

【Original article】

## **Volleyball or Bareebooru? Common Problems of English Pronunciation for Japanese Learners**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to identify common problems Japanese learners have with English pronunciation. By analyzing a recorded dialogue spoken by two Japanese university students, the paper highlights problems the speakers have with segmental and suprasegmental features of English. The paper discusses and explains the pronunciation problems by connecting the speakers' mistakes to the pronunciation of the Japanese language. The discussion section of the research provides teaching implications on how students would benefit from having a realistic aim of improving their intelligibility instead of a goal of sounding like a “native speaker”, as well as suggestions on how teachers can more effectively utilize their limited class time to focus on improving intelligibility via pronunciation training to avoid misunderstandings in English communication.

Key Words: English pronunciation, English speaking, pronunciation instruction, pronunciation errors, Japanese English learners

### **1. Introduction**

English is a major subject in Japanese education and learners typically have studied the language for at least 8 years by the time they become university students. While they may be comfortable with reading and listening, many students lack confidence in their speaking skills and believe that they have very weak English pronunciation skills. Through detailed analysis of a

recorded dialogue spoken by two Japanese university students, this research aims to look into pronunciation problems that Japanese learners often face and discuss them in relation to how the issues affect intelligibility as well as its implications on pronunciation training.

I will first provide some essential background information about English education in Japan. Using the transcriptions of recorded dialogues based on General American English (attached in the appendix), I will analyse the speakers' performance on a segmental level in section 3 and on a suprasegmental level in section 4. Lastly, section 5 will include some suggested implications in teaching English pronunciation for Japanese university students.

## **2. Background information**

To assist in highlighting pronunciation issues Japanese learners face, this section will provide a brief look at English education in Japan, particularly regarding pronunciation learning. It will also discuss some common pronunciation problems that Japanese learners face, as well as the background of the two university students who performed the dialogue.

### ***English education in Japan***

In Japan, students begin learning English in public schools from 5th grade of elementary school. By 2020, the introduction of English will start from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade instead. The lessons focus on communication, prioritizing speaking and listening skills. From junior high school and upward, however, the focus is heavily shifted onto reading and writing, and “teachers spend most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading, and vocabulary presentations” (Sakui, 2004). From personal observation, I can confirm that oral skills are generally given very little attention.

Throughout elementary school and high school, English is considered a “team-taught” subject, involving a partnership between a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), who is typically a native English speaker. While ALTs are hired from various English-speaking countries, General American English tends to be favoured in Japan, and it is also the pronunciation this paper is based on. Teaching pronunciation is often considered, by both students and teachers, to be the responsibility of the ALT (Tajino & Walker, 1998). However, ALTs are expensive, and even in schools where ALTs visit often, the number of English classes with a JTE and an ALT is fewer than that of classes solo-taught by the JTE, which are usually exam-focused and grammar-oriented in nature (Sakui, 2004). In addition, the majority of the JTEs are not fluent in English communication, so aural and oral skills are often ignored when ALTs are not present (Martin, 2004). Overall, a typical Japanese student goes through at least eight years of English learning before entering university. However, pronunciation teaching is rather insignificant

in the grand scheme of English education in Japan. In universities, English is often a mandatory subject, but what aspects teachers focus on varies. Students may spend a semester focused on literature for a semester and then academic writing in the next semester, so how much pronunciation instruction university students receive largely depends on what the teacher chooses to teach.

### ***Common problems faced by Japanese learners***

Japanese learners of English face two major challenges when it comes to acquiring English pronunciation. One is the sounds used in English that are not found in Japanese, which Japanese learners (and some teachers) have problems recognizing and producing them. A more in-depth breakdown of the segmental differences will be provided in later sections when we analyse the dialogue.

Another major challenge that deserves our attention is the “*katakana* effect” (Martin, 2004). Katakana is one of the three subsets of Japanese characters that is used to transliterate foreign words into the Japanese language. It employs the Japanese phonemes and syllable patterns. “Bus”, for instance, is *katakana*-ized as *basu* in Japanese, and “supermarket” is *suupaamaaketto*. Such words are used in the everyday Japanese language, and from my experience, many learners who find difficulties producing the English pronunciations retreat to reading the English words as *katakana* instead. The problem affects English pronunciation learning in general, as many textbooks (and teachers who accept them) in Japan provide *katakana*-reading to “assist” learners, and students often memorize English speeches and dialogues in *katakana* instead (Martin, 2004). Ironically, the *katakana*-ized English are often incomprehensible to English speakers. The widespread and counterintuitive usage of *katakana* in English learning fossilize Japanese intonation and pronunciation patterns in English (Martin, 2004), and it hinders students heavily on the suprasegmental level as it attempts to mould many suprasegmental features of English to resemble Japanese while removing the need for students to acquire the sounds of English.

