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# How to Improve Listening Skills by Practicing Pronunciation

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## **Abstract**

When one speaks a foreign language, having accurate pronunciation is one of the most important elements. Not having accurate pronunciation might lead one to fail to get their message across even if correct grammar and vocabulary are being used. Many L2 learners understand the importance of pronunciation in L2 learning. For many of them, comprehensible pronunciation is an important part of their communication skills (Hewings, 2004). Yet, speaking and listening are not being taught enough in Japan. Out of the four performance skills, speaking and listening ranked third and fourth; writing and reading ranked first and second (Thompson, 2001). Oftentimes, as Hewings (2004, p.19) claims, pronunciation is “given a lower priority than other components of language such as grammar and vocabulary.” It is not just pronunciation, but learners also need to be aware of English prosody. Speed, stress, reduction, and connection of each sound are very important aspects in learning English prosody. Pronunciation and listening skills are closely connected (Flege & Port, 1981; White, 1998). If a person can improve pronunciation, they can listen and understand better as well. This paper then looks at how student-led practice to improve pronunciation is effective for improving listening skills.

## **1. Introduction**

When one speaks a foreign language, having accurate pronunciation is one of the most important elements. Whether people understand what a person says greatly depends upon how natural their English sounds. Even if the grammar

is correct, the speech may not be comprehensible if the English sounds poor. In order to listen well, one needs motivation and concentration (White, 1998). Hewings (2004) argues, however, that when students experience repeated communication breakdowns because of their poor English pronunciation, they can be frustrated and lose motivation to learn English.

In order to sound better, it is important to understand how native speakers speak English and try to imitate it. The better one is able to do so, the better they can understand natural English. Many Japanese L2 learners find English hard to learn. As Thompson (2001) explains:

There are only five vowels, though these may be distinctively long or short. Syllable structure is very simple, generally vowel + consonant or vowel alone. There are few consonant clusters. Japanese learners therefore find the more complex distinctions and sound combinations of English very hard to produce, and they may have even greater difficulty in perceiving accurately what is said (p. 297).

Pronunciation and listening skills are closely connected (Flege & Port, 1981; White, 1998). If one can pronounce better, they can listen and understand better as well. The writer conducted research at a Japanese university in an English listening class to find out how student-led practice to improve their pronunciation is effective for improving their listening skills.

## **2. Method**

In order to discover the effect of practicing pronunciation on listening skills, research was conducted. This section describes the participants, instrument, and procedure of the research.

### **2.1 Participants and Materials**

The research was conducted in a listening class at a Japanese university. There were 20 students from freshman to junior year who were all non-English majors. Out of those students, there were 11 male students and 9 female students in the class. The study used a warm-up section from the textbook (Kumai & Timson,

2005) that was being used in the class, with some small changes made to the questions. There were no textbooks which covered all the materials the instructor desired to cover; handouts were made and distributed to students as pronunciation tips were introduced. Students were also asked to bring their smartphone to the classroom on the day of the recording. Instead of using a CD, the instructor read the sentences to have the students record the sentences.

## 2.2 Procedure

### 2.2.1 Pretest

In order to see the improvement, a listening test was conducted (see Appendix A). There were 20 sentences with blanks and students filled them in. The blanks contained sound connection, reduction, and so on. The result of the pretest is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean of the Result in Pretest

n = 20	
The number of questions	20
The average score	8.3
Percentage	42%

### 2.2.2 Introduction of Pronunciation Tips

Pronunciation tips that students needed to know were introduced in class along with the symbols used to mark them (see Appendix B). The elements introduced to the students were:

Stress and rhythm

Consonant + vowel (connected)

Consonant + consonant (dropped)

Consonant + consonant (weakened)

Consonant + a word starting with “y”

Plosive sounds: “p”, “b”, “t”, “d”, “k”, “g”

Individual sounds: “l”, “nt”, “w”, “f/h”, “r/l”, “b/v”

The students then were given a worksheet with 20 sentences (see Appendix C).

Those sentences were carefully chosen by the instructor. They contained a variety of pronunciation features that had been taught in class. The sentences were chosen for the following reasons:

First, the sentences contained expressions that are frequently used in English speaking countries. If the expressions are useful, the students will be able to remember and hopefully use them when they want to. Therefore, many sentences are useful in their daily lives, such as, “Are you ready to order? Is this for here or to go?” If they understand this, it will be easier for them to actually use this phrase when they travel abroad and use English. Students work very hard practicing those sentences so that by the end of the quarter, they have learned most if not all of them by heart. Therefore, it is wise to give them useful expressions to remember if they are going to memorize them.

