

English Sounds to Japanese Ears*

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For the learners of English as a foreign language, oral repetition of model sentences is an essential practice to improve their listening and speaking abilities of English. Skill training of both speech perception and production is involved in this practice. This paper reports on an observation of production errors in such practice made by Japanese college students in my class. The teaching material used is intended for acquainting the learners with basic English rhythm and intonation patterns. The students were required to repeat each sentence in a series of conversations after a model reading. Although the vocabulary and expressions were rather limited, I monitored different kinds of errors in their repetition. Putting aside intonation, their difficulties are classified into five types: 1. Omission of words or morphemes, 2. Addition of unnecessary words or morphemes, 3. Replacement of words, 4. Japanization of English sounds, 5. Wrong rhythm caused by improper stress assignment. Accurate listening, especially to weakly stressed syllables and to assimilated sounds, as has often been pointed out, is the most difficult part in perception for them. Japanese sound system interferes in production of English sounds. More often than not their knowledge of grammar or the context does not work at all to guess the words they are hearing.

1. Data analysis of the oral repetition practice in my class

In the earlier stage of language learning, some amount of our energy should be spared for developing and acquiring the sound image of the target language. Through the repetition of discrimination practice of individual sounds, linking of sounds and intonation, we can form the typical images of phonemes, words and pitch contours in our brain. Aural recognition comes before oral production in language learning. It also applies to the learning of English. The situation is changing, but traditionally in Japanese high schools students seem to spend their time more in reading and writing than in listening and speaking. Consequently, though admiring their fair knowledge of English, the same process as I mentioned above is still useful and necessary for my English major college students. This article deals with error analysis of their difficulties in perceiving and producing the sounds of English.

The following data are from my research work on the errors in oral repetition in my English pronunciation class. The students were asked to repeat each sentence with correct pronunciation, rhythm and intonation. This paper points out or sorts out their problems in the practice. Actually the oral repetition practice contains two parts. One is aural recognition and the other is oral production. The students were facing two different levels of difficulties when they repeated the model sentences.

1.1. Omission

Omission of a word or part of a word seems to be concerned mainly with the aspect of perception. The errors can be categorized into the following two types (cf. 1.1.1. and 1.1.2.).

1.1.1. Omission of words (or morphemes) with minor stress

So many omissions were observed as to such functional words as pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliaries. Inflectional endings such as past tense *-ed* and plural *-s* are liable to be omitted. We can easily know the reason why all this happens. Weakly pronounced words (or morphemes) are hard to hear especially to the ears of the learners of English as a foreign language. (1)-(67) show the sound omissions of this kind.

- (1) I think (I'll) make a chocolate cake.
- (2) Would you like (me) (to) mail these letter(s) for you?
- (3) Carol, I have to go to (the) university now.
- (4) I ('m) sure (I) brought it home.
- (5) I parked (in) the driveway and came in through the kitchen.
- (6) But (it) isn't there.
- (7) I listen(ed to) the news on the radio in the living room.
- (8) Oh, well, maybe absent-minded(ness) (is) (a) good sign.
- (9) After all, I'm supposed to be (a) professor.
- (10) The class did very well (in) (this) examination.
- (11) You finished reading those exam paper(s) at last.
- (12) And you look(ed) so pleased.
- (13) I thought he (was) very amusing and good-looking, too.

- (14) And he (had) protested when he got (a) poor grade (for) the course.
- (15) Now I understand (the) pleased expression.
- (16) He('s) progressing marvelously.
- (17) He's working, and (his) record shows it.
- (18) Let's invite (him) to dinner tomorrow.
- (19) That's (a) good idea.
- (20) It's a wonderful place for (a) picnic.
- (21) It's on (the) floor (in) back.
- (22) We couldn't (have) found a better place for (a) walk.
- (23) I hope we didn't forget (the) beer.
- (24) We can go for (a) walk later.
- (25) It's just (an) old battery.
- (26) I guess we('ll) have to get (a) new one.
- (27) We('re) having trouble with the car.
- (28) Take (the) wheel, Carol.
- (29) Sam and I (will) push.
- (30) Put (it) in gear, but don't start the motor till I shout.
- (31) Sit down, Ruth, and I('ll) get (us) some coffee.
- (32) Yes, but (our) baby-sitter is sick.
- (33) Oh, if you could we'd appreciate (it) so much.
- (34) I'll come over (at) seven.
- (35) I'll enjoy (it).
- (36) Are you going (to) have something.
- (37) Do you want the same vegetable(s) (or) others.
- (38) Well, I('ll) have French fried potatoes, asparagus and a salad.
- (39) I'm going to have roast beef, (a) baked potato, green peas, and (the) mixed green salad.
- (40) Here comes the waiter with our drink(s).
- (41) All right, if you want to make (it) that easy.
- (42) I('ll) hang (it) up.
- (43) First (a) wonderful dinner, then (an) excellent play, and now all this service.

