

# A Study on the Inclusion of Pronunciation Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom

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**Abstract:** Research on instruction of pronunciation in a foreign language setting has seen an increase in recent decades, but often this research focuses specifically on the acquisition of English pronunciation. This paper aims to investigate the direction that research based on the acquisition of pronunciation has taken up to this point. Further, this paper aims to specifically explore whether the vast progress made in research for English pronunciation acquisition can be utilized in a non-English foreign language classroom setting.

The study first explores largely research on English pronunciation acquisition to date, including research that has validated the necessity of pronunciation research. It then focuses specifically on the comparatively small amount of research that has been done in improving Japanese pronunciation for non-native learners as a possible spring-board for future research. The fourth section suggests future directions for research in pronunciation acquisition of foreign languages besides English, using the previous Japanese language based research as a model. The final section provides an example of a possible study in Japanese pronunciation utilizing the suggestions in the fourth section.

**Key words:** pronunciation instruction, Japanese pronunciation, beginning language instruction

## 1. Introduction

In their research, Saito and Lyster (2012) bring to light the fact that the majority of research to this point on the effects of form-focused instruction has been performed on morphosyntactic targets. They further state that this research has been performed despite “calls for research into the roles for form-focused instruction in phonological development...” (Saito & Lyster, 2012, p. 596). In the comparably new area of Second Language Acquisition, the research on acquisition of L2 pronunciation is not only limited in the amount research being done, but also the scope. A large part of the research, as we will see, focuses on the acquisition of English pronunciation without considering difficulties that may occur when learners from an English language background learn a second language.

The instruction of pronunciation itself has seen support for many years from such researchers as Hall (1978), Grant (1995), and Pennington & Richards (1986). In particular, Hall emphasizes many of the perceptions of the role of pronunciation and how it is often reserved for advanced levels of learning. He explains that this is a common misconception that can be countered by “recognizing that the early learning of accurate pronunciation is an undertaking in which significant personal accomplishments can be made in an efficient way and recognized from the very first week of an elementary [foreign language] class” (Hall, 1978, p. 63). He continues to make connections between pronunciation acquisition and the many ways in which it can serve as a form of motivation for learners of a language, but the idea that pronunciation can be taught even from the beginning of language acquisition alone provides

insight into future avenues available in pronunciation research.

This report will first look at some of the research that has been performed on acquisition of L2 pronunciation in general, and then will consider research on the acquisition of pronunciation specific to learners of the Japanese language. In the final section, possible research directions are suggested borrowing the methods designed and used by research to date, such as the Saito and Lyster (2012) study on Japanese learners' acquisition of the English /r/. The final section more specifically considers how existing research on English pronunciation instruction may be used to further research in pronunciation acquisition of other foreign languages.

## 2. Pronunciation Research to Date

### 2.1 Is Pronunciation Research Necessary?

In Hall's (1978) article, readers are provided with quite a few supporting ideas behind pronunciation instruction, but other researchers, including the following, seem to focus more on specific strategies. Bray (1995) argues that "explicit instruction in English phonology for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) is a valuable aid in promoting communicative competence" (p. 1). Bray takes an interesting step in the research by taking advantage of limericks as a means for pronunciation instruction. Although this study looks more at stress and rhythm in pronunciation, it provides a different perspective of instruction utilizing a more communicative approach that may be utilized in future pronunciation acquisition research.

Other researchers (e.g. Munro & Derwing, 2008; Lord, 2010) argue that often non-native speakers newly arrived to a country or students who participate in study abroad programs have participated in "the best way to acquire a foreign language" (Lord, 2010, p. 490). Through study abroad, students have shown significant gains in such areas as oral fluency, the use of the copula, and general language accuracy. Lord (2010) describes some of these studies but also warns that not only have these data been partially consistent or difficult to interpret, but that "far less work has examined the effects of immersion or [study abroad] specifically on L2 pronunciation" (Lord, 2010, p. 491).