Also, many sentences contained positive expressions and messages. Expressions such as, “Don’t worry. Everything’s gonna be alright,” or “I hope you’ll pass the exam. My fingers are crossed,” can give the students a positive message and hopefully they can use them to encourage themselves and others. The students were also introduced to corresponding gestures, such as how to cross their fingers.

Lastly, one sentence was carefully picked from the movie *Stuart Little*, which the students watch in class at the end of each quarter: “Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bugs bite.” If they have not heard this expression before, it is highly unlikely that they understand what those sentences mean. The sentences were taught to the students with the explanation that this phrase is often used by parents who tuck their children into bed at night. The students, however, are not told the fact that they will see the movie or that this phrase was chosen from the movie. This way, when they do watch and understand this expression, they will be able to experience a feeling of achievement and improvement of their listening. This can lead them to have confidence and motivation.

When teaching a class with multi-level students, it is advantageous to consider each learner’s difference (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). Therefore, some sentences are simple and short, and others may be a little more challenging in terms of pronunciation.

Students were given the worksheet. The instructor explained each sentence and students checked each sound. The blending sounds are very important.

However, L2 learners tend to have more problems, as Cook (1991, p.43) claims, “with sounds that are similar to those in their L1 than with new sounds that are completely different.” The students marked each pronunciation feature on the sheet (see Appendix D).

### **2.2.3 Recording**

In class, students recorded a video of the paper along with the audio of the instructor reading the sentences. This way, they can practice saying the sentences at home by listening to the instructor read them. Students can take an active part in listening if they are able to listen to a speaker that they know (White, 1998). Therefore, rather than having students listen to CDs or other materials in which they have no idea who the speaker is, students can be more motivated to practice with the audio material recorded by their instructor. One advantage is that they have the paper recorded on the screen. All they need to practice with is their smartphone. They do not have to have the actual sheet when they practice outside of class. Having both the visual and audio material makes it easy for them to practice their pronunciation wherever they like.

### **2.2.4 Practice**

The students were assigned to practice reading the sentences with the audio material at home. They were encouraged to practice at least once a day to promote a habit. They listened to the instructor’s English and tried to mimic her English. In the next class, they wrote in their reflection paper how many times they practiced reading the sentences. This helps them be aware of their achievement. In class, they read the sentences in pairs or small groups. In communicative language teaching, it is essential to have group work (Brumfit, 1984). Ellis (1994) also explains the importance of group work and how it can promote a positive atmosphere in a classroom and motivate students. Motivation is the key to success. Sometimes games like tongue twisters take place in class to help students become more motivated.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 20 Sentences: Before vs. After**

The improvements in the students’ pronunciation can be shown in Table 2. The class read 10 sentences from the worksheet together and the instructor compared

their pronunciation before and after the pronunciation practice took place.

Table 2. Pronunciation: Before and After

	Overall (50)	Pronunciation skills (50)	Total (100)
Before	26	25	51
After	41	46	87

It is obvious that their pronunciation improved over the quarter. Their sounds had more stress and rhythm, and, in addition, they sounded more natural.

### 3.2 Individual Student: Listening Students vs. Economics Majors

In order to see how students can read other sentences on their own, five students each from the listening class and a communication skills class with Economics majors, who had not been taught about pronunciation at the time, were randomly selected to perform another reading task. There were five sentences which were neither taught nor introduced in either class (see Appendix E). The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Individual Student: Economics Majors vs. Listening Students

Economics majors				
Sentence	Student	Overall (5)	Pronunciation skills (5)	Total (10)
1	1	3	1	4
2	2	2	1	3
3	3	2	1	3
4	4	3	2	5
5	5	2	1	3
Listening students				
Sentence	Student	Overall (5)	Pronunciation skills (5)	Total (10)
1	A	4	5	9
2	B	5	4	9
3	C	3	4	7
4	D	5	5	10
5	E	5	5	10

It is obvious that the students in the listening class sounded more natural, with good rhythm and stress.

### 3.3 Pronunciation Test

At the end of the quarter, students took a pronunciation test. Out of the 20 sentences from the worksheet, they chose one sentence that they felt most confident in reading. The instructor also picked another sentence and the student had to read the sentence. The performance on each sentence was scored from 1 to 10. They read two sentences; hence, their total possible score was 20. The average was 17.9.

