

What are Missing on the English Teacher Preparation Programme at Japanese Universities in Terms of Pronunciation Instruction?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how English pronunciation instruction is dealt with in the teacher preparation programme at Japanese universities and to suggest how the trainees can be better prepared for instructing pronunciation before they start teaching in classroom settings. The literature review verifies a vicious cycle of pronunciation instruction, where 1) teachers are not confident in pronunciation instruction, 2) teachers cannot teach pronunciation sufficiently, 3) secondary school students do not learn pronunciation sufficiently from their teachers, 4) university students cannot pronounce English correctly, 5) pronunciation instruction is not mandatory for obtaining a teaching licence and 6) the curriculum for the teacher preparation course is insufficient; that is, university students do not learn about pronunciation instruction. These stages 1)-6) circulate and it is obviously necessary to end this circulation at some point. Thus, the previous literature stressed the importance of teaching university students on teaching courses the skills to instruct pronunciation to their future students. These skills include ‘how they should deliver the knowledge of pronunciation to students so that they can understand it fully’ and ‘how they should correct students’ inappropriate pronunciation into a pronunciation that is intelligible’. However the author doubts that these suggestions are enough for the trainees to prepare for teaching in classroom settings, and therefore proposes that they should be given opportunities to consider and practise 1) choosing appropriate teaching materials, 2) giving ‘clear instructions’ of tasks to students and 3) making pronunciation tasks student-centred and communicative with adequate student-talking time.

Keywords: pronunciation instruction, English phonetics and phonology, teacher training, syllabus design

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Introduction

In April, 2018, English language teaching began to be aimed at third- and fourth-grade pupils, aged 8-10, at public primary schools in Japan. Currently these lessons are held fifteen times a year, and in 2020, they will be increased to thirty-five. This means that primary school pupils in Japan will experience more and more exposure to English and its sounds at an early age of learning. In addition, MEXT (2017), in the New Course of Study, states that we should focus on ‘contemporary standard pronunciation’ and that we should instruct ‘basic phonological features’ of English at primary schools (p. 33). This means that pronunciation instruction is likely to be of more importance at Japanese schools. However Zielinski and Yates (2014, in Murphy, 2017; 16) claims that ‘learners’ spoken intelligibility may suffer long-term negative effects if attention to pronunciation is neglected during the initial stages’. Therefore pronunciation has to be taught very carefully in these classes.

The importance of pronunciation instruction is also supported from learners’ perspective. Ota (2013) reports that pronunciation instruction leads to the enhancement of learners’ motivation and confidence in learning English and Ota (2012) reveals that students are in favour of being taught pronunciation at an early stage of their career in learning English. These findings indicate that teaching English pronunciation cannot be ignored in classes and it is likely that teachers are expected to be able to instruct it.

Then, who is supposed to be in charge of teaching English pronunciation? Of course it is Japanese English teachers in most cases. As Murphy (2017) states, in EFL settings, there are more learners taught by non-native English speakers than native speakers (p.16), and this is also the case in Japan. Japanese English teachers cannot leave the teaching of English pronunciation to native English counterparts; they themselves need to be in charge of it.

All these facts above considered, it is essential that Japanese teachers should be well-prepared for teaching English pronunciation, and for this goal teacher preparation programmes at universities will inevitably play an important role. However very little research has been conducted on what constitutes adequate preparation for pronunciation teaching (Brinton, 2018; 1860). Therefore, this paper, referring to various literature, will examine how English pronunciation instruction is dealt with on the English teacher preparation programme at Japanese universities and discuss how it could be improved.

The status of pronunciation instruction on the teacher preparation programme in Japan

Kochiyama et al. (2013) investigated the syllabuses of modules on the teacher preparation programme offered by universities in Japan. According to their survey, 75.2% of the 1,084 syllabuses did not focus on English pronunciation at all. That is, those syllabuses did not deal with English pronunciation even in one lecture of the whole module. In addition, 40.2% of 289 departments offering teacher preparation programme do not provide English pronunciation modules. This is because such modules are not compulsory in obtaining a teaching licence in Japan and it is up to the university whether they offer those modules. It is clear that there is some defect

regarding the teacher preparation programme in Japan with respect to English pronunciation instruction, which leads to Japanese English teachers' lack of confidence in teaching pronunciation and their being unable to teach it. This results in the fact that secondary school students do not learn pronunciation in the classroom and that they continue to be incapable of pronouncing English properly when they become university students, some of whom will take the English teacher preparation programme. This vicious cycle of pronunciation instruction is demonstrated by Kochiyama et al. (2013) as in Figure 1.