### ***Profile of the speakers***

Both speakers in the recording are 20-year-old, female, Japanese university, second-year students majoring in physical education. They both went through the standard English education taught in Japanese public schools without additional English learning experiences such as studying abroad or attending English conversation schools. They were considered by their English instructor to be enthusiastic and diligent students. However, they lacked confidence in their speaking skills, and consider their pronunciations to sound very “Japanese”. They were selected for this study due to their typical “Japanese English pronunciation”.

### ***The Recorded Dialogue***

The two students were asked to read a provided script of a dialogue. The dialogue was of two friends in a causal conversation, and it contained only words that students of their level would have studied before. The dialogue also contained various segmental and suprasegmental features of the English language that could help reflect what the students find challenging. They were given ten minutes to familiarize themselves with the dialogue and prepare for any uncertain pronunciation before the recording.

### **3. Segmental features**

This section analyzes the dialogue at the segmental level, focusing on vowels and consonants.

#### ***Vowels***

In English, there are 20 vowels, including seven short vowels, five long vowels, and eight diphthongs. We make English vowels with a voiced egressive airstream without any closure or narrowing of the articulators, and they are differentiated based on the position of our soft palate (raised or lowered), the aperture formed by our lips (neutral, spread, close-rounded or open-rounded), and the part of our tongue that is raised and the degree of its raising (Cruttenden, 2008, p. 32).

In contrast, the Japanese language has only five vowel sounds, which are the two front vowel sounds /i, e/, one central vowel sound /a/, and two back vowel sounds /u, o/ (Vance, 1987). The English /u/ does not exist in the Japanese sounds, instead, this rounded-lip vowel is often replaced by the Japanese unrounded-lip /u/ in practice. Diphthongs also do not exist in Japanese, and two consecutive vowel letters (including long vowels) would often be read as two separate syllables by lower level speakers (Bloch, 1950). As a result, Japanese learners of English have difficulties producing the vowels that the Japanese vowel system does not contain (Vance, 1987).

In the recording, however, the performers only made a few mispronunciations and they were not very significant. When speaker A pronounced “journey” in the first sentence, “Did you have a good journey yesterday?”, /dʒɜːni/ was pronounced as /dʒəni/. The open-mid central unrounded vowel /ɜː/ cannot be found in the Japanese vowel sounds and it does not have a close equivalent Japanese sound, so we can hear the performer replacing it with /ə/. Another vowel mistake that caught my attention was the word “great” when speaker A said “It’s great that we could meet today.” The vowel of /eɪ/ is a diphthong, and as I have explained above, the Japanese language does not have any diphthongs, and the vowel /e/ was used in replacement, thus /ˈɡreit/ was pronounced as /ˈɡret/. The /æ/ in “Thank you” was also pronounced as /e/, changing /θæŋk/ into /ˈθeŋk/. This instance speaker B had with /æ/, however, was not an issue with words like “catch” and “happening”

when spoken by the same person. One last vowel problem I noticed was with the word /mi:t/, where the speaker seems to have replaced the /i:/ with /ɪ/. This issue likely came from the conflict between the English long vowels being one syllable while the Japanese long vowels constitute as two syllables, so the speaker who recognized meet being a one-syllable word read it with a short vowel. Overall, I did not find as many vowel problems with these two speakers as I had expected with lower level Japanese learners. While some similar-sounding words may cause confusion when the vowels are pronounced incorrectly, I believe that these issues with vowels alone would not affect the general intelligibility of the speakers, especially when spoken with the context of the conversation.

### **Consonants**

We will now analyze the performers' articulation of consonants. In English, there are 24 consonants. They are made by forcing out the airstream to produce the sound, which in contrast to vowels, can be voiced or voiceless and are differentiated by the differing degree of closure or narrowing of our articulators (Cruttenden, 2008, p. 26). There are six categories to demonstrate the manner of English consonant articulation: plosive, affricate, fricative, nasal, approximant and lateral (Kelly, 2010).

In Japanese, on the other hand, there are only 14 consonants. Problems often occur when Japanese learners are faced with the consonants that are not in their native language, such as the fricatives /f, v/ and /θ, ð/, as well as the approximants /w, l, r/ (Lambacher, 1999). Since learners tend to categorize the English sounds they hear using their native phonemic categories, categories that are missing in the Japanese sound systems become extra difficult for Japanese learners to recognize and produce (Lambacher, 1999). The abovementioned teaching technique of *katakana*-izing sounds for students, which ironically hinders their ability in recognizing sounds (Martin, 2004), and the widespread usage of *katakana*-ized foreign words that are now ingrained in the Japanese everyday language add to the challenges for lower level learners to accept English sounds without immediately connecting them to their L1 sound systems.