## 4. The Effect on Listening Skills

### 4.1 Posttest

In order to see the improvement, a posttest was conducted. The test was identical to the pretest which the students took at the beginning of the quarter (see Appendix A). The result of the posttest is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean of the Result in Posttest

n = 20	
The number of questions	20
The average score	16.2
Percentage	81%

There was an interesting finding. One sentence from the test included the sentence, “That’ll do just fine,” which is similar to No.5 from the worksheet, “That’ll be 60 cents.” As shown in Table 5, only 5% of the students could correctly identify the phrase at the beginning of the quarter. However, 95% of the students answered correctly at the end of the quarter.

Table 5. “That’ll do just fine.”

	Percentage of students answered correctly
At the beginning of the quarter	5%
At the end of the quarter	95%

This proves that the phrase “that’ll,” the shorter version of “that will,” was acquired by many students in the listening class. They could listen and understand it in other sentences.

## 4.2 Movie

All of the students in the class who watched the movie *Stuart Little* understood the expression: “Sleep tight. Don’t let the beg bugs bite.” They were very delighted and satisfied that they could understand English from the movie. For many of them it was their first time to actually understand an English phrase in an English film.

## 5. Feedback

At the end of the quarter, the students were asked to answer a survey. In the survey, three questions were asked and the results were as follows:

Table 6. Survey

n = 20				
1. Do you think your listening ability improved in this quarter?				
Strongly agree: 2	Agree: 16	No change: 2	Disagree: 0	Strongly disagree: 0
2. Are you able to recognize sound connections and reductions more now?				
Strongly agree: 16	Agree: 4	No change: 0	Disagree: 0	Strongly disagree: 0
3. Do you think you can continue to be careful about those pronunciation strategies on your own outside of class?				
Strongly agree: 9	Agree: 9	Not sure: 2	Disagree: 0	Strongly disagree: 0

Practicing pronunciation also had a positive effect on students’ speaking. Some students felt those phrases were very useful and tried to use them when talking to their classmates in English. Two of the students used the phrase, “Everything’s gonna be alright” in their self-introduction presentation in class. Therefore, by practicing those phrases, students can memorize them and will be able to use them when they want to. Other comments from the students were that many of them



felt the pronunciation test was necessary. The test gave them a reason to practice on a daily basis.

## 6. Conclusion

When communicating with other people in English, it is important to have good pronunciation. Pronunciation and listening skills are closely connected (Flege & Port, 1981; White, 1998). Students may become more motivated after they experience success in learning (Ellis, 1997; Yule, 2006). After practicing pronunciation on their own and successfully improving their listening skills, students tend to be more motivated to learn English. They somehow feel that they are sounding more like native speakers and that they want to learn more to improve even more. Motivation is indeed necessary for successfully learning English.

Needless to say, there are many other important elements to becoming a good English speaker; for example, grammar, communication strategies, and so on. However, listening skills and good pronunciation are definitely things students need to have in order to become fluent in English. Pronunciation is “not something the teacher can instill in learners, it is something the learners assimilate for themselves. As a teacher, you are the initiator” (Laroy, 1995, p. 12). By having useful audio material students can use outside of class, they can work on their own at their own pace to improve their pronunciation. Moreover, the more they listen and practice, the more their listening skills will improve.

## References

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## Appendix A

### Listening test

1. Nathan, **would you** do me a favor?
2. What **made you** decide to study Italian?
3. Keep in touch. I'll **write you** once in a while.
4. I'm terribly sorry to have **kept you** waiting so long.
5. Bill seems a little **upset**. What's **up** with him?
6. I always travel **light** whenever I go **abroad**.
7. I've got a **quick question** to ask you.
8. One of the ways you can be better at English is to **keep practicing**.
9. I'm really broke. Can you **lend me** some money?
10. Why don't you **check out** the latest news on the Internet?
11. Stay **out of** my business, will you?
12. Can you **keep an eye** on my baggage while I'm away?
13. I don't believe you. **You've got to** (gotta) be kidding!
14. You mean Joe? **He's gone** to the dentist's.
15. I hope **we'll get** together again soon.
16. There **won't be** any additional charge for using this function.
17. **That'll** do just fine. Thank you.
18. You **should've paid** more attention to what the teacher said.
19. Things **can't get** worse. Don't let it worry you.
20. It's a piece of cake! I **could do** that with my eyes closed.

## Appendix B

### Pronunciation tips

#### Stress & Rhythm

- ◆ Let's call it a day.
- ◆ That's the way it goes.