Lord (2010) hoped to provide further data on the area of explicit instruction's versus immersion's roles in L2 pronunciation acquisition to find if one or the other had a greater effect. The major difference between the two groups of participants leaving for a study abroad program in Lord's study was that only one of the groups experienced explicit pronunciation instruction prior to departure. The data showed that both groups of students showed gains in their pronunciation of the target sounds at the end of a two month immersion program. Further, although the students who were exposed to explicit pronunciation instruction started off slightly higher than their peers with no instruction, their average gains between the pretests and the post-tests appear much greater than the gains of those same peers. This would imply that the instruction given in pronunciation was more effective in enhancing later student pronunciation acquisition in that immersion environment. This does not mean we can say that pronunciation instruction itself is more effective than immersion, but it warrants more research into the effects of pronunciation instruction on students' L2 acquisition.

### 2.2 Some General Pronunciation Research

Kendrick (1997) made a connection between the lack of evidence of the time in how and why instruction can improve student pronunciation and the need for "more controlled studies of how learners' pronunciation actually changes as a result of instruction" (p. 545). In her review of the literature, Kendrick makes mention that much of the research to date had shown either neutral or positive gains in pronunciation for students of a second language. Yet it was the conflicting reports of the long-term effects of pronunciation instruction that led Kendrick to conduct her research. The results indicated that the activities performed during the research, focusing on such areas as speech

sounds, spelling of sounds, connected speech, stress and rhythm, intonation, and voice quality, were received well by both students and instructors. Further, findings in the tests of progress indicated that the most significant gains in phoneme pronunciation appeared to occur between the fourth and eighth months of instruction.

Since then, other researchers (e.g. Elliott, 1997; Gonzales-Bueno & Quintana-Lara, 2011; Isaacs, 2009; Jones, 1997; Trofimovich & Gatlinton, 2006) have looked into a variety of activities and approaches to be used in pronunciation instruction and the effectiveness of each type. Specifically, Jones (1997) points out that even though there has been a push to bring pronunciation instruction into a communicative approach, much of the materials being used by instructors in the field resemble the audio-lingual texts of an older age, "relying heavily on mechanical drilling of decontextualized words and sentences" (Jones, 1997, p. 104). For Jones, the instruction of pronunciation should not be ignored, but fully address the driving power of motivation and awareness by introducing the importance of pronunciation to students earlier on in their education and providing a greater deal of pronunciation input.

Jones warns against activities that are based on imitation drills and reading aloud because, he notes, that much of the second language acquisition research has found that although these types of activities produce students who can accurately produce during controlled practice, this is not often the case when the same students are required to perform in a more communicative situation. Jones makes a number of suggestions for future pronunciation instruction that integrate confidence building and student reflection, consider the role of the learner and the possibility of specialized needs, and provide more authentic listening opportunities.

Isaacs (2009) also pulls from the idea that pronunciation instruction should be done in a more communicative framework, and indicates that there are a number of difficulties, particularly in pronunciation instruction, with finding a balance between form and meaning. Isaacs especially considers the line between form-focused instruction and focus on forms as an area that needs particular attention in pronunciation acquisition research. She warns that when using a treatment that is initially focused on form, it is easy to slip into a focus on forms, thus dropping the communicative purpose of the activities. In order to accomplish this balance between communicative activities and a focus on pronunciation form, Isaacs feels that "the success of the pronunciation feedback and the quality of instruction [are] largely contingent on the skill of the [teacher]" (Isaacs, 2009, p. 9).

Elliott (1997) also considers the role of the communicative approach in pronunciation instruction. In his article, he goes through a similar review of the debate on the plausibility of teaching pronunciation in a more authentic manner. Not only did he find that formal pronunciation instruction promoted more accurate pronunciation in learners of Spanish, but that there are differences in performance depending on the type of task used during instruction. He found that the instruction was most beneficial in the spontaneous communication instruction followed in a top-down manner from sentence production to word production. Similar to the findings of Kendrick (1997), Jones (1997), and Lord (2010), Elliott promotes the instruction of pronunciation earlier on in the education of the learner.

