

SOME PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH CONVERSATION TO JAPANESE STUDENTS

by
Gould S. Stevens

Introduction

In teaching Spoken English, which is something quite different from teaching the reading of English, — it seems to me that there are three basic problems. First, the student must learn the correct sounds, and some students experience difficulty in learning to pronounce certain English vowels, diphthongs, and consonants, which do not occur in the Japanese language. The second problem involves correct intonation, the rising and falling of the voice when we speak. Third, the student must learn correct stress (described by some teachers as loudness and softness).

Subsidiary difficulties include the problem of English nouns, and the learning of question patterns.

I

First of all, let us consider the matter of sounds. It is well-known that there are certain sounds in the English language that are difficult for many Japanese students. The Japanese language has only five basic vowel sounds: あ い う え お. These sounds also occur in English, but there are others that some students have trouble in learning to pronounce. Among these, there are the short “i” (as in “big”), the short “a” (as in “cat”), the short double “oo” (as in “book”), and the open “a” (as in “all”). The double vowels, or diphthongs, usually are not difficult, since they are almost the same as in Japanese.

Among the consonants, the most troublesome are the voiced “th” (as in “this”) and the unvoiced “th” (as in “think”). And then, of course, there is the problem of distinguishing between the two quite different sounds of “l” and “r”. Because the Japanese pronunciation of “r” is somewhere between the English “l” and “r”, with sometimes a very little of the sound of “d” mixed in, the difference in the pronunciation of “l” and “r” can be difficult for many students.

There are a few other consonants that sometimes give trouble. Perhaps because the Japanese pronunciation of the ふ varies somewhat according to individual and locale, between the sounds of “fu” and “hu”, the English “f”, whether at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of, a word, is sometimes mispronounced. Since the English “v” does not occur in Japanese, some students find it difficult. Also, the “zh” sound of “s” (as in “measure”) is sometimes incorrectly pronounced. Then, finally, the last letter of the English alphabet “z”, especially when it occurs at the beginning of a word (as in “zoo”), is often mispronounced by Japanese students as “dz”, as if the word were “dzoo”.

Now, how can these problems of pronunciation be made more easy for the student to learn? I think it is unfortunate that in most textbooks of Spoken English written by Japanese teachers, the pronunciation of each word must be printed (either above or below the word) in katakana, so that, for instance, “this”

becomes “zuisu” (ズイス), and “these” becomes “zuiizu” (ズィーズ). One of the best textbooks I have found, so far, for the elementary school level, “The First Step in English”,^(a) uses this system throughout the text, adding, in Part II, the phonetic symbols as well. In my opinion, phonetic symbols are too difficult for students on the elementary school, as well as on the junior high school, level. In America, phonetic symbols are usually not introduced to the students of foreign languages until the high school level, and sometimes not until university.

So far, no one has invented a better system of writing pronunciation of English for Japanese students. If the students have a native speaker for a teacher, the problem is much simpler, if the students will try to copy, as far as possible, the teacher's pronunciation. If the teacher is Japanese, he will find the recordings, that accompany many of the textbooks by foreign teachers nowadays, of value in the preparation of his lesson. For some of the more difficult sounds, I myself sometimes attempt to explain the shape of the mouth and lips, and the shape and position of the tongue.

It is not intended that the Japanese student “must sound exactly like a native speaker; but that his pronunciation is natural enough that he cannot be misunderstood”.^(b)

II

The second problem, that of correct intonation, is probably more difficult for most Japanese students, and for several reasons.

The various structures of the European languages, from which English is derived, are so very different from the structures of the Asian languages, that one might say that the grammatical structure of English is sometimes the opposite of that of Japanese. This affects not only the learning of correct intonation, but also the problem of English nouns, mentioned in the introduction, as well as that of question patterns.

However, there is perhaps another reason for the difficulty of learning the “pattern of modulation and inflection in connected speech”^(c) which is usually called Intonation. In Japan, the traditional method of learning, not only in schools, but also in all the arts of the theatre and music, has been to repeat vocally, by rote, the lesson to be learned. In Junior High School, when Japanese students are usually introduced to the study of English, the students soon learn to read the English letters, and little by little, the words themselves. Of course, a great deal of time must be spent on the learning of English grammar, but, for the purpose of this paper, which deals primarily with spoken English, let us suppose that the students begin by trying to read the words silently, progressing to the point where they can read a complete sentence, and then, later, learning to read out loud. I believe that a great deal of this oral reading is learned in a monotone.

