



A Survey of Japanese English Teachers' Attitudes Towards Pronunciation Teaching and Knowledge on Phonetics: Confidence and Teaching

Yoko Uchida¹, Junko Sugimoto²

¹Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, Japan, ²University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo, Japan
¹uchidayo@kaiyodai.ac.jp, ²sugimoto@u-sacred-heart.ac.jp

Abstract

In light of the significant role of teachers in pronunciation, we conducted a questionnaire survey in the summer of 2015 in an attempt to reveal the problem areas in English pronunciation faced by Japanese teachers of English. A total of 100 public junior high school teachers in Tokyo responded to the survey.

The preliminary analysis revealed positive correlations between “emphasis on pronunciation instruction” and “confidence,” while a negative correlation was established between “do not know how to teach” and “confidence.” As expected, there was a negative correlation between “do not know how to teach” and “emphasis on instruction,” and those who “do not know how to teach” tended to claim “no time to teach” and “students show no interest.” The results point to the possible existence of two types of teachers: those who are comfortable teaching pronunciation in class and those who are not.

Further analysis will be necessary to provide clarity about the two groups by finding out their profiles in detail. Data concerning the major phonetic features taught in class and/or the extent of knowledge that teachers have should be incorporated into the analysis as well. Personal interviews will also be necessary to investigate any assistance teachers may require.

Keywords: phonetics in teacher training, English education in Japan, junior high schools, questionnaire survey

1. Aim of the study

Despite the significant role of teachers in pronunciation, no explicit guidelines currently exist regarding what aspects of pronunciation prospective teachers are expected to master in the teacher-training program. As teacher-training instructors, the authors strongly believe that all teachers should be equipped with sufficient knowledge of phonetics, not to mention pronunciation ability that suffices to serve as a model for their students, since together

they constitute the backbone of their teaching: Skills and knowledge go hand in hand.

We conducted a questionnaire survey among Japanese junior high school teachers in Tokyo in July/August 2015, in an attempt to discern teachers' attitudes towards English pronunciation and the problem areas they face, with the hope that the findings obtained will contribute to improvement in English phonetics courses offered in the teacher-training program. Among other issues, the present report focuses on the relationship between teachers' confidence in pronunciation and their attitudes towards pronunciation teaching. We also provide a preliminary analysis of the data.

2. Method

A seven-page questionnaire was created based on the findings of a study of junior high school textbooks [1] and similar surveys conducted in the past [2, 3]. It consisted of questions including respondents' confidence in pronunciation, attitudes towards pronunciation teaching, and knowledge of phonetics (see Table 1). Most of the questions were on 4- or 5-point scales, but there were multiple-choice questions, yes/no questions, and a few open-ended questions as well.

Table 1: Topics of questions covered in the questionnaire.

Topic of questions	# of questions in each part
Part 1: English competence in general as teachers	2
Part 2: Pronunciation model and goal	7
Part 3: Confidence in own pronunciation	7
Part 4: Attitudes towards teaching pronunciation	9
Part 5: Classroom activities and students' attitudes	4
Part 6: Phonetic features taught in class	19
Part 7: Knowledge of phonetic features	19
Part 8: Teacher profiles	8

Paper questionnaire forms were distributed to those who attended a summer teachers' workshop, while a group of teachers who belonged to one school district received a Word format copy electronically. Data were collected from 118 participants, all Japanese teachers of English at

public junior high schools in Tokyo; 18 of the questionnaires had to be excluded due to missing data. Thus, the analysis hereafter is based on the data collected from the remaining 100 (65 female, 35 male).

3. Results

Figures 1 and 2 summarize the responses to the questions in Parts 3 and 4 of the questionnaire. For each question, participants responded by rating how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements on a 5-point scale.

3.1. Confidence in own pronunciation

The results indicate that a comparatively large number of teachers were confident in their own pronunciation, especially in smaller units. According to the results, 70% of the teachers said that they were confident in pronouncing words, 58% in sentences and passages, and 50% in pronunciation in general. A certain percentage of them were not confident, however: 11% for words, 12% for sentences and passages, and 20% in general. In

addition, a certain number of respondents were indecisive, with the ratio higher for the pronunciation of larger units: 30% for both sentences and passages, and pronunciation in general.

Although most of the teachers were more or less confident of their own pronunciation, they seemed to think there was room for improvement, and as many as 90 % of them agreed with the statement that “their pronunciation will improve if they have pronunciation training opportunities.”