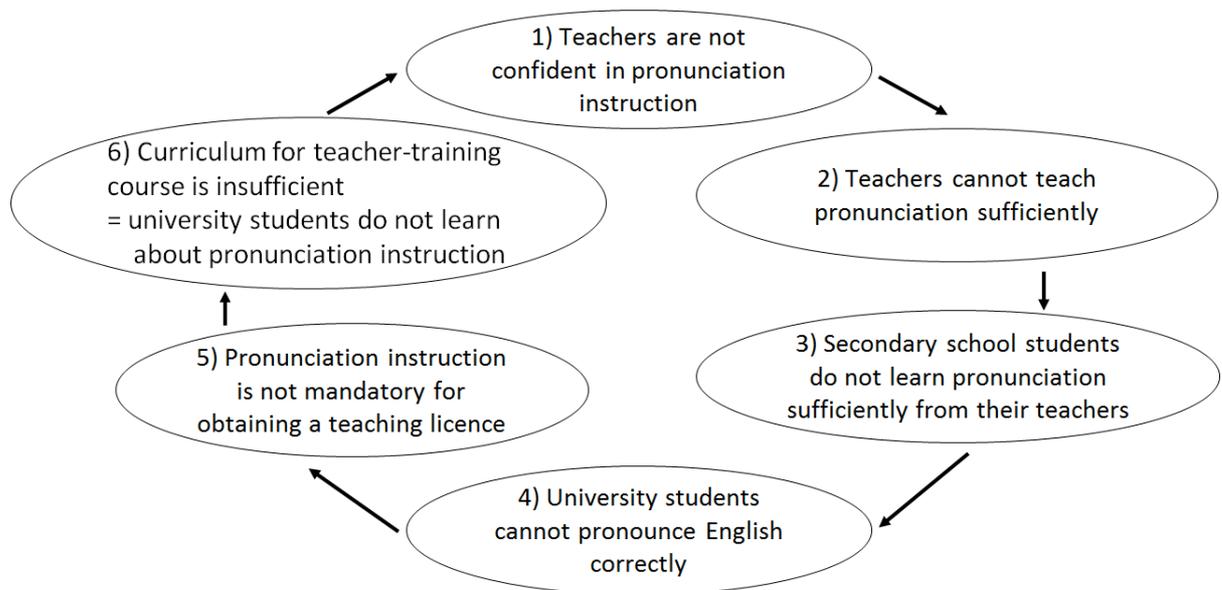


Figure 1. The vicious cycle of pronunciation instruction (Kochiyama et al., 2013; 128, translation by the author)

For the purpose of improving the current situation of pronunciation instruction at school, we must take action to end this cycle and 6) in Figure 1 will be the stage we should work on.

Kochiyama et al. (2013) and Arimoto and Kochiyama (2015) identify three factors in Figure 2 as essential in order for Japanese English teachers to be able to instruct pronunciation in classrooms and propose that these factors should be targeted on the teacher preparation programme.

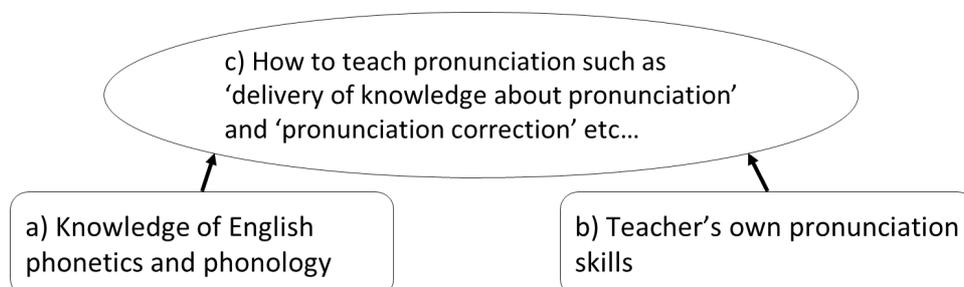


Figure 2. Skills necessary for pronunciation teaching (Kochiyama et al., 2013; 123, translation by the author)