For example, when we read a book, most people, in reading to themselves, do not voice the words, nor even form the words with their lips. And most people

(a) THE FIRST STEP IN ENGLISH by Hitoshi Nitta; Osaka Musashi Shobo, 1963.

(b) SPOKEN AMERICAN ENGLISH (INTRODUCTORY COURSE) by William L. Clark; Tokyo, Kenkyusha, Revised Edition, 1962; page v.

(c) THORNDIKE-BARNHART COMPREHENSIVE DESK DICTIONARY; Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962.

do not, without great effort, hear in their own minds, the “intonation” of the sentences. This skill is sometimes taught, in the Western world at least, to students of acting and public speaking, but it is not an easy one to learn,—to form in one’s own mind, without moving the lips, the “sound” of the patterns of intonation.

In teaching English Conversation to Japanese students, I advise the students strongly not to practice reading the sentences aloud, when they are studying alone, until they have learned the correct intonation from the teacher. Until that time, they must study silently. This is important, because wrong patterns learned by rote, are sometimes difficult to unlearn and to correct. When the students start to follow the voice of the teacher, he must speak clearly, and the students must repeat loudly. This is important, for the “desired results cannot be obtained if the student merely mumbles”.^(a)

The use of correct intonation is what makes a spoken language, any language, a beautiful instrument to use, and to hear. Also, and this can sometimes be, to say the least, embarrassing,—a different intonation can give an unintended meaning or feeling to a word or phrase, or even to a whole sentence. For example, in Japanese, the word “nani”, as well as the sentence “sō desu-ka”, can be given several different intonations, with quite different meanings. In English, the word “oh” has several intonations, with corresponding meanings. “Oh?” with a rising inflection is a question; “oh!” short and sharp, with no inflection, expresses surprise; “oh . . .” with a slow falling inflection, shows pity and sympathy; “oh.....” with a long even sound, can express indecision.

For another example, “sayonara” and “o-yasumi-nasai”, when used in the family, or by close friends, are sometimes given a rather quick tempo, with a slight downward inflection at the end. If the student uses the same intonation in saying “good-by”, or “good night”, the resultant meaning, or feeling, might be described as follows: “it’s too bad, but this meeting was not very interesting, so, to be polite, I must say ‘good-by’ to you, but I won’t be very unhappy if we don’t meet again for some time.....”

Therefore, it is important to learn intonation correctly, and as early in the study of spoken English as is practicable. Different textbooks use different systems of marking, to show intonation in a printed sentence. Clark^(b) uses a number system, with four levels of intonation: 1-very high; 2-high; 3-normal; 4-low. In his textbooks, the printed sentence may show a continuous rising and falling line, to indicate the intonation. Another slightly different system is that of Brown^(c) who adds an arrow at the end of the mark. However, Brown uses his intonation line only on the phonetic symbols, which is a disadvantage for students who have not thoroughly learned those symbols. When I must write a sentence on the black-board, I use the continuous line ending with the arrow, in chalk of a different color.

One more element in intonation is sometimes neglected, especially in longer sentences, and that is the matter of phrasing. In normal English speech, there are

(a) IMPROVING YOUR CONVERSATION (Volume 1) by Vernon Brown; Tokyo, Meirindo, 1961; page 8.

(b) Ibid. Page #2

(c) Ibid. Page #3

certain pauses, usually very brief, that are used for emphasis. These can be shown on the blackboard, by using a light vertical line in chalk of another color. They are an important part of the "pattern of modulation and inflection in connected speech".

III

The third problem is that of correct stress, or accent. Most shorter English words have only one syllable accented, but many longer words may have a primary (stronger) stress, and a secondary (weaker) stress. This problem usually gives the students little trouble, if they listen carefully to the speech of their instructor, and follow the stress exactly.

IV

The problem of English nouns, their number, their determiners, and their modification, is well-known, and since it should have been well introduced in the study of English grammar, I will not attempt to analyze it here. However, most beginning textbooks of English Conversation have many practice drills covering this problem.

Question patterns often are difficult for Japanese students. In printed, or written, English, there is the convenient question mark (?). However, in spoken English, only the correct intonation will signal to the Japanese student, that "this is a question; therefore, you must answer". Brown^(a) has a very good lesson on this problem.

Conclusion

All of these problems can be surmounted by the student who really wishes to learn English, and who studies carefully, by following the model of speech presented by the instructor. A foreign language can be learned, for example, by a researcher, only for needed information. But in learning to speak a foreign language, it is well to remember that all languages, and especially spoken language, is communication. Language carelessly, or incorrectly, spoken, results in incomplete, and sometimes, wrong communication.

(a) Ibid. Page #3