- (44) Well, I('ve) had a good time.
- (45) I('m) glad (you) enjoyed (the) play.
- (46) I enjoy(ed) (it) very much.
- (47) I liked (her), too.
- (48) Not (a) very good student (of) history, but (a) good actress.
- (49) The boy (who) played (the) part of George.
- (50) And he was (an) excellent student.
- (51) (The) best in (the) class.
- (52) Tony, it was (a) delightful evening.
- (53) When('s) the next play?
- (54) How have you (and) Ruth been?
- (55) We have(n't) seen you lately.
- (56) We have(n't) gone out very much.
- (57) I('m) so glad you invited (us) (to) come over this evening.
- (58) Take off your coat(s) and let's go into the living room and sit down.
- (59) Yes, let me have your coat(s).
- (60) Carol , we have to (be) going.
- (61) You have (to) get up early tomorrow.
- (62) You('ll) have to visit us soon.
- (63) I'll call (you) up early tomorrow.
- (64) Put (on) your coat dear, and let's go.
- (65) Is (there) anything (I) (can) get for you?
- (66) I (was) planning to get (a) new lipstick, too.
- (67) Just let (me) get my coat.

1.1.2. Omission of words with major stress

Omission of such content words as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs is limited in number.

- (68)-(79) show the sound omissions of this kind.
- (68) I thought he was very amusing and (good)-looking, too.
- (69) We can (go) for a walk later.

- (70) They (do) look (good), don't they?
(71) Did you leave the radio (on) again?
(72) I'm just (out) for a walk.
(73) Why don't you play your (new) Gershwin record?
(74) We've had a wonderful (time).
(75) I'll call you (up) some time next week.
(76) You'd better come (along) with me.
(77) Just (let) me get my coat.
(78) There you (are), Tony.
(79) What size (shirt) does he (wear)?

1.2. Addition

Function words and inflectional endings are liable to be added where unnecessary in repetition practice. Not so many content words are found in the addition errors. (80)-(105) are the list of insertion errors of unnecessary morphemes.

- (80) I think I'll make you a chocolate cake.
(81) All right, when did you see it last night?
(82) I'm sure I brought it my home.
(83) That sounds a reasonable.
(84) You are finished reading those exam papers at last.
(85) I'm thought he was a very amusing and good-looking, too.
(86) And I didn't accepted his protest.
(87) Let's invited him to the dinner tomorrow.
(88) , and let's have dinner for ourselves.
(89) If you have a time....
(90) I think I'll have change my mind.
(91) I'm gladed you enjoyed the play.
(92) I am enjoyed it very much.
(93) When's the next to the play.
(94) I'm so gladed you invited us to come over this evening.

- (95) I was planning to get a new lipsticks, too.
- (96) Well, I can get the toothpaste, but not the lipsticks.
- (97) We have a sale on the razor blades this week.
- (98) I'll take you/it the two packages.
- (99) I'd liked to/to have some shaving cream, too.
- (100) All I have is a ten dollars bill.
- (101) That's three dollars, four, five and five dollars makes the ten dollars.
- (102) They have a wonderful selection of the paperback books here.
- (103) Perhaps you would like to a shirt or a necktie.
- (104) I suppose you're all right.
- (105) He likes very heavy jackets, but not heavy sweaters.

1.3. Replacement

The words in parentheses were replaced by the words underscored. These kinds of errors can be classified into the following two types (cf. 1.3.1. and 1.3.2.).

1.3.1. Replacement by a word which sounds similar to the original one

Sometimes the students hear only part of a word and guess the remaining part incorrectly to produce a different word from the original one. (106)-(160) show the replacement errors of this kind.

