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ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A JAPANESE STUDENT

FIRAS ISMAIL, ETTIEN KOFFI, AND MOEKA UCHIKAWA¹

ABSTRACT

According English Proficiency Index (EPI) of 2019, p. 24, English proficiency in Japan is low, i.e., 53rd in the world. In this paper, we attempt to understand why this is so despite Japan's excellent political, economic, and military relationship with the USA. The experiences of the third author, a native speaker of Japanese, who studied English in Japan serves as a launching pad for our investigation. We interface her experience with pedagogical practices, cultural norms surrounding pronunciation feedback, and English proficiency expectations and delve deeper into our inquiry. We also examine the third author's current proficiency level in English now that she has been living in the USA and studying at Saint Cloud State University (SCSU) for 18 months. The analysis of her social network and the acoustic phonetic measurements of her vowels reveal that her intelligibility has improved greatly. Additionally, and maybe more importantly, her English learning experiences in Japan and in the USA and the insights we derive from them can help other Japanese speakers improve their oral proficiency.

Keywords: Acoustic Phonetics of Japanese-accented English Vowels, English Proficiency Index in Japan, Japan as an Expanding Circle Country, Acoustic Vowel Space of Japanese English, English Education in Japan

1.0 Introduction

The participant in this study is also the third author. Her name is Moeka Uchikawa. She is a 21 years old undergraduate student at Saint Cloud State University (SCSU). She has been a student at SCSU since August of 2018, and has been living in the United States for approximately the same amount of time. Prior to coming to the USA, she was a student at Akita International University (AIU), the only university in Japan where English is the language OF education. She studied there for three years. By her own admission, she felt that her English abilities at that school, though rather high by average Japanese standards, had plateaued relatively early on. Consequently, she wasn't improving until she came to the United States. The goal of this paper is to assess the state of her English since she came to the USA. We do so by examining her social network and by comparing and contrasting her pronunciation of English vowels with those produced by speakers of General American English (GAE).

¹ **Authorship Responsibilities:** Author 1 was enrolled in Author 2's sociophonetics course where the idea of this paper originated, first as a term paper, and now as a joint publication. Author 2 made copious observations and re-analyses of the term paper for this publication. Author 1 edited the paper accordingly and submitted a second version of the original paper. Author 2 has rewritten significant portions of the second draft, provided additional analytical clarity and bibliographical support. To the extent that the measurements provided by Author 1 are accurate, both assume full responsibility for any erroneous interpretation of the social network and acoustic phonetic data. Author 3 is recognized as such to the extent that she provided the data on which this analysis is based. They all share equally the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of this publication.

1.1 Participant Background

At the time of this study, the third author had been a student at St. Cloud State University for about 18 months. For comparison, she was a student at an English-speaking university in Japanese for three years. While she was in high school, she felt she was better at English than many of her peers. However, she still felt far less proficient when she was exposed to more fluent speakers, such as those who had lived abroad for extended periods of time or those students who were born abroad and actually spoke Japanese as their second language. This was apparently a relatively common feeling among the students, even though English is the language of instruction at her university. The vast difference in English ability between those who had only been exposed to English through the Japanese public-school system and those who had firsthand experience in English speaking countries has made her realize that English language education in Japanese school system needs to be reformed.

1.2 An Overview of English Education in Japan

The third author reached this conclusion by reminiscing about her own proficiency and the areas on which she needed to improve. She stated that she had difficulty in differentiating which vocabulary was appropriate for which register. For example, she still has trouble when speaking to her advisor because she is not able to come up with words of the appropriate level of formality. In trying to avoid being overly casual, she creates long pauses in the conversation. Our assessment is that this is an issue of both semantics and pragmatics. It springs from a lack of focus on communicative competence skills in English education curriculum in Japanese in public education. The long pauses while the third author searches for lexical items that meet the pragmatic demands contribute a sense of disfluency.

In Japan, English is taught in public schools, however only in the form of mandatory English classes. Outside of the classroom, English is not used at all. Public signage, news broadcast, official business, and every day activities are carried on in Japanese. With respect to English usage, Japan is for all intents and purposes an Expanding Circle country. Yes, English is taught at school but only as a language IN education. According to the third author, English education in public-schools focuses largely on the receptive skills of reading and listening, not so much on the productive skill of speaking. Ikegashira et al., (2009, p. 90) concur. As for English instruction in higher education, colleges vary widely in what kind of English courses they offer. The third author is a special case, as she, before coming to Saint Cloud State University, she attended AIU.

