

Pronunciation Plan Portfolio

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MTSL 517: Phonology

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Introduction

In the book *Tips for Teaching Pronunciation: A Practical Approach*, Lane (2010) states, “[Japanese] differs from English in almost all linguistic aspects.” (Lane & Brown, 2010, p. 242). Japanese is based around the pitch of the language rather than word stress, and learning English intonation can be a challenge. For this reason, it is not surprising that some ELLs from Japan struggle with their English pronunciation.

The following pronunciation plan has been designed for an ELL from Japan. For the purpose of this paper, the student will be given the pseudonym Sota. Sota has elected to study English at Gonzaga University’s English Language Center. He is twenty years old and his first language is Japanese. He does not speak any other languages apart from Japanese and some English. Sota studied English for six years in both junior high school and high school. He is currently a junior at his university. All of Sota’s previous English teachers have been Japanese but he was exposed to some native English at a military base he visited near his home.

After graduating from university, Sota hopes to move to France to learn French. He originally studied business at his university in Japan but his true dream is to coach basketball. In order to become a coach, he must study education and teach English because it is not permitted to coach without being a teacher in Japan.

Speaking and listening are the hardest aspects of learning English for Sota. Sota often watches movies in English with Japanese subtitles as well as listens to English music to help improve his pronunciation. At Gonzaga, he lives in a dorm with an American and is able to practice his pronunciation with his roommate.

The first diagnostic test provided much insight about Sota’s English pronunciation. In the introduction part of the test, Sota was able to answer the five questions about himself with ease. However, the following question about whether or not he liked Spokane proved to be more of a challenge. This question required Sota to speak freely rather than from prepared answers. It became clear that fluency is a challenge for Sota at this point in his English language studies. There were many pauses and the speech was unclear in some parts. The recording also highlighted the challenges Sota has distinguishing between certain phonemes such as /r/ and /l/. This particular problem is expected with an ELL from Japan because as Swan and Smith (Swan & Smith, 2001) point out, both the /l/ and /r/ are pronounced as a Japanese /r/. Therefore, it is

anticipated that Japanese speakers will find distinguishing between these phonemes to be a challenge.

The students were then asked to read a pre-selected text about a man who misplaced his umbrella. The most noticeable feature from this exercise was Sota's lack of intonation. He spoke in a very monotone voice throughout the entire exercise with pauses and choppy speech. This is also typical of a Japanese student learning English. Lane (2010) mentions this difficulty, "Japanese students also have difficulty learning English intonation; their pitch range sometimes sounds too flat, and pitch changes may seem too abrupt." (Lane & Brown, 2010, p. 242).

The next part of the diagnostic test required the students to recount the story they just read but in their own words. This part reinforced the conclusions I drew from the previous two exercises. Again, the speech was flat and Sota continued to struggle with certain phonemes such as /r/, /l/, and /θ/. His speech was also very choppy and would be unclear to anyone unprepared to expect certain mispronunciations such as /l/ and /r/.

Finally, the students were asked to speak about their pronunciation needs and goals. Sota seemed slightly confused by the question and did not directly provide an answer. He mentioned that he wanted help with his pronunciation but did not specify in what areas. Through the second interview with Sota, I was able to draw out some more information about his overall pronunciation goals such as the desire to sound more like a native. When I mentioned his difficulty distinguishing between the two liquid sounds /r/ and /l/, he admitted to having trouble in this area and expressed a desire to improve. As Sota did not have any distinct goals, I had to come to my own conclusions about how to help him practice his English pronunciation.

The meeting with Sota provided the opportunity to collect more data on his pronunciation. I was able to further investigate his pronunciation goals as well as reaffirm my initial conclusions. After compiling all of the information from the diagnostic test and the meeting with Sota, I was able to determine what steps to take for Sota's pronunciation plan. The following section will highlight the areas of focus for this plan.

Prioritized Intelligibility Issues

Segmental

The phonemes that cause the most intelligibility issues for Sota are the liquids /l/ and /r/. As previously mentioned, these are two of the most troublesome phonemes for Japanese speakers because the sounds are pronounced the same in Japanese. For example, in the diagnostic test, Sota frequently confused the sounds in the words *red* and *yellow* pronouncing them /lɛd/ and /yero/. He also struggled with the pronunciation of *umbrella* and said “rost” instead of “lost.” The confusion between /l/ and /r/ occurred in every exercise on the diagnostic test which indicates that this is a very troublesome area for Sota.

/l/ and /r/ became one of the main focus points for Sota’s pronunciation plan because they have a significant affect on his intelligibility. The first step in helping Sota with these phonemes is to help him recognize the difference between them. In order to test whether he can hear the different pronunciation of /r/ and /l/, he was asked to listen to a sentence containing either an /r/ or /l/ and select the written sentence that corresponded to what he heard. The results of this exercise indicated that Sota has a hard time hearing the difference between the two sounds. Therefore, recognition of the sounds became the first step in the pronunciation plan. The first handout explains how the tongue is placed in the mouth to form both the /l/ and /r/ sounds. Hopefully, if Sota can visualize and know how to form the sound, he will have more success producing them. Then the activities move to hearing the difference between the sounds. Starting with micro activities, Sota will only listen to one word and select the one he hears. The second exercise uses the sounds in sentences which Sota must first listen to and then select the sentence that he hears. The goal of these activities is to heighten Sota’s awareness of how the sounds are formed and how to listen for the difference in their pronunciation.