a) refers to a type of knowledge traditionally taught in English phonetics and phonology modules, such as vowels, consonants, connected speech phenomena and

prosody. b) is likely to be acquired in the course of learning a) with some amount of training. c), which is labelled as ‘procedural and pedagogical knowledge about how to teach pronunciation’ by Murphy (2017; 23), is rather a broad category and tends to be vague. In addition this category is ‘more difficult to acquire than reading and discussion alone’ (ibid). Therefore, regarding c), it is necessary to investigate what factors and stages are important in instructing pre-service teachers how to teach pronunciation and to investigate what techniques and materials help them to be prepared for and confident in teaching pronunciation in classrooms. The following section will discuss the importance of offering pre-service teachers the opportunity to consider and practise 1) choosing appropriate materials, 2) giving clear task instructions to students and 3) making pronunciation tasks student-centred and communicative with student-talking time secured.

Suggested contents and stages of a pronunciation instruction module

1. Choice of appropriate materials

In the first place, the type of tasks or materials must be discussed. The conventional way of teaching is ‘listen and repeat’ but it is out of context and is not communicative. Jones (2018) emphasises that teaching materials should be contextualised and Farrelly (2018) claims that the activities should be implemented ‘in a way that impacts meaning’ (p. 1711). In terms of another aspect of communicativeness, each activity could be processed individually first and in pairs next, in which case learners use English during the activity. The importance of such communicative pronunciation teaching is supported by Henrichsen and Frizen (2000), who found that students who had experienced it had positive attitudes towards it. The activity must also be interesting so that it can ‘maintain their overall involvement in English learning’ (McVeigh, 2018; 1620). Thus pronunciation activities should be contextualised, communicative and interesting.

With regard to the preparation of teaching materials, it is necessary to bear in mind that teachers do not have to design these activities by themselves. The use of existing, published materials is encouraged by researchers (e.g. Jones, 2018; Murphy, 2017; Ota, 2013) and Murphy (2018) attaches importance to giving pre-service teachers access to activity recipe collections, the examples of which are Hancock (1995; 2017), Miller (2007) and Henrichsen et al. (1999). They even may not know the existence of such useful collections of activities. Using these materials also saves novice teachers a lot of time when planning lessons (Marks 2014).

With these premises of teaching materials discussed, then what process enables pre-service teachers to make full use of above materials? First, Japanese pre-service teachers listen to L2 speech, which is available online through sources such as YouTube video clips and International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), as well as by recording their friend’s and peer trainee’s speech. In the next stage, they analyse the L2 speech, employing English phonetics and phonology knowledge. In this analysis, they need to focus on the sound that lowers intelligibility (‘the extent to which a listener has understood what a speaker said) and/or comprehensibility (‘the degree of effort required by a listener to understand an utterance) (Downing and Munro 2015). This stage trains pre-service teachers spotting learners’ pronunciation needs. Trainees may find this difficult, in which case they can work with their peer

trainees. The next is the actual teaching phase, consisting of five stages in Celce-Murcia et al. (2010)'s communicative framework. This is comprehensively summarised by Nazari and Mirsaeeidi (2017) as in Table 1. Step 1 is rather explicit but it becomes more contextualised and communicative as the step advances. Even minimal pair exercises can be contextualised and communicative. For example, as for the sounds /l/ and /r/, Stage 2 sets a contextualised activity, where learners listen to the sentence 'The teacher collected/corrected the homework' (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; 53). It is a minimal pair exercise but it is presented in a certain context and it impacts the meaning. Miller (2007) also includes similar communicative minimal pair activities.