### 3. Pronunciation Research in Japanese

Although, as mentioned above, research into acquisition of Japanese pronunciation is rare, that does not mean it has not been explored to some degree. Hirata (2004) looked into more of a drill based method of pronunciation training, using a computer based CSL-Pitch program, to see the effects that this program would have on learner pronunciation in terms of both duration and pitch. What can perhaps be taken away from Hirata's study the most involved her third question of whether training in pronunciation had only effects on production or on both production and perception. Hirata warns that some research has shown that "the training of production or perception may dissociate the

link between production and perception that the trained subjects initially had” (Hirata, 2004, p. 361). Through her data, Hirata found that the participants in the experimental group showed significant gains in both production and perception of the target pronunciation when compared to the control group. Although this study introduced the target pronunciation both in isolation and in context situations, the information was presented in a manner that could not be considered a form-focused type of instruction, and as such may provide some direction for future research (to be discussed below).

Other studies have taken a look at how different types of exposure to the Japanese language can have an effect on learner production of Japanese. Fukunaga (2006) is one researcher who looked at Japanese instruction in a manner similar to Bray’s limericks. Although her study was qualitative, it did not provide much strong evidence for pronunciation acquisition, likely due to the design of the study. In her study, Fukunaga claims that such activities as watching animated shows, reading comic books, and playing video games have benefits for learners of Japanese, not only in maintaining student motivation to learn a language, but also in providing multiple opportunities for learning Japanese in three linguistic aspects; word recognition, listening and pronunciation, and awareness of linguistic features. Although Fukunaga’s article does provide a number of ideas about less formal methods of language acquisition and how they can aid in motivation and improved language ability, she does not provide much evidence to support this claim outside of the opinions of those students that were interviewed for the research.

It is difficult to determine why research into Japanese pronunciation has not been performed at the same level as that found in English pronunciation. Okamura’s (1995) research may help to shed some light on the reasons behind this. In this qualitative research article, Okamura looked at Japanese teacher and student perceptions of what makes a good and poor Japanese language learner. She found that although the students considered pronunciation and fluency as the top priority for being a good Japanese learner, the teachers (who were native Japanese speakers) felt appropriateness of speech the greatest indicator. Further, although pronunciation was number one on the list for students, the native speakers placed pronunciation at number four out of seven places in terms of priority. This could lead one to infer that the surprising lack of Japanese language pronunciation research is a result of the Japanese teaching community in general not putting much weight into the importance of pronunciation in acquisition of the language. However, as there is so much research being performed in the acquisition of English pronunciation, and especially considering that a large amount of it comes from Japanese learners of English, it may be time the research branches out into Japanese language instruction, as well as other languages.

#### **4. Future Research Directions**

Having identified some of the research to date on pronunciation acquisition, we now consider how that research can influence possible directions for future research. One possible direction for pronunciation research in languages besides English could take Hirata’s (2004) research to the next step to see how a form-focused presentation of a much smaller, single phoneme pair affects both the production and perception of the L2 learner in regards to this specific phoneme. As an example, to the best of our knowledge, there exist no studies that are similar to Saito and Lyster’s (2012) study which take this type of pronunciation study to the acquisition of Japanese phonemes, specifically to the acquisition of the “tsu” sound and its differentiation from the similar “su” sound. This research could be given to a class in the introductory stages of learning the language, as suggested in previous research (e.g. Kendrick, 1997; Jones, 1997; Elliott, 1997; Lord, 2010), as it would look to improve pronunciation only at the comparatively simplistic phoneme level.