- (106) Some more coffee, dinner(dear)?
- (107) All right, when did you seen(see) at(it) last?
- (108) Well, have(how) do you light(like) there(that).
- (109) The class did very well in the(this) examination.
- (110) You finished reading the(those) exam papers at last.
- (111) And he's is(had) a protest/a protesting(protested) when he got a poor grade in(for) the course.
- (112) Now I understand your(the) pleased expression.
- (113) He's progress in/progress is(progressing) marvelously.
- (114) It's on a(the) floor in back.

- (115) We couldn't have find(found) a better place for a walk!
- (116) I hope we couldn't(didn't) forget the beer.
- (117) You weren't(aren't) listening.
- (118) It's just a(an) old battery.
- (119) Yes, that(it) is.
- (120) We're having travelling(travel with) the car.
- (121) Put it the(in) gear, but don't start the motor till I shout.
- (122) Is(Keep) the motor running, Carol.
- (123) By the way, can you(we) giving(give) you a ride?
- (124) Sit down , Ruth, and I'll get you(us) some coffee!
- (125) He has a ticket(tickets) for the concert tonight.
- (126) Oh, that sounds like this(a nice) evening.
- (127) You and Sam like(love) music, don't you?
- (128) Yes, but my(our) baby-sitter is sick.
- (129) I'll('d) be like(glad) to sit with a(the) children.
- (130) Oh, if you could, I(we) 'd appreciate it so much.
- (131) You usually have supper at seven(six), don't you?
- (132) I'll enjoying(enjoy it)!
- (133) Would you like to order anything from a(the) bar?
- (134) In the mean time, you may want to be looking at the menu in(for) this evening.
- (135) I think I'll have a lamb chop(lamb chops), mashed potatoes, green peas and a salad.
- (136) Do you want to be(the) mixed green salad, or lettuce and tomato?
- (137) I have('ll) bet that lobster is good.
- (138) Here let me get(have) a(your) coat, darling.
- (139) What did (have) you do(done) along(wrong)?
- (140) Well, you(I)'ve had a good time.
- (141) She had(did) a fine job.
- (142) Not a very good student in the(of) history, but a good actress.
- (143) Dave Dawson is(was) in my class, too.
- (144) My hair is(looks) terrible.

- (145) And he was a/the(an) excellent student.
- (146) I'm(I'll) remind you to get the tickets.
- (147) Tony, Ruth says my(this) skirt is too long.
- (148) I'm so glad you invited us to come and(over) this evening.
- (149) I'll hang them map(up)
- (150) Why don't you play on the(your new) Gershwin record?
- (151) You'll have a(to) visit us soon.
- (152) I'm('ll be) waiting for(to hear from) you.
- (153) Well, I can get a(the) toothpaste, but not the lipstick.
- (154) Are you(we) walking or taking a(the) car?
- (155) That's the kind of(I) usually buy, too.
- (156) We(I)'ll take two packages.
- (157) That's three dollars, four, five and five comes(makes) ten dollars.
- (158) They have a wonderful selection of paperback books now(here).
- (159) But then I was waiting for you at/to(by) the newspaper stand.
- (160) and I starting(started looking) at the books, and....

1.3.2. Replacement by a word in adjacent position

Words in adjacent position are liable to be exchanged for each other in repetition. (161)-(171) show the replacement errors of this kind.

- (161) Are you(You're) going to do some baking?
- (162) Would you like me mail to those(to mail these) letters for you?
- (163) I thought he was very amusing and looks so good(good-looking), too.
- (164) This is a such(such a) lovely place!
- (165) Are you not busy now, are you?/You're not busy, are you now?(You're not busy now, are you?)
- (166) Now it's turn to your(your turn to) choose!
- (167) The university group drama(drama group) is really very good, isn't it?
- (168) Well, let's just not(not just) stand here.
- (169) Say, you got have('ve got) a new hi-fi system, haven't you?

(170) I'll call up you(you up) some time next week.

(171) That's the kind I buy usually(usually buy), too.

1.4. Japanization of English sounds

Differences in phonemic and syllabic systems between English and Japanese causes production errors by the students. For instance, they tend to retain Japanese syllable structure in repeating English sentences. English phonemes are liable to be replaced by Japanese ones. Sometimes the original sounds are hypercorrected by the students. The errors in (172)-(179) seem to be concerned mainly with the level of production rather than the perceptual aspect.

