

Minimal pairs in the context of teaching English as a Lingua Franca in Japan

日本の共通語としての英語教育における ミニマルペアについて

Vladimira Hanzlovská, ハンズロヴスカー・ヴラディミール

Center for English as a Lingua Franca, Tamagawa University, Japan
mirahanz@lab.tamagawa.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

In a world where English is a dominant communication medium, the need to sound like a native speaker is diminishing. Accents are unique tokens of every speaker's expression, and they should be embraced as such. However, situations where a conveyed message is misunderstood are not uncommon, especially when English is used as a lingua franca. They often occur when a phoneme typical for English has either a significantly different quality or is completely absent in the speaker's native language. This article discusses a series of activities using minimal pairs—two words varying by a sound typically difficult to distinguish. The tasks have been formulated based on isolating such challenging phonemes observed during daily interactions with Japanese speakers of English. They aim to enhance students' ability to distinguish these sounds as speakers, as well as listeners.

KEYWORDS: Minimal pairs, Challenging phonemes, Japanese speakers of English, ELF pronunciation

1. INTRODUCTION

The way we pronounce, and in a broader sense, our diction are subtle, yet arguably the most personal, intimate, substantiations of our cultural identity, and temperament. The aim of using language is to communicate our needs and thoughts. As long as the message is received and understood, language serves its purpose. Problems may arise when the intelligibility of the message is compromised. In spoken language, and especially among speakers of English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF), the characteristics of our native tongue may interfere with the intelligibility of what is communicated. Perceiving and producing sounds inherent to a foreign language “can be effortful if these sounds do not occur in the native language or have a different

phonological status” (Hazan, 2005, p. 361). Targeting young adult and adult learners at the pre-intermediate to intermediate level, the activities in this article aim to improve the intelligibility of their spoken expression.

2. INTELLIGIBILITY, ACCOMMODATION AND THE COMMON CHALLENGES FOR JAPANESE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

The term intelligibility was introduced by Munro and Derwing (1995) and is defined as “the extent to which the speaker’s intended utterance is actually understood by a listener” (p. 76). Their study focused on non-native accents of exchange students as perceived by their native-speaking counterparts.

Jenkins (2001) departs from the native and non-native dichotomy and puts the term intelligibility into a global context. She also reminds us that communication is a two-way street where successful reception of a message does not only depend on the speaker but also on the listener’s readiness to accommodate the ways the language is spoken. Traditionally, the term accommodation referred to the “adjustments speakers make for affective reasons” and attempts to liken their speech to their partner in communication “in order to be liked” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 144). In ELF contexts, however, accommodation indicates the conscious “effort...to adjust [the speakers’] pronunciation in order to be a more intelligible interlocutor” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 145). Jenkins’ research has mostly focused “on the segmental phonological features that affect mutual intelligibility” (Sewell, 2010), and she proposed the so-called Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2001, henceforth LFC), which in practice can be understood as a set of guidelines for teaching English pronunciation to speakers of other languages. In accordance with the LFC, the following aspects of pronunciation should be paid attention to maximise intelligibility (Davies & Patsko, 2013):

1. most consonant sounds
2. consonant clusters
3. vowel distinctions, length and diphthongs
4. tonic stress

So how do the principles outlined by Jenkins translate into the context of English spoken by Japanese speakers? Leveraging experience in and beyond the EFL classroom, alongside insights from existing research (e.g., Riney & Anderson-Hsieh, 1993; Smith, 2012; Tsubota et al., 2004), I have identified five crucial aspects that Japanese speakers of English frequently find challenging, potentially hindering the intelligibility of their spoken communication:

1. consonants: liquid consonants [r] and [l]; voiced plosives [b] and [v]; voiced fricatives [ð] and [z]; voiceless fricatives [f] and [h], [s] and [ʃ], [θ] and [s]
2. most consonant clusters and consonants, especially in mid- and final word positions—the tendency to insert an additional vowel (e.g., *helpful*

- is likely to be pronounced as *herupuhuru*, desk as *desuku*)
3. vowel sounds: [ɑ:] and [ɜ:], [æ] and [ɑ:], [əʊ] and [o:]
4. weak (unstressed) vowels—[ə] sound is less common
5. tonic stress—the perceived unpredictability of stress placement of English words

The pronunciation characteristics of Japanese speakers of English, especially on the segmental level, have been investigated by several scholars over the past three decades (e.g., Ohata, 2004; Riney, 1993; Saito, 2007; Saito & Lyster, 2011). However, while the attention to these issues has been mostly theoretical or empirical, the present paper outlines several practical approaches contributing to the improvement of intelligibility and are specifically designed for Japanese speakers of English.