3.2. Attitudes towards teaching pronunciation

The data in Figure 2 seem to indicate that overall, the teachers consider pronunciation instruction an important element in teaching English. For example, as many as 96% of the teachers agreed, 50% of them strongly, that “pronunciation instruction is important,” and the same percentage of 96% agreed that “correct pronunciation is important for students.” In addition, over 70% of the teachers claimed that “pronunciation instruction is effective,” and disagreed with the statement that “students do not show interest in pronunciation instruction.”

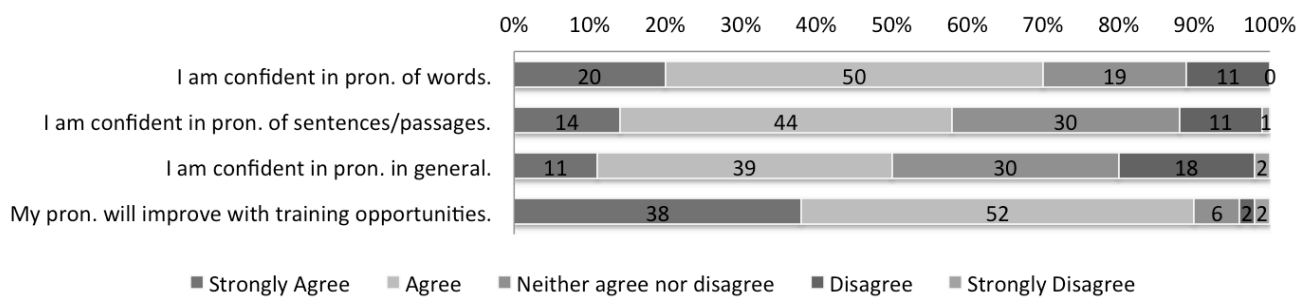


Figure 1: Teachers’ confidence in pronunciation of words, sentences/passages, and overall, and their belief in possible improvement with training; responses taken from 100 participants.

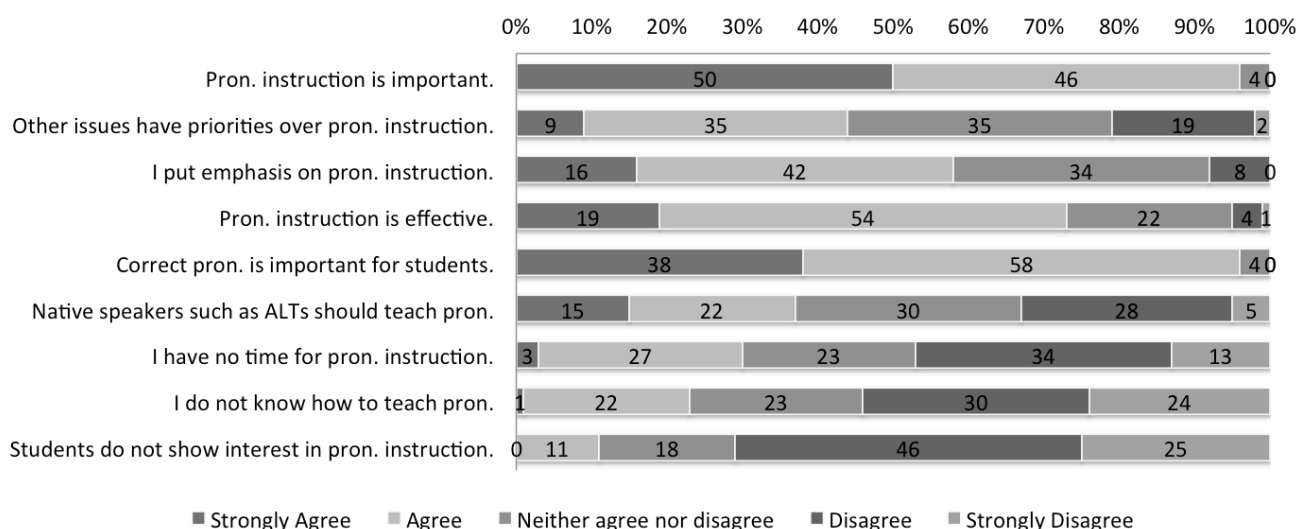


Figure 2: Teachers’ attitudes towards teaching pronunciation; responses taken from 100 participants.

As for the other statements, it is not easy to detect an overall trend among the teachers. With some statements (e.g., “Other issues have priorities over pronunciation instructions,” “I put emphasis on pronunciation instruction,” “Native speakers such as ALTs should teach pronunciation”), 30% or more of the teachers were not able to decide whether they agreed or disagreed.

