word, or which words are stressed in the textbook or in the sentences that the students learn.

But I believe that focusing on mouth shape etc. is problematic and can be de-motivating for the students, especially when faced with students who by nature do not want to speak out in class. Students *do* want to speak though when they feel

the activity is safe and is not threatening to their confidence. However, finding the time for this in a class of thirty-eight kids is a challenge.

James Cassidy-

For me, teaching pronunciation is important. There are so many things to consider: word stress, sentence stress, intonation, etc. The best piece of advice that I have been given is that when we teach pronunciation, we should teach only a little, but go over it often. I think by doing this we allow the pattern to go through a process in which it can be reviewed and built upon a little later.

Mark Hamilton-

I find that most students don't like spending too much time on pronunciation practice and so any focusing on it lasts 5 minutes maximum.

Don Block-

I find that progress with pronunciation with people in their 50's or over is very slow. Furthermore, that age group doesn't seem to care much about pronunciation. Therefore, I think that being too strict on pronunciation with an older person will just frustrate them. It's the same with kids three years old and under. Many three year olds can't even pronounce their own names correctly yet in their mother tongue.

Jim Scott:

Over the years, I've noticed that when a Japanese adult has problems communicating with me in English, it is almost always because either: (1) he or she lacks the vocabulary needed to communicate whatever he or she wants to say, or (2) he or she is unable to string the English words together in a way that will make sense to me. Improper pronunciation of English hardly ever causes any misunderstandings that are not easily noted and easily cleared up.

Given this, I spend very little time teaching pronunciation to adult students. It seems to me that giving my students the opportunity to experience trying to communicate in English is far more important.