3. MINIMAL PAIRS

From the above breakdown of challenging aspects of pronunciation, two of them, namely the consonant and vowel sound quality, can be approached through minimal-pair activities. Minimal pairs are defined as two words in a language which differ in only one phonological element and have a different meaning (Roach, 2000).

Mispronunciation of these near homophones may cause the clarity of the message to be compromised. This is particularly the case if minimal pairs are of the same word category (e.g., verb: play - pray). A set of activities based on minimal pairs containing ‘difficult’ phonemes is introduced in the following section.

4. MINIMAL-PAIR ACTIVITIES

First minimal-pair pronunciation tasks were formulated as term assignments in 2020, during the early months of the COVID-19 restrictions, when students and teachers needed to adjust to the sudden shift to remote learning. In the following academic years, with the circumstances allowing instruction to take place in classrooms again, pairwork and groupwork minimal-pair activities were created to suit the characteristics of learning face-to-face. It should be noted that none of my courses has been specifically focused on pronunciation, so their implementation represents an addition to the curriculum.

4.1 At-home Assignments

These assignments are designed to be suitable for self-learning, i.e. with minimal need for real-time interaction with the course teacher. Each material covers one pair of ‘challenging’ sounds; namely [ʃ]/[s], [r]/[l], [b]/[v], [θ]/[s], [ð]/[z] and [f]/[h].

Firstly, each material introduces the selected pair of phonemes—their names, how they are typically articulated in English and why they might be difficult for Japanese speakers of English. Having familiarised themselves with the way these sounds are pronounced, students proceed to three tasks, two of which (the second and

the third one) are submitted in the form of voice recordings.

As task one, students are asked to watch two videos (URL embedded in the document) where a voice coach introduces the chosen phonemes and practices them on several isolated words (not necessarily minimal pairs). The students are instructed to practice the words along with the coach. For this part, British pronunciation standards are applied.

Next, the students are asked to read, listen to and practice sentences intentionally rich in both ‘difficult’ sounds. When they feel they have practised them enough, they record their voices. The voice recording, the link to which is embedded in this part, is made by an ELF speaker (the author herself).

Lastly, the students access two or three links embedded in the document with several isolated minimal pairs grouped based on language proficiency levels. Students are usually asked to practice the first two or three proficiency levels (elementary - pre-intermediate - intermediate). These minimal pairs are pronounced in American English. For an example of an at-home assignment, see Appendix A.

4.2 In-class Activities

In this section, the three most frequently used classroom activities are introduced. They are created as either pair or group activities, allowing students not only to practice the challenging sounds synchronously but also with the possibility of immediate feedback. While the main focus of the home assignments is the production of sounds, during the in-class activities, both production and reception are practised equally.

4.2.1 Student-led Dictation

With this activity, minimal pairs are trained in the context of complete sentences. Students take turns reading out short sentences containing a word which has a minimal pair. The minimal pairs are intentionally chosen to be of the same word category (e.g., noun, verb), and therefore could easily be misunderstood.

One student reads a sentence and a comprehension question which follows it. The rest of the class answer the question. Students can be given the possible options as prompts on the blackboard or projected on a screen.