### **Consonants: /f/ vs. /ɸ/ and /v/ vs. /b/**

One of the consonants that Japanese learners have tremendous issues with is the labiodental fricative /v/. The closest sound in the Japanese is a voiceless bilabial fricative sound /ɸ/, which does not exist in English. In order to produce the sound, most Japanese learners substitute /ɸ/ for /f/ and /b/ for /v/ (Lambacher, 1999), and this approach to handle the /v/ sound has been commonly utilized to *katakana*-ize many foreign words into the Japanese everyday language. “Vanilla” is read as “banilla”, “volleyball” in Japanese is “bareebooru”, and the word “convenient store” is depicted and shortened as “conbini”, all in attempts to replace the /v/ sound.

In the recording, both speakers displayed issues with all three occurrences of the /v/ sound. In the sentences “Did you have a good journey yesterday?” and “Tea would be lovely. Thank you.”, read by speaker A and B respectively, both productions of /v/ in the words “have” and “lovely” were substituted by /b/. The third instance of /v/ in the phrase “it’s not out of my way at all”, the /v/ sound in the word “of” was dropped and /əv/ was pronounced as /ə/ instead. It may have been a subconscious elision decision, but either way, the students did not demonstrate any accurate productions of the labiodental fricative /v/ throughout the dialogue.

#### ***Consonants: /w/ vs. /ʍ/***

Another consonant sound that both speakers had issues with was the approximant /w/. In multiple cases, both speakers substituted the /w/ sound with the velar approximant /ʍ/, which is a common substitution used by Japanese learners (Lambacher, 1999). This sound in Japanese is spoken with a slight force on the lips but the lips remain largely unrounded. In the words “one”, “waiting” and “what’s”, the /w/ was replaced with /ʍ/. In the case with the word “would”, both speakers dropped the /w/ and pronounced /‘ʊd/ for what should have been /‘wʊd/ (strong form) or /wəd/ (weak form). I attribute this occurrence to the subsequent vowel sound /ʊ/, which has a rounded-mouth quality and may have affected the speakers. However, I did not detect the same issues with the word “we” as both speakers pronounced it accurately with rounded lips.

#### ***Other consonants***

I would like to group the other consonant findings together, as they did not appear in the dialogue as often as the /v/ and /w/ sounds as analyzed above. It has been noted that Japanese learners often pronounce the English sounds /θ/ and /ð/ as /s/ and /z/, as influenced by the Japanese phonetic system (Lambacher, 1999), which we can hear with the words “something” and “the”. However, I feel that the speakers did not have similar issues with the words “that” and “thank you”, thus more samples would be required in order for closer examination. Lastly, the consonants /r/ and /l/ are renowned for causing trouble for Japanese learners and has inspired constantly updated research in improving the /r/ sound of Japanese speakers (see, for example, Aoyama, Flege, Guion, Akahane-Yamada, & Yamada, 2004; Saito & Munro, 2014). The two sounds are not distinguished in the Japanese sound system, so learners often use a flap sound that resembles the English /l/ for both /l/ and /r/ (Lambacher, 1999). Speaker B in particular had trouble when she pronounced “real pleasure” as /lɪəl prɛʒə/, confusing the two sounds. However, once again, more samples than the ones found in this dialogue would be required for further discussions.

These consonant substitutions have high potential to create misunderstandings, such as when an order of vanilla ice-cream is mistaken to be banana ice-cream, or when a delicious Japanese rice-ball is said as a disgusting ball of lice. I had a difficult time comprehending an invitation to play

“bareebooru” with my students thinking it was a new game, and when I demonstrated the labiodental fricative of “volleyball” to the students, they were surprised to visually see the differences between the two pronunciations as well as the fact that Japanese people pronounced it so differently from where the word came from. Considering the potential intelligibility issues, I believe that consonants require more attention than vowels from teachers when teaching English pronunciations.

#### **4. Suprasegmental features**

This section analyzes the dialogue at the suprasegmental level, focusing on stress and rhythm, as well as intonation.

##### ***Stress and rhythm***

In order to contrast the two languages at the suprasegmental level, I believe that it is essential we first examine the rhythm patterns of the two systems first. English is a stress-timed language, which means that the rhythm of the language is governed largely by the stressed syllables in the words and sentences with an equal amount of time taken between any two consecutive stressed syllables (Cruttenden, 2008). Words can be stressed by increasing loudness, strength, pitch or vowel quality (Roach, 2000 p.74), while sentence stress is achieved through de-emphasizing words in the sentence that carry relatively unimportant information, often prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, determiners and auxiliaries. The unstressed syllables are made shorter in order to achieve the regular stress interval (Kelly, 2000).