Table 1. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010)'s communicative framework summarised in Nazari and Mirsaeeidi (2017; 862)

Steps	Activities
1	Description and Analysis – oral and written illustrations of how the feature is produced and when it occurs with spoken discourse.
2	Listening Discrimination – focused listening practices with feedback on learners' ability to correctly discriminate the feature.
3	Controlled Practice – oral reading of minimal pair sentences, short dialogue etc., with special attention paid to the highlighted feature in order to raise learner consciousness
4	Guided Practice – structured communication exercise, such as information-gap activities, cued dialogues, and cued strip stories, that makes the learner monitored for the specified feature as he/she engage in controlled communication.
5	Communicative Practice – less structured, fluency-building activities (e.g. role-play, problem solving, interviews) that require the learner to attend to both form and content of utterances.

In order to instruct pronunciation in the classroom, (pre-service) teachers need to plan a lesson by considering which sounds should be stressed and which material is best used in a particular lesson. This cannot be done on the spot. It is also necessary to plan at which stage of a lesson pronunciation instruction should be given. Marks (2014) claims that it should not be planned at the end of the lesson because it is likely to be omitted when the time is running out.

So far, how pre-service teachers practise choosing appropriate materials has been discussed. However, this is not the end of a series of stages that the author proposes. Teachers must give feedback to students after tasks and activities. Usually pronunciation instruction is followed by corrective feedback and this is effective indeed, but Foote et al. (2016) insist on its insufficiency. Corrective feedback is likely to be reactive and it tends to deal with an individual student. They suggest that feedback should be proactive and target the whole class. Another feature of feedback is whether it is immediate or delayed. In order not to interrupt learners' activities, i.e. the communication with their conversational partners, pre-service teachers also must practice giving delayed feedback.

This is the cycle of training pre-service teachers to teach pronunciation of particular sounds or features and once this is done, it proceeds to the next target.

2. Clear instructions of tasks and activities

When the use of existing materials is discussed, it is also significant to mention the instruction of tasks and activities. As Sowell (2017) states, 'mastering instruction-giving is a fundamental aspect of good classroom teaching practice' (p.10). It is often the case that teachers believe they give a clear instruction on the task while students are at a loss what to do with it. Therefore pre-service teachers need to raise their awareness of the importance of good instruction-giving. One good approach may be having the module instructor give an unsuccessful task instruction to pre-service teachers, who then evaluate it and discuss how it will be improved. Once their awareness is raised, they are provided with a workshop activity, where they practise giving instructions. Giving good instructions results from practising classroom language, writing clear and simple instruction, timing for giving handouts, modelling, giving time limit and instruction checking question (Sowell, 2017; 17) and this whole activity can be instructed between groups of pre-service teachers within the module.

3. Student-centred, communicative tasks with adequate student-talking time

Lastly, as is discussed above, a communicative task can be retrieved from activity recipe collections by carefully examining whether it is contextualised and impacts a meaning. A task can be done individually first and in pairs afterwards or in pairs from the start, depending on its type. The key is to get learners to work in pairs so that they will have more student-talking time than otherwise. Another key is that pre-service teachers 'abandon the traditional director role' (Henrichsen and Fritzen, 2000; 71) and practise playing the role of facilitator by monitoring how engaged their fellow trainees are in the task and by preparing for delayed feedback.

It is also helpful to get pre-service teachers to design a tailor-made task according to the proficiency level of learners so that they will be more engaged. If a task is modified into a personalised one, learners are likely to be more engaged, for example.

In order to put into practise the three points discussed above, the module instructor must plan each lesson thoroughly and establish a good rapport with pre-service teachers.

Conclusion and suggestions for a future pronunciation instruction training on the teacher preparation programme in Japan

This paper emphasised the importance of pronunciation instruction modules on the teacher preparation programme in Japan and posed problems regarding the current situation of pronunciation instruction at the secondary school and university levels. The author proposed three points that would enhance pre-service teachers' procedural and pedagogical knowledge about pronunciation instruction. In order for these points to be implemented on the teacher preparation programme, an English phonetics and phonology module or a pronunciation instruction module should be compulsory in getting a teaching licence. In an ideal situation, it will be at least one year long to cover both English phonetics and phonology knowledge and procedural and pedagogical knowledge. The whole module should also treat topics such as pronunciation instruction model and its goal, assessment, integration into other lessons, designing tailor-made tasks and the use of technology. If all the

above-mentioned items are implemented on the teacher preparation programme with the module convenor's enthusiasm about instructing pre-service teachers, the author feels confident that the vicious cycle of pronunciation instruction will end.

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