Examples:

There is a pile of glass outside the door. → What is outside the door?
GLASS - GRASS

Don't disturb her now. She is praying. → What is she doing?
PLAYING – PRAYING

John wears a fancy uniform, but he is not a pilot. → What is he not?
PILOT - PIRATE

4.2.2 Voice Assistant

This activity tends to be popular with students because it allows them to use their smartphones in class. Students work with digital voice assistants on their smartphones (e.g., Google Assistant, Siri, etc.), asking them to show images of words that are minimal word pairs. They instruct the voice assistant to display images of one word of the pair, and then the other. If the voice assistant can distinguish between these words and display different images, the pronunciation is probably intelligible. This activity can be done individually, or as a pair/group activity, depending on the size of the class. In preparation for this activity, students ideally should change their language settings on their smartphones before the lesson.

Examples:

[ɑ:] and [ɜ:]

SHOW ME...

AN IMAGE OF A CARD	-	AN IMAGE OF CURD
AN IMAGE OF A FARM	-	AN IMAGE OF A FIRM
AN IMAGE OF A BARD	-	AN IMAGE OF A BIRD

4.2.3 Road Trip

This is a dynamic activity which can be done in pairs or groups. It challenges the students to navigate a journey through ten pairs of fictitious 'UK-like' place names all of which are minimal pairs. They are arranged as stops on a road trip with two possible final destinations (in this case, an actual city in England). One student receives a worksheet with highlighted words. This student describes the road trip pronouncing the highlighted words to the partner or the rest of the group. Other students receive a sheet with the same place names without highlighting. Their task is to mark the stops on the road trip as they hear them from their classmate. For an example of this activity, see Appendix B.

5. CONCLUSION

A substantial body of research (e.g., Gilakjani et al., 20011; Saito, 2007; Saito & Lyster, 2011) coupled with observations from pedagogical practice, suggests that pronunciation presents a significant challenge for language learners and is often relegated to a secondary position in instructional priorities. While lexis and grammar can usually be learnt through continuous efforts and practice, pronunciation often hinges on the characteristics of the speaker's native tongue, as well as individual predispositions to imitate new sounds.

In a world where English has become the bond that brings people of diverse language backgrounds together, we ought to abandon the idea that sounding like a

native speaker is necessary. Learners should be encouraged to do their best to maximise their intelligibility while being continuously reminded that, ultimately, accents are unique and valuable. The present article has sought to outline several activities which encourage the learner to make conscious efforts to distinguish sounds which are typically difficult to produce. They are meant to be a stimulating addition to an ELF course curriculum. Students report finding the activities both useful and enjoyable, particularly appreciating the interactive and dynamic approach. This engagement has demonstrably led to better memory retention, evidenced by improved pronunciation and increased confidence in spoken communication.

REFERENCES

- BBC Learning English. (2014). *Pronunciation / the sounds of English: Other consonants - 5*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/pronunciation/otherconst5>
- BBC Learning English. (2014). *Pronunciation / the sounds of English: Voiceless consonants - 6*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/pronunciation/vlessconst6>
- Davies, K. S., & Patsko, L. (2013). How to teach English as a lingua franca (ELF). Retrieved from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-teach-english-lingua>
- English Club.com. (2023). *Minimal pair /l/ and /r/*. <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-l-r.htm>
- Gilakjani, A., Ahmadi, S., & Ahmadi, M. (2011) 'Why is pronunciation so difficult to learn?'. *English Language Teaching*, 4(3), 74-83. <https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/11877>
- Hazan, V., Sennema, A., Iba, M., & Faulkner, A. (2005). Effect of audiovisual perceptual training on the perception and production of consonants by Japanese learners of English. *Speech Communication*, 47(3), 360-378. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.specom.2005.04.007>
- Jenkins, J. (2001). *The phonology of English an international language*. Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2005). Teaching English pronunciation: A sociopolitical perspective. In C. Gnutzmann & F. Intemann (Eds.), *The Globalisation of English and the English Language Classroom* (pp. 145-158).

- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of Second language learners. *Language Learning*, 45(1), 73–97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1995.tb00963.x>
- Ohata, K. (2004). Phonological differences between Japanese and English: Several potentially problematic areas of pronunciation for Japanese ESL/EFL learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6(4), 1-19.
- Riney, T., & Anderson-Hsieh, J. (1993). Japanese pronunciation of English. *JALT Journal*, 15(1), 21-36.
- Roach, P. (2000). *English phonetics and phonology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Saito, K. (2007). The Influence of explicit phonetic instruction on pronunciation teaching in EFL settings: The case of English vowels and Japanese learners of English. *The Linguistics Journal*, 3(3), 16-40.
- Saito, K., & Lyster, R. (2011). Effects of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback on L2 pronunciation development of /ʌ/ by Japanese learners of English. *Language Learning*, 62(2), 595-633. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00639.x>
- Sewell, A. (2010). Research methods and intelligibility studies. *World Englishes*, 29(2), 257–269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01641.x>
- Smith, B. (2012). Pronunciation patterns of Japanese learners and their implications or teaching. *Polyglossia*, 23(10), 199-206.
- Tsubota, Y., Dantsuji, M., & Kawahara, T. (2004). ‘An English pronunciation learning system for Japanese students based on diagnosis of critical pronunciation errors’. *ReCALL*, 16(1), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004001314>

APPENDIX A

(At-home Assignment)

[r] & [l]

Officially, these two sounds are called liquid consonants. The sounds [r] and [l] may seem quite similar. However, in the English language, there is a difference between these two sounds.

Some languages only have one liquid consonant. The Japanese language has only one liquid consonant [r]. That's why it can be extremely difficult for Japanese speakers to distinguish between the English sounds [r] and [l].

1. Watch these two videos and try to practice the words along with the voice coach.
BBC Learning English - Pronunciation / The Sounds of English: Other Consonants - 6
BBC Learning English - Pronunciation / The Sounds of English: Other Consonants - 5

2. Next, listen to these ten sentences. Practice saying these sentences. Once you have practised enough and feel good about it, record your voice saying the sentences. Submit your recording.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IBjENsKII0AiYnYBeR2Aj6uv0Ap_IVG0/view?usp=sharing

1. Please, collect only the correct information.
2. All the rhinos arrived alive.
3. A load of firewood dropped on the road.
4. All the chickens were trapped in her lap.
5. Press the light button on the right.
6. She tripped on a curb and ripped her lip.
7. Throw away the liquid and get rid of the lid.
8. The long answer is the wrong one.
9. There is a fly in my fried pork bowl.
10. Don't walk barefoot. I saw some glass in the grass.

3. The link below offers an excellent list of the so-called 'minimal pairs' of [r] and [l]. A minimal pair is two words which are different in only one sound, e.g. rice-lice.

<https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-l-r.htm>

Have a look at all of them. Listen to all of them. Practice all of them. Once you have practiced enough and feel good about it, record your voice saying the "Elementary" and "Pre-Intermediate" pairs only. Submit your recording.

APPENDIX B
(Road Trip - highlighted sheet)

Manchester	Liverpool	London	Leeds
Fairdon	Haredon	Hogton	Fogton
Foam River	Home River	Hell Valley	Fell Valley
Bestlake	Vestlake	Veil Castle	Bale Castle
Shockhill	Sockhill	Singlebury	Shinglebury
Sign City	Shine City	Shavedon	Savedon
Face Lake	Faith Lake	Sin River	Thin River
Rainhill	Lanehill	Light Valley	Right Valley
Freebury	Fleebury	Crown Hill	Clown Hill
Blue Town	Brew Town	Rock Lake	Lock Lake
Jerry Castle	Jelly Castle	Loyalton	Royalton

APPENDIX B
(Road Trip - non-highlighted sheet)

Manchester	Liverpool	London	Leeds
Fairdon	Haredon	Hogton	Fogton
Foam River	Home River	Hell Valley	Fell Valley
Bestlake	Vestlake	Veil Castle	Bale Castle
Shockhill	Sockhill	Singlebury	Shinglebury
Sign City	Shine City	Shavedon	Savedon
Face Lake	Faith Lake	Sin River	Thin River
Rainhill	Lanehill	Light Valley	Right Valley
Freebury	Fleebury	Crown Hill	Clown Hill
Blue Town	Brew Town	Rock Lake	Lock Lake
Jerry Castle	Jelly Castle	Loyalton	Royalton