Japanese, on the other hand, is a syllable-timed language where there is no strong pattern of stress, as syllables maintain their lengths and vowels maintain their quality (Kelly, 2000). This major difference creates a lot of difficulties for Japanese learners to comprehend and produce the English stress patterns characteristics.

In the recorded dialogue, we can hear the syllable-timed system influencing the learners' performance. Affected by their native language, both speakers placed equal stress on most of the syllables in the sentences. For one, function words like “that”, “a” and “can” have weak forms when unstressed (/ðət/, /ə/, and /kən/, respectively), but the speakers pronounced the words in their stressed forms (/ðat/, /a/, /kan/, respectively).

The dialogue in general also sounded very mechanical overall with each syllable produced one at a time. We can hear a few rhythmically connected utterances with phrases, specifically “did you have a”, “would you” and “thank you”, but experience tells me that these three phrases in particular were taught and practiced as “connected sets” in junior high school, thus unfamiliar phrases unfamiliar to them such as “at all” and “catch up” still sounded very disconnected, with each word

maintaining its own stress. In fact, most of the words sounded very detached from each other. This could be due to the unfamiliarity the students had with the dialogue, but nonetheless, both learners displayed a syllable-timed approach towards reading English aloud, likely influenced by their L1. Although I do not think this affected heavily the intelligibility of the dialogue, the conversation would definitely sound unnatural to other English speakers.

### ***Intonation***

One more suprasegmental feature I want to discuss is intonation. Intonation is a fundamental method we express our meanings with rising and falling tones (Kelly, 2000). For example, falling tones may indicate that the spoken sentence is a statement or information question, while a rising tone would suggest a yes/no question.

In the recording, both learners displayed very accurate usage of intonation. All of the statements were appropriately followed with a falling tone. The two yes/no questions posed by speaker A were said with a rising tone (despite the word “yesterday” in the first sentence being said with an unusual word stress), and the speaker also used two rising tones for “tea, coffee...” to suggest that it was a list with more options available (such as water, or no drinks). While intonation can heavily hinder the intelligibility of a speech, both speakers utilized this feature very naturally to demonstrate the meanings of the dialogue.

## **5. Pedagogical implications**

With the already limited opportunities to learn and practice pronunciation in class, it would be immensely advantageous if the teachers and students have a consensus on the goal that the lessons are helping the students reach: are students learning pronunciation to sound closer to a native speaker, or is it to improve their intelligibility? From my own observations, many students in Japan do in fact practice pronunciation with the dream to “sound like native speakers”. It is a big reason why so many advertisements of language schools in Japan sell the word “native” over actual teaching qualities. However, given the differences between the two languages’ sound systems and the lack of focus on the oral aspects during English lessons, this aim is seemingly unrealistic. Millions of people in the world, myself included, live in English-speaking countries but still speak English with a slight accent because of the influences from our other languages. I also believe that the disappointment from not reaching this unpractical goal heavily contributes to a lack of confidence the learners have, which is a topic for further research.

If the students aim to learn pronunciation to improve their intelligibility and overcome the noticeable Japanese influence, rather than aiming to sound “native”, they would have a much more achievable and practical aim for the purpose of communication. It would provide teachers with



precise teaching goals that they can prioritize to help students avoid being misunderstood. For example, teachers can consult Jenkins' *Lingua Franca Core* (2007) which provides great suggestions on the teaching priorities in regards to improving intelligibility, then they can consider some issues that Japanese learners have particular issues with and focus on those. On the segmental level, for example, the differences between /v/ and /b/ and the infamous /r/ and /l/ should be prioritized for Japanese students. Meanwhile, as Jenkins suggests, the /ð/ is not as crucial for intelligibility. Teachers should also raise students' awareness for long and short form vowels (Jenkins', 2007). On the suprasegmental level, while the syllable-timed influence from Japanese may hinder learners from sounding natural, Jenkins suggests that tonic stress (i.e. stress on the most important word within a group of words) is important to be understood. On the other hand, weak forms, some word stresses, and even the stress-timed pattern are not as crucial for intelligibility.