3.3. Correlations between statements

We looked into correlations between statements. First, it was observed that confidence in their own pronunciation seemed to play an important role in the teachers’ attitudes towards pronunciation teaching (see Table 2-a). “Confidence in own pronunciation” had a moderately positive correlation with the statement “I put emphasis on pronunciation instruction,” with correlation coefficients of .59 for confidence in words, .52 for confidence in sentences and passages, and .48 for confidence in pronunciation in general. However, a negative correlation was established between “Do not know how to teach” and “confidence”: $r = -.48$ for words, $r = -.48$ for sentences and passages, and $r = -.49$ for pronunciation in general.

Table 2-a: Correlations between confidence and attitudes in teaching. ($n = 100$, $r > .26$, $= .01$)

	Confident ...		
	in words	in sentences	in general
Put emphasis on instruction	.59	.52	.48
Instruction is effective	.24	.28	.26
Do not know how to teach	-.48	-.48	-.49
Students show no interest	-.22	-.28	-.28

Table 2-b: Attitudes of teachers who put emphasis on instruction. ($n = 100$, $r > .26$, $= .01$)

Put emphasis on instruction	
↔ Pronunciation instruction is effective	.51
↔ Pronunciation instruction is important	.45
↔ Correct pronunciation is important for students	.27
↔ Do not know how to teach pronunciation	-.58

Table 2-c: Attitudes of teachers who do not know how to teach pronunciation. ($n = 100$, $r > .26$, $= .01$)

Do not know how to teach pronunciation	
↔ Have no time for instruction	.40
↔ Students show no interest in pronunciation	.37

Positive attitudes towards pronunciation were also found in the relationship between “emphasis on instruction” and four statements, as is shown in

Table 2-b. Those who “put emphasis on instruction” tend to think “pronunciation instruction is effective” ($r = .51$), “pronunciation instruction is important” ($r = .45$), and “correct pronunciation is important for students” ($r = .27$). The fourth statement in Table 2-b, “Do not know how to teach pronunciation” with $r = -.58$, can be interpreted to indicate that those who put emphasis on instruction tend to think they know how to teach pronunciation.

Furthermore, as Table 2-c shows, it appears that those who do not know how to teach tend to claim they “have no time for instruction” and those who “have no time for instruction” think that “students show no interest in pronunciation.”

4. Discussion

From a first glance of the data, it appears that almost all the teachers had a positive attitude towards pronunciation, because they seemed to acknowledge the importance of teaching pronunciation; considered correct pronunciation important for their students; and seemed to be highly motivated and think that their pronunciation would improve if they could receive training. However, a more careful analysis made across statements implied attitudinal variability among teachers, and depicted some interesting aspects of the participants.

4.1. Differences in confidence in words, sentences, and in general

More teachers were confident in smaller units of speech such as words than larger units, which is natural considering that the pronunciation of words can easily be looked up in a dictionary. In contrast, it is impossible to find the right pronunciation of longer units such as sentences in the dictionary, not only because possible combinations of words are infinite but also because other factors such as rhythm, intonation, speech rate, and the speaker’s mood all influence the phonetic output: They are less “rule-governed.” These are all elements that are more context-dependent in the pronunciation of a sentence or passage and are likely to require not only a good grasp of the rules but also sufficient experience. In fact, in an open-ended question, relevant remarks were found: “I become less confident when it comes to passages because I cannot check the dictionary for the correct pronunciation” and “I do not feel a necessity for training in words and sentences but would like some training in speech and recitation.”

This does not mean, however, that pronouncing words is always easy, as is evident from another comment: “There are certain words that I find difficult to pronounce (e.g., girl, world).” For improvement of classes offered in the teacher-

training program, more detailed investigation may be necessary to pinpoint specific pronunciation problems that may make teachers less confident.

4.2. The “more confident group” and the “less confident group” and their attitudes towards pronunciation instruction

The authors assume that the correlations between statements point to the possible existence of two types of teachers: those who are comfortable teaching pronunciation in class and those who are not. Confidence seems to play an important role, and it appears that the former group, more confident in their own pronunciation, tends to put emphasis on instruction and thinks that pronunciation instruction is effective. On the other hand, those in the latter group, lacking in confidence in their own pronunciation, are more likely to think they do not know how to teach pronunciation and that students show no interest in pronunciation.

Naturally, those who put emphasis on instruction overall hold positive views about pronunciation teaching and consider it both important and effective, and they also think having their students acquire correct pronunciation is important, whereas the second type of teachers, not surprisingly, has a negative view of pronunciation and is likely to shy away from pronunciation instruction and claim they have no time, and even say their students show no interest in pronunciation. Considering the attitudinal differences between the two types of teachers, it is very likely that the teachers in the two groups cannot be treated uniformly in pronunciation training. Even if almost all the teachers think they can benefit from training, what those lacking in confidence need is likely to be different from what those with positive attitudes need.