#### Consonant + Vowel (connected)

- ◆ When the first word ends with a consonant, and the second word begins with a vowel, the sounds are connected.
- ◆ Good jidea ◆ First of all ◆ Take a chance ◆ Can I ◆ And I ◆ But I

#### Consonant + consonant (dropped)

- ◆ When the first word ends with a consonant, and the second word begins with a consonant, the first consonant is often dropped.
- ◆ Sit ʃdown ◆ I can't ʃsing. ◆ Don't ʃworry. ◆ Let ʃme try.

#### Consonant + consonant (weakened)

- ◆ When the first word ends with a consonant, and the second word begins with a consonant, the first consonant is sometimes weakened.
- ◆ I'm ʃseven. ◆ I've ʃtried it. ◆ I'll ʃgo. ◆ Things ʃwill get better.

#### Consonant + Y

- ◆ When the first word ends with a consonant, and the second word begins with Y, then the sounds are often connected.
- ◆ Thank you ◆ Would you ◆ As you ◆ That you

#### Plosive sounds (p, b, t, d, k, g)

- ◆ When a phrase or a sentence ends with a plosive sound, the sound is dropped.
- ◆ Check it ʃ ◆ Keep practicing ʃ ◆ My fingers are crossed ʃ.

#### Light t

- ◆ Not t at all ◆ Let it go ◆ water

#### nt

- ◆ In~~t~~ernet ◆ advan~~t~~age ◆ gent~~t~~leman

#### W

- ◆ ~~W~~ater ◆ ~~W~~hat ◆ ~~W~~here

#### F/H

- ◆ food ◆ hood

#### R/L

- ◆ a~~r~~ight ◆ ri~~g~~ht place

#### B/V

- ◆ bo~~a~~t ◆ vo~~t~~e

## Appendix C

### Worksheet

1. Tomorrow is another day. Keep your hopes up.
2. Break a leg! You'll do great!
3. One of the ways you can be better at English is to keep practicing.
4. Are you ready to order? Is this for here or to go?
5. That'll be 60 cents. Would you like a bag for that?
6. Don't worry. Everything is gonna be alright.
7. This is Jennifer Smith calling. May I speak to Mr. Sanders, please?
8. I think you've got the wrong number.
9. I was wondering if you'd like to go see a movie with me.
10. You've gotta be kidding me! I can't believe it!
11. Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite.
12. I'm tired. Let's call it a day.
13. First of all, I'd like to introduce myself.
14. Do you wanna go get a bite to eat? I'm starving.
15. I stayed up until four in the morning.
16. Congratulations! I'm so happy for you!
17. Things will get better. Don't let it bother you.
18. I hope you'll pass the exam. My fingers are crossed.
19. I can't wait for my birthday to come. It's just around the corner.
20. My mother has gone to the dentist's.

## Appendix D

1. Tomorrow is another day. Keep your hopes up.
2. Break a leg! You're do great!
3. One of the ways you can be better at English is to keep practicing.
4. Are you ready to order? Is this for here or to go?
5. That'll be 60 cents. Would you like a bag for that?
6. Don't worry. Everything is gonna be alright.
7. This is Jennifer Smith calling. May I speak to Mr. Sanders, please?
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18. I hope you'll pass the exam. My fingers are crossed.
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20. My mother has gone to the dentist's.

## Appendix E

Five sentences

1. It can't be helped. That's the way it goes.
2. Since I was awake all night, I'm totally wiped out.
3. You've been very helpful. I really appreciate it.
4. We don't have much time left. We've got to run.
5. It's getting late. You'd better hit the road.

## Appendix F

Pronunciation Test Rubric

Overall (stress, rhythm, and intonation): 5 points

- 5: Has clear pronunciation, appropriate intonation and rhythm, stresses key words appropriately. Speech is easy to understand.
- 4: All of the above though with evidence of a few minor problems in one or two areas. Speech is easy to follow.
- 3: Pronunciation is basically clear and speech does not interfere with understanding, uses some intonation, rhythm, and stress patterns.
- 2: Pronunciation is basically clear, though speaks in a monotone voice and may use "katakana" English, may be unintelligible at times but speech is mostly clear.
- 1: Pronunciation interferes with comprehension, may show extreme "katakana" English, and is difficult or impossible to understand.

Pronunciation skills: 5 points

How much of the following features could you follow?

Consonant + vowel (connected)

Consonant + consonant (dropped)

Consonant + consonant (weakened)

Consonant + a word starting with "y"

Plosive sounds: "p", "b", "t", "d", "k", "g"

Individual sounds: "t", "nt", "w", "f/h", "r/l", "b/v"

## How to Improve Listening Skills by Practicing Pronunciation

5: 100

4: 80%

3: 75%

2: 50%

1: 30% or less