While the time for university students to learn and practice pronunciation in class is limited, given that students generally have received little education on English pronunciation means that even the basics can already open students up to a brand new way to listen to the language. By focusing on the differences of the languages, students become aware of what might interfere with their intelligibility as well as more precise priorities on what to improve first. University students with the goal of intelligibility can then proceed to discovering opportunities outside of the classroom to experiment with their level of communication skills. With exchange students, English circles on campus, and even technology such as voice recognition software, students can continue practicing and improving their pronunciation of their own accord. However, what must come first is for teachers to make students aware of the language differences and give them a realistic goal.

## 6. Conclusion

It is clear that the Japanese and English pronunciation systems differ significantly from each other on both the segmental and the suprasegmental levels, and certain L1 influences that Japanese learners have experienced may greatly hinder their communicative intelligibility. I believe that it is crucial for students and teachers to focus on improving learners' intelligibility via pronunciation teaching, rather than aiming to sound like native speakers. This approach allows teachers to prioritize certain aspects of English pronunciation that Japanese students have difficulties with and might create potential misunderstandings, while deprioritizing certain aspects that are less likely to interfere with English communication. This would result in more effective use of the limited teaching time inherent in the Japanese English education by improving students' intelligibility and, hopefully, giving them a stronger foundation of confidence in their English speaking.

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### Appendix

This is a transcription of the dialogue based on GA pronunciation. The original text and its transcription are in black, and the transcription of the recording is in red.

A: Did you have a good journey yesterday?

[Original]: 'dɪd jʊ əv ə 'ɡʊd dʒɜːniː 'jestəˌdeɪ||

[Recording]: 'dɪd jʊ əbə 'ɡʊd 'dʒəniː ˌjestəˌdeɪ||

B: Not too bad, just one short delay waiting in Manchester.

[O]: 'nɒt tuː 'bæd| dʒʌst 'wʌn ʃɔːt drɪˈleɪ weɪtɪŋ ɪn 'mænˌtʃestə||

[R]: nɒt tuː 'bæd| dʒʌstə 'wʌn ʃɔːt drɪˈleɪ ʍeɪtɪŋ ɪn 'manˌtʃestəː||

A: Good. Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee .....?

[O]: 'ɡʊd|| 'wʊd jʊ laɪk 'sʌmθɪŋ tə 'drɪŋk|| 'tiː| 'kaːfiː||

[R]: 'ɡʊ|| 'ʊd jʊ laɪk 'sʌmsɪŋ tə 'drɪŋk|| 'tiː| 'kʌfiː||

B: Tea would be lovely. Thank you.

[O]: 'tiː wəd biː 'lʌvliː|| 'θæŋk jʊ||

[R]: 'tiː ʊd biː 'lʌbliː|| 'θæŋk jʊ||

A: It's great that we could meet today.

[O]: ɪts 'ɡreɪt ðæt wɪ kəd 'miːt təˈdeɪ||

[R]: ɪts 'ɡret 'ðæt 'wɪ 'kət 'mɪ tdeɪ||

B: It's a real pleasure and it's not out of my way at all.

[O]: ɪts ə 'rɪəl pləʒə ən ɪts 'nɒt aʊt əv maɪ 'weɪ ət ɔːl||

[R]: ɪts ə 'lɪəl prəʒə ənd ɪts 'nɒt 'aʊt ə maɪ 'ʍeɪ ət ɔːl||

A: Oh, let me put the kettle on.

[O]: əʊ| 'let miː 'pʊt ðə 'ketəl ɒn||

[R]: 'əʊ| 'let 'miː 'pʊt zə 'ketəl ɒn||

B: Yes, then we can catch up on what's been happening since last time.

[O]: 'jes| ðen wi: kən 'kæʃ ʌp ɒn 'wɒts bi:n 'hæpənɪŋ sɪns 'lɑ:st taɪm||

[R]: 'jes| ðen 'wi: 'kan 'kæʃ| 'ʌp ɒn | 'ʌpɒts bi:n 'hæpənɪŋ sɪns 'lɑ:st taɪm||

# Volleyball または Bareebooru ?

## 日本人学習者に共通する英語発音の誤り

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### 要旨

本稿では、日本人英語学習者に共通する発音の誤りを指摘することを目的とする。2 人の日本人大学生の発話の録音を用い、対象学生が有する英語の分節、超分節の特徴に関する問題を明らかにした。日本語の発音の影響を関連づけることにより、発音に関する共通の誤りを分析する。考察において「ネイティブスピーカーのように」という目標を設定するのではなく、より現実的で達成可能な相手に伝わりやすい発音を目標として設定することの効果について述べる。そして、限られた授業時間であっても、誤解を避けるための発音練習を集中的に行うことで発音の伝わりやすさを向上できるということを提言する。

キーワード：英語発音，英語スピーキング，発音教育，発音誤り，日本人英語学習者