Note that although the importance of confidence and its influence on attitudes towards instruction has been pointed out in some previous studies [3, 4] as well, what those studies mean by “confidence” is not identical to our meaning. Shibata et al. [3], for example, surveyed Japanese junior high and high school teachers’ confidence in instruction. Their approach differed from ours in that “confidence in instruction” was more likely to involve factors such as teaching skills or techniques. In the case of Macdonald [4], too, where an interview study was conducted among ESL teachers in Australia following a questionnaire survey, “confidence” was more or less synonymous with “confidence in instruction.” He reported that factors such as absence of pronunciation in the curriculum and no guidelines for assessing learners’ performance seem to contribute to the teachers’ lack of confidence. The significance of our study lies in the fact that we are

focusing on the teachers’ confidence in their own pronunciation.

4.3. Directions for further analyses

What we are claiming here is based on preliminary analysis, and some elaboration will be necessary. More specifically, in order to give a clearer picture of the two groups of teachers, responses obtained in other parts of the questionnaire should be incorporated into the analysis.

Going back to Table 1, in Part 6 of the questionnaire, we listed 19 phonetic features and asked the participants to answer on a 4-point scale whether or not they taught each feature. Following this, in Part 7, we asked them how knowledgeable they were on the 19 features. For example, in Part 6, there was a statement “I teach phonetic symbols,” and in Part 7, there was a corresponding statement “I have knowledge of phonetic symbols.” Teachers’ problems in pronunciation instruction stemming from their lack of knowledge are reported in studies such as Orii-Akita [5], but the current study has taken a larger number of phonetic features into account. By incorporating the data in the confidence and attitude data, we hope we will be able to describe what aspects of pronunciation are acquired or missing in the teachers with confidence and those lacking in it, and to find out more about the characteristics of the two groups of teachers.

In addition, as the comments provided in open-ended questions suggest, selecting several participants from each group for individual interviews and collecting opinions will make it possible to get valuable feedback that cannot be obtained merely from questionnaire responses.

5. Conclusion

The report discussed here is one part of a larger project that the authors are currently working on, the main objective of which is to define essential phonetic knowledge teachers should acquire and to improve the teacher-training curriculum, so that when prospective teachers actually start teaching in the classroom they will be able to provide a good model, identify problems their students have, and give them constructive feedback and advice. This survey was conducted to learn the status quo of the teachers who are currently active, and to find out their attitudes towards pronunciation and pronunciation teaching, what they know or teach regarding pronunciation, and any concerns they may have regarding pronunciation.

While we have highlighted the role of confidence, further analysis is required to clarify in more detail what impact confidence has on teachers’ behavior in terms of pronunciation and

pronunciation instruction. While most teachers are willing to improve their pronunciation, the specific areas they would like to improve may differ greatly. Data on the major phonetic features taught in class and/or the extent of knowledge that teachers have should be incorporated into the analysis as well. Personal interviews will also be useful for revealing individual needs and investigating any assistance the teachers may require.

6. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to four junior/senior high school teachers who served as pilot participants; the Tokyo Public Junior High School Study Group (Chueiken-Tokyo) for their help in recruiting participants; and the Tokyo Association of Phonetics and Speech (TAPS) for their advice on the development of the questionnaire. We would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

7. References

- [1] Sugimoto, J., Uchida, Y. 2015. An analysis of Japanese junior high school textbooks as pronunciation teaching materials, *Proc. Phonetics Teaching and Learning Conference*, London, 91-95.
- [2] Foote, J.A., Holtby, A.K., Derwing, T.M. 2011. Survey of the teaching of pronunciation in adult ESL programs in Canada, 2010. *TESL Canada Journal* 29, 1-22.
- [3] Shibata, Y., Yokoyama, S., Tara, S. 2008. Onsei shidoni kansuru kyoinno jittai chosa [A survey on pronunciation teaching], *Nihon Eigo Onsei Gakkai Dairokkai Kyushu Okinawa Shikoku Shibu Kenkyu Taikai Kinen Ronshu*, 49-55.
- [4] Macdonald, S. 2002. Pronunciation – views and practices of reluctant teachers. *Prospect* 17, 3, 1-22.
- [5] Orii-Akita, M. 2015. Eigo onsei kyoin kenshuno hitsuyosei: Hatsuon shidoni kansuru chugakko kyoinno ishiki chosakara [Necessity of teacher training for English pronunciation: A survey of junior high school teachers on their attitudes towards pronunciation instruction], Waseda University, *Gakujutsu Kenkyu: Jinbun Kagaku/Shakai Kagaku*, 63, 203-222.