The next segmental that typically causes pronunciation problems for Japanese speakers is the morpheme *ly*. This is connected to the problem distinguishing between the /l/ and /r/ phonemes because Japanese speakers will pronounce the *ly* ending as /ri/. For instance, at one point in the interview, Sota said /æktɹi:/ instead of *actually*. This could also be considered a suprasegmental issue because Sota is omitting syllables when he pronounces this word. This also occurred with the word *accidentally*. Again, Sota pronounced the final morpheme as /ri:/ rather than /li:/ as well as dropped syllables.

In order to practice syllables, the pronunciation plan includes a Hot Potatoes activity where Sota must select the number of syllables in various words after listening to a recorded pronunciation of each word. This exercise incorporates words ending in *ly* in hopes that Sota will be able to notice and produce the correct pronunciation of the morpheme.

There were a few other segmentals that caused noticeable errors in the pronunciation of certain words. However, none of these mistakes impacted Sota's intelligibility as much as the difference between /l/ and /r/. One of the other segmentals is the pronunciation of /ð/ and /d/. For example, in one instance, the word *then* was pronounced with a /d/ rather than with a /ð/. For example, instead of pronouncing the *th* in *then* or *that*, Sota said *den* and *dat*. /θ/ and /ð/ are two phonemes that ELL's from many different countries have trouble pronouncing (Lane & Brown, 2010). Lane (2010) mentions that Japanese speakers are more apt to substitute the /s/ or /z/ phoneme for the *th* sound but on all occasions during both the diagnostic test and the first meeting, Sota pronounced *th* with the phoneme /d/.

Sota also occasionally substitutes the /v/ for /b/ as is typical for Japanese ELLs. As is the case with /l/ and /r/, Japanese does not include the /v/ phoneme (Lane & Brown, 2010). Therefore, it is not unexpected that Sota would make this substitution in words such as *very*. The pronunciation plan, however, does not focus on this phoneme or the pronunciation of *th* for a few reasons. Mainly, these phonemes do not impact Sota's intelligibility on the same level as the problem of distinguishing /l/ and /r/. A listener will be able to understand the speaker if he or she hears *bery* instead of *very* based on context. These sounds also do not alter the "music" of English which has more affect of the listener's ability to understand a speaker. For all of these reasons, the pronunciation plan emphasizes the importance of learning /l/ and /r/ as well as the suprasegmentals that will be introduced in the next section.

Suprasegmentals

In the English language, suprasegmentals have a greater effect on the intelligibility of a speaker than segmentals. Lane (2010) states, "For native English listeners, the most important syllable in a word in the stressed syllable, the primary cue for identifying the word. This makes stress a very important pronunciation topic." (p. 17). Along with stress, rhythm and intonation are suprasegmentals that also affect the native English listener's ability to comprehend the speaker. These suprasegmentals became the focus for Sota's pronunciation plan.

The first aspect to focus on is stress. Overall, Sota does not show too many problems correctly placing the stress over the right syllable. The problem usually occurs when the word contains multiple syllables such as *assistant*. As mentioned in the previous section, the first step is to emphasize the number of syllables in each word which was done through another Hot Potatoes activity. The follow-up activity to the number of syllables activity is a worksheet that asks Sota to mark the primary stress of each word. The goal is to improve his pronunciation of multi-syllabic words.

The second part of the pronunciation plan focuses on intonation and the rhythm of the English language. This is a common difficulty for Japanese ELLs because they tend to pronounce all of the words with the same emphasis (Lane & Brown, 2010). In the reading part of the diagnostic test, Sota read the paragraph with a very flat tone and rarely altered his voice. The pronunciation plan incorporates both an exercise where Sota has to select whether the intonation is rising or falling and one where Sota must select the stressed words in a sentence. The goal of the first exercise is to help Sota hear the variations in the tone of the English language. Swan and Smith (2001) mention that Japanese speakers are good at hearing and repeating stress and intonation. Once Sota recognizes that there is a rhythm to English, hopefully he will be able to copy the intonation and begin to speak with more intonation both when reading and in free speech.

Sentence stress is another aspect that affects the sound of English. Stressing the wrong words in a sentence can impact the speaker's intelligibility. During both reading and free speech, Sota does not place emphasis on the important words or information in the sentence. Therefore, his speech tends to sound flat. The exercise on sentence stress requires Sota to listen to a recording of nursery rhymes and select the words that are stressed. The pronunciation plan also includes a handout stating the rules of sentence stress because Japanese speakers tend to learn these rules quickly once they understand the pattern (Swan & Smith, 2001).

Finally, there is a section of the portfolio dedicated to intonation with the goal that Sota will be able to recognize the sound of English. The worksheet explains the intonation patterns that English follows with practice on thought groups.

Most of the activities were developed either from Sota's actual speech from the diagnostic recording and the first meeting or were created around his expressed interests. For example, the activity where Sota must distinguish between the /l/ and /r/ consists of only words

that Sota himself mispronounced. The intent was to keep the activities relevant to Sota's pronunciation issues and hopefully seem like worthwhile exercises. The thought group paragraph is about basketball because Sota expressed interest in the sport and hopes to be a coach one day which makes the exercise more personal.

The principle goal of this portfolio is to improve Sota's intelligibility and not perfect his accent. Intonation, stress, and the difference between /l/ and /r/ were the factors most inhibiting the listener's ability to understand. Therefore, the plan focused on those three main issues.

Works Cited

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- Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. Ernst Klett Sprachen. Retrieved from <http://www.foreignstudents.com/sites/default/files/learnerenglish.pdf>