Another possible direction for research on pronunciation acquisition involves the design of

Fukunaga's (2006) study. Although Fukunaga explored a variety of larger media driven aspects of Japanese culture to look for evidence of improvement in pronunciation, it may be more beneficial to focus on a single aspect alone, such as the use of Japanese music to present the target pronunciation. From a Second Language Acquisition point of view, the advantage of introducing the subject matter in this manner is that it provides the learner with a large amount of input to be processed. Naturally, the amount of intake also increases, giving the learner more chances to acquire the target pronunciation. Another possibility is to move from using such media as music in the study to using tongue twisters, which not only provide a cultural aspect of the language, but can increase the occurrences of the target sound. The use of a discussion of cultural tongue twisters to introduce the target pronunciation does require some instructional caution, as the repeating and drilling of these tongue twisters is a very possible outcome. As Isaacs (2009) warns, "accessibility of such frameworks to classroom teachers and their understanding of the purpose of the framework are crucial for success" (p. 10).

## 5. Example of a Possible Study in Japanese Pronunciation

For this study, it is intended to use a pretest, post-test, and trained native speaker judgment to investigate the effects of form focused instruction (FFI) on student L2 pronunciation, specifically with regards to the Japanese "tsu" and "su." Based on previously mentioned L2 pronunciation studies, FFI will be operationalized by the use of production tasks designed to develop student Japanese pronunciation while drawing their attention to the target forms through a large amount of input and a pronunciation focused task. The research question that will be addressed is: Does form focused instruction, in the manner of a pronunciation activity, lead to improvement in learners' pronunciation and discernment of the Japanese "tsu" and "su?"

### 5.1 Method

This study adopts the general format of that found in Saito and Lyster (2012), in that it will be comprised of two stages. The instructional phase will divide the participants into two groups, those who receive the FFI pronunciation activities and the control group who will receive no instruction outside of the normal curriculum. The assessment phase will have the native speakers, who will have been trained in the use of the rubric designed to rate student pronunciation ability, first rate selections chosen from pronunciation recorded during the pretest sessions. Subsequently, ratings of student pronunciation will be performed on the data collected during the post-test sessions, and these ratings will be compared to those assigned during the pretest sessions. Further, to determine if there are gains in student perception of difference in pronunciation, quantitative measures will be used to determine if the data from the actual pretest will be compared with those from the post-test.

### 5.2 Participants

The students who participate in the study will be average college students, the majority of which share a first language (L1) of English, taking Introductory Japanese as a foreign language. The study will be conducted near the end of their first semester of learning the language, as they will have had a great amount of exposure to the "tsu" and "su," and will have reached a higher level of comfort with the language's writing system. It is assumed that students at this level of proficiency will still have difficulty with pronouncing and telling the difference between both target sounds. For the purpose of the study, it will need to be determined how much previous exposure to the language the students have had (studying in high school, various media outlets), as many will have come from different backgrounds.

The same instructor will be in charge of teaching both the experimental group and the control group. The native language listeners could be recruited from the Japanese language department at the same university and from the community. These listeners will be recruited to rate the quality

of selected recordings of student “tsu” and “su” usage. The listeners will be selected based on their being native speakers of the language, their sharing the same or a similar dialect of the language, and having a familiarity with non-native speaking of Japanese.

### 5.3 Procedure

Students in the experimental group will receive FFI in the form of the introduction of *hayaguchikotoba*, or tongue twisters. The tongue twisters will be composed of those focused on the target sound “tsu,” those focused on the target sound “su,” those using a combination of both target sounds, and those that are normally found which do not focus on the target sounds but may include them. Those students in the control group will receive the same instruction, but will not participate in these tongue twister activities or get explicit instruction on pronunciation of the target sounds.

Examples of the tongue twisters to be used are provided in the Appendix and the target sounds are highlighted. Highlighting will also be included during instruction so that students can notice the target feature during the task. The use of both sounds occurs in a variety of words, but is found at the beginning of each word to emphasize the pronunciation and ideally increase the amount of noticing. These tongue twisters will be included as part of a daily lesson, not to focus on the specific pronunciation of the target sounds, but will be presented as introducing cultural information and to work with pronunciation in general.