(172) Let's stop here. (stop→[stoʔpu])

(173) No, just a little cream, please. (little→[ritoru])

(174) See you later. (later→[reita])

(175) The mixed green salad I think. (salad→[sælada])

(176) I'll hang them up. (hang→[hæŋu])

(177) You'd better come along with me. (along→[əloŋu])

(178) May I help you? (help→[herupu])

(179) Yes, I'm looking for a birthday present for my husband. (present→[prezent],
husband→[hæzbənd])

1.5. Rhythm

Improper stress assignment is a cause of trouble in keeping proper rhythm of English sentences. (180)-(183) show the examples.

(180) We couldn't have found a better place for a walk! (have→[hæv])

(181) I'll take this one ('ll→[wiru])

(182) It's a pretty good récording.

(183) I'll hang it up.

2. Mishearing data from a dictation

(184)-(188) illustrate the students' errors in perception. They are from a dictation test in my class.

(184) Your father had a briefcase.

(185) What's the matter?

(186) You can finish the next lesson.

(187) His name is John and he lives in France.

(188) A: May we go? B: Yes, you may.

In (184) twenty three students out of 62 missed the indefinite article before briefcase. In a sense it is quite natural that they could not identify the indefinite article since it is pronounced most weakly in the sentence. Function words usually do not carry primary or secondary stress, which very often makes Japanese students mishear the words in such categories. So far as this particular sentence is concerned, such mishearing does not seem to cause any serious problem in a real situation of the sentence use. It might be a trivial mistake in grasping a general idea of the sentence. In (185), however, mishearing of the definite article before matter causes trouble. Contrary to the case of (184), perception error of the definite article in (185) makes a complicated problem. Twenty eight students out of 54 could not catch the sound of the definite article correctly. About half of them just missed the word, which causes no serious problem just as in the case of (184). However, the remaining half of them misheard the matter as a single word, which does create a problem. Some misheard the phrase as tomato and some as tomorrow. As to (186) the definite article before next lesson was taken as an inflectional ending of finish, that is, finish the as finished by five students out of 52. Ten students just missed the article in perception. We could say that those who confused the matter with tomato or tomorrow and finish the with finished heard part of the definite article, or in other words, that they noticed the existence of a weakly pronounced syllable. Anyway it was unfortunate that their knowledge of English grammar did not work at all to identify the word correctly. As to (187) I would like to focus on mishearing of two content words in the latter half of the sentence. One is lives and the other is France. The total number of the answers to (187) is 62. Although the words were pronounced rather clearly with major stress, not a few students misheard them. Six students answered is for lives. Five students

answered friend for France. Several other mishearing mistakes are also found as to the two words. While they could perceive the first half of the sentence fairly well, they had a lot of difficulty in listening to the latter half. So it seems to be concerned with the length of the sentence as well as the phonotactics of the English sounds. (188) also illustrates that our knowledge of English grammar does not work at all in listening to the shortest conversation. If I ask my students what should be the affirmative answer to the question May I go?, hopefully, all of them will be able to answer correctly without hesitation. Actually this question is suitable for junior high school students, but not for college students. When it comes to listening, however, the result was unbelievable. Sixteen students out of 62 misheard Yes, you may. as Yes, she may.. What could it be that the affirmative answer to May I go? is Yes, she may. instead of Yes, you may.? The final sound of Yes [s] and the initial sound of you [j] are reciprocally assimilated to make [ɟ], which triggered their confusion.

3. Mispronunciation in reading

(189)-(193) illustrate how the students mispronounce English words when reading their textbooks.

(189) Spelling pronunciation

author, allow, work, routine, erased, level, height, helium, early, radio, conversation, various, society, instead, animal, equator, species, vowel, oxygen

(190) palatalization

classical, sightseeing, basic, pencil, system, signal, accidentally, pronunciation, responsibility; easier, easily, business, music; politically, ticket; radio, edit

(191) hyper correction

appreciate, species, ensure

(192) Addition of [o] after alveolar stops

next[o], asked[o], it[o]

(193) other kinds of replacements

thanks, three, author, father, they, turn, signal

4. Conclusion

Oral repetition includes both aural recognition and oral production. Many basic errors are still found in the perception and production of English sentences by Japanese college students even after at least six years of study of the target language. Their phonetic and grammatical knowledge of English has to be activated in learning oral English as well.

*This is a revised version of Endo (1979, 1980 and 1997) written or presented in Japanese.

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