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## **The Importance of Phonetic Factors in Language Learning**

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### **1. Background**

David Crystal, who is an English linguist, gives six answers to the question ‘Why study the English Language?’ in the column article of his *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995, p.3). Let me quote those six answers to the question

‘Why study the English Language?’

- 1 Because it's fascinating.
- 2 Because it's important.
- 3 Because it's fun.
- 4 Because it's beautiful.
- 5 Because it's useful.
- 6 Because it's there.

The number of people who use English in the world today is said to exceed well over one billion. It is said that about eighty percent of the information stored in computers in the world is in English. English education at public elementary schools has already been introduced in Korea, and will formally be taken into Japanese education in 2002. The purpose of introducing early English education in our countries is clearly meant to equip the students with communicative competence.

The famous English grammarian, Otto Jespersen states in his *A Modern English Grammar, Part 1, Sounds and Spelling* (1st 1961,1970), that “the essence of language is activity, the purpose of which is to communicate and express thoughts and feeling.”(p.v)

I'd like to stress the importance of phonetic factors in language learning by giving one or two concrete examples.

We need to think of the linguistic distance between our language and the target language.

## 2. The Minimum Pairs that are Hard for Students to Discriminate

As an example that is hard for Japanese learners of English to discriminate, the English sound pair R(right) and L(light) is often cited.

See Hyun Bok Lee(1998), 'Japanese Mispronunciation of English Vowels', *Proceedings*, Joint Summit on English Phonetics, pp.13-21. Hyun Bok Lee, S. H. Kim & Y.J.Kwak(1998), English Auditory Discrimination Test (for Korean), *Proceedings* Part II, pp.45-63.

According to the results, among the difficult pairs for Korean students are [dʒ](ledger)-[ʒ](lesure), [v](vow)-[b](bow), [d](day)-[ð](they), including [l](load)-[r](road).

[dʒ] and [ʒ], and [v] and [b] pairs are difficult for Japanese students to distinguish, too.

As to the pair R and L, the reason why Japanese students cannot tell which is which is that these two sounds are not individual, independent phonemes in our sound system.

Practice in telling [r] from [l] is, of course, important, but the more important thing is to have the learners notice that phonemes are different in languages; that is, English speaking people should feel the phonetic distance between R and L as the same distance between [i](sit) and [e](set).

## 3. On the Reduced Vowel [ə]

Now I'd like to talk about the importance of the correct pronunciation of the reduced vowel, an inverted e, [ə], which is often called a 'schwa'. The weak point regarding the vowel [ə] that the Japanese learners of English get into trouble:

(1)Examples : appear, oblige, upon; diet, second, houses, analysis, animal, famous, tortoise; Americaa, sofaa, etc.

(2) [ 'wɛn də jə 'θɜŋk ðə 'tʃɪldrən wəl gət 'hə:m frəm 'skə:l ]

(3) When do you think the children will get home from school?

(A.C.Gimson, a former phonetician, states in his *Gimson's Pronunciation of English* (1994, p.283, revised by Alan Cruttenden)

I'd like to show you a video of a pronunciation practice which I tried several years ago.

[Playing the video].

[Video]

(4) How to Produce the Unstressed Vowel [ə]

1 Practice Sentences

1) Will you stay in America? [jə]

2) I would have done it. [əv]

3) Father went for a walk. [fə]

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2 Practice for Confirmation of [ə]

1) [ə]-[ʔ]-[a]

2) [a]-[ə]-[æ]-[ʊ]

3) (Placing the hand under the chin) [a···]-[ə···]···[a]-[ə]

3 Practice with Words containing [ə]

1) Word initial: about, account, oblige, oppose, upon, etc.

2) Word mid: atlas, silence, family, restaurant, etc.

3) Word final: Americaa, operaa, schappe, etc.

4) [-fən]: actiona, collectiona, fictiona, sectiona, stationa, etc.

(Japanese students are apt to pronounce the words with -tion endings as [-ʃɔn]; not reduced [-ʃən]. So this practice aims at that kind of correction.)

#### 4 Practice by Conversion of the Parts of Speech

1) récord(n) ~ record(v) [ə]~[ɔ(r)]

2) produce(n) ~ produce(v) [ə]~[ɑ/ɔ ]

3) full ~ fáthull [ʊ]~[ə]

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#### 5 Visual Confirmation by the Soundspectrograph

1) He can see it.

2) Much obliged.

3) oblige

4) breakfast

5) upon

(Amplitude and Pattern by the Soundspectrograph RION, SG-09)

#### 6 Practice by Contrast

1) [ə]-[ɪ]

Word initial: affect-effect, acept-expect

Word mid: (BE)battered-batted, (BE)razors-raises

Word final: (BE)mitre-mighty, sitter-city

2) [ə]-[ʌ]: mention-men shun, Wahington-washing ton

[ə]-[ɛ]: gratest-gray test, material-materiel

[ə]-[ɪ]: license-lie since

[ə]-[ɑ/ɔ]: German-germ on, project(v)-project(n)

[ə]-[æ]: human-hue man, parents-pair ants

(Tiffany/Carrell, *Phonetics: Theory and Application*, 1977, pp.226-7)



#### 4 Concluding Remarks

It goes without saying that we should keep in mind the importance of our native language, but at the same time, we'd like to admit anew that English, as an actual international language, is not only for Englishmen, Americans, and some other native speakers of English.

According to the US Bureau of the Census (1996), by 2050, that is, 50 years hence, the population of the United States is projected to grow to about 394 million, but the percentage of non-Hispanic whites will decrease to little more than 50 %, while Hispanic people will amount to as many as 88 million.

(See Fern. L. Johnson, *Speaking Culturally: Language Diversity in the United States*, 2000, Sage Publications, p.8)

English, already established as a world language, will increasingly solidify its status. It is quite clear that English is a means or a tool of communication of the world and a common language on the internet. To master 'communicative English', I'd like to underscore the importance of phonetic factors.