The activity will be performed in a five minute session near the beginning of the class and students will be asked to perform both the tongue twister from the previous day and the new one. The study will be performed over the course of two weeks, which would be only eight days of instruction, with the pretest and individual interviews being given before treatment begins on the first day. The post-tests will be given on the last day of the treatment and again one month after the treatment concludes, with individual interviews occurring at the conclusion of the treatment. Students will not be given information concerning the study or the purpose behind the activities beyond that which is mentioned above.

### 5.4 Measures

In order to determine the impact of the treatment on both student production of the target sounds and recognition of a distinction between the two sounds, two types of tests must be administered. These tests will include words that students will be exposed to through the treatment, as well as words that will not be included in the treatment, but make use of the target sounds. This assessment is similar to that found in Saito & Lyster (2012). Also found in the Saito and Lyster study, the second assessment will have students producing the language for recording. The production pretest will be administered during a designated “Mid-term Oral exam” and presented to the students as just another part of the exam, while the differentiation pretest will be given to the class as a whole. The post-tests will be administered in a similar fashion, with the differentiation post-test occurring in the whole class, and the production post-test as a part of a “Final Oral exam” given six weeks after the mid-term exam. As the students will be alone in the room with the instructor during the oral examinations, this provides the greatest opportunity for recording with minimal background noise and without outside influences on student production.

### 5.5 Distinction Tests

For the pretest and post-test, an audio recording of a native Japanese speaker will be played for the students to listen to. The recording will consist of the speaker pronouncing a total of 25 words in Japanese that begin with either the “tsu” sound or the “su” sound. Students will be expected to label on their test forms whether they thought the word started with that “tsu” sound or the “su” sound. (i.e. *tsunami*, *sushi*, *tsubo*, *tsukuru*, *sumi*, *suugaku*, *sugu*, *tsuyoi*) The post-test version of this assessment will include words that students have not had exposure to through the treatment or in the course curriculum to see if the knowledge gained through the treatment of the different pronunciation could

be generalized to unknown words. This data will then be compared with the pretest to determine if gains were made in recognition of the different pronunciation.

### 5.6 Rating and Judgment

As mentioned above, during student oral exams the researchers will record student readings of Japanese text that includes the target sounds for “tsu” and “su.” These recordings will be given to the native Japanese listeners for a human rating. Due to the sheer amount of recordings that will be done with the study, the researchers will choose twenty students from each group randomly to be listened to, providing the listeners with 80 items to rate (including the recordings from both pretests and post-tests).

Again, based upon the rating sessions performed in the Saito and Lyster (2012) study, the listeners will participate in a training session where they will be exposed to some samples of Japanese speaking with the target pronunciation. The rating scale will follow the 9 point scale used in the Saito and Lyster study, with a rating of 1 representing a “very good pronunciation of the target sound” and a 9 representing a “very poor pronunciation of the target sound.” These samples will help to unify ratings by the listeners by showing them examples of what would be labeled a 1 (recorded from someone who has no experience with the language), what would be labeled as a 9 (recorded from a native speaker of Japanese who is not a listener in the current study), and some examples in between those two ratings. The listeners will be allowed to listen to the recordings as many times as they like to provide confident ratings. The researchers will also be present to clear any confusion that may occur about the rating system.

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## [Appendix]

### Example Tongue Twisters

Amenbo akaina a i u e o,  
kakinoki kurinoki ka ki ku ke ko,  
sasageni suwo kake sa shi su se so,  
tachimasho rappode ta chi tsu te to,  
namekuji noronoro na ni nu ne no,  
hato poppo horohoro ha hi fu he ho,  
maimai neji maki ma mi mu me mo,  
yakiguri yudeguri ya i yu e yo,  
raichousamukaro ra ri ru re ro,  
waiwai wasshoi wa wi u we wo.

Tsuyoi tsuaa gaido ga tsunami no tsuyosa wo tsutaemashita.

Suasan no suupaa no sushi ni su wo sukoshi kakemashou.

Su nondara tsuba ga su no aji suru.

Sono tsugi no tsuba mo su no aji no tsuba desu.