While English is taught in public schools, it does not have any kind of official status in Japan, nor is it used in any fashion by the government outside of the mandatory English classes. Despite this, it is recognized as a valuable skill and the learning of it is widely encouraged. English education begins in the student's fourth year of elementary education. These classes are taught by Japanese teachers who are not necessarily commutatively competent in English. More often than not, students only repeat short sentences or phrases. In some schools, assistant language teachers (ALT) are used as resources who provide naturalistic language input at the request of main classroom teachers. However, ALTs are not available in every classroom. When ALTs are present, they would assist with pronunciation through the use of the audiolingual method. However, even then, they say no more than a few short sentences in isolation. Moreover, these ALTs are often limited to merely providing native pronunciations for the students to hear, though

whether or not the students' pronunciation is accurate is left up to the Japanese teacher to decide. The author noted that she, and many other students, felt that they were simply repeating after what they had heard and were not actually learning English. She also added that the Japanese teacher's standards for correct pronunciation often seemed quite low.

English is an examinable subject for both high school and college. However, each prefecture makes its own high school entrance exams and, while English is always included on these exams, the weight it carries depends on said prefecture. The third author is from Nagano prefecture, in the center of Japan. She was not even sure if passing the English classes in high school was required for graduation. In fact, many students considered the English classes so easy that it is next to impossible for anyone to fail them. English in higher education is somewhat different. Rather than each prefecture making its own exam, it is up to the colleges themselves to create their own unique exam each year. Therefore, the amount of English one needs to get into college depends entirely on the college one is trying to get into (Goto-Butler, 2007). For example, some colleges require only a few simple sentences and accept even direct translations, while others may require an essay in grammatically correct English. For the latter, students typically go to the private conversation schools specifically for the purpose of gaining those skills.

1.3 Instrumental Motivation for Learning English

Many students learn English on their own for better job opportunities in the future. Because of this desire for English, many private English conversation schools have appeared in Japan. Therefore, it is not uncommon for students to head straight to these places after their public-school classes have finished (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). Motivated students typically for 1-10 hours per week learning English in these private institutions, depending on which college they hope to get into. These conversation schools are not affiliated with the public schools in any official capacity and are also open to people of any age group, from children to the elderly. These institutions have proven incredibly popular, and this popularity suggests that, even in the general population, there is a desire for increased proficiency in English.

Another problem we see with proficiency in English in Japan is due to the fact that* once students are out of the education system, they have no more access to the language. According to English Proficiency Index (2019, p. 26), approximately 28% of the Japanese population is 65 or older. They did not have the chance to learn English at school. Many of these people are attending private English conversation schools. Despite the emerging enthusiasm for private conversation schools, the qualification of teachers leaves much to be desired. Many do not have Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) degrees, only certificates. Consequently, they may not be prepared to teach at the capacity necessary to meet the needs of their students (Elaine-Silver et al, 2002, p. 44).

2.0 Social Network Analysis

This succinct background information about English language instruction in Japan gives us the opportunity to take a closer look at the third author's English to see what strategies she may implement to achieve her proficiency goals. Since language is a tool for social interaction, we begin by analyzing her social interactions in an effort to see what kind of influences the people in her network may have on her spoken English abilities. Table 1 provides us with the information we need to begin our analysis. The third author was asked to name four people with whom she interacts the most at SCSU. Her interactional data is summarized as follows:

	Friend 1	Friend 2	Friend 3	Friend 4
Countries	USA	USA	Japan	USA
Native Languages	English	English	Japanese	English
Hours per week	12	3	2	1
Social Event 1	Eating	Eating	Studying	Club
Social Event 2	Studying	Shopping	Eating	
Social Event 3	Shopping			
Language(s) used	English	English	Japanese	English

Table 1: Interaction with Social Contacts

Koffi et al. (2017:65) and Koffi (2019:90) have found that, generally speaking, international students spend between 9% to 12% of their interactional times with domestic students. The third author spends approximately 18 hours with the 4 people in her network. It is noteworthy that 89% of her interactions are in English. Other aspects of her interactional patterns are reflected in Figure 1:

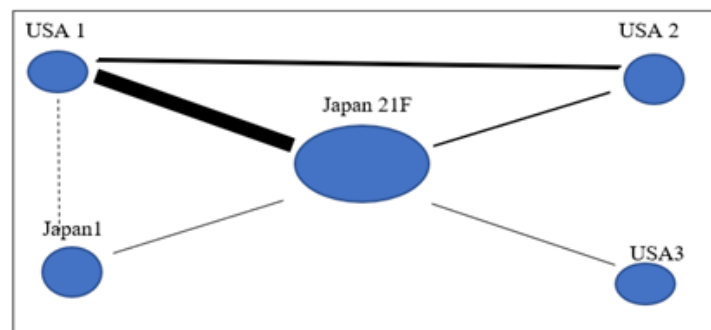


Figure 1: Social Network Chart

It is also noteworthy that her strongest link is with USA 1 with whom she spends 67% of her interactional times. Since her friends, USA 1, USA 2, and USA 3 are native speakers, they provide her not only quantity but also quality of input. With regard to the overall structure of her social network, it can be said that it is of moderate density because it has only 5 out of 10 possible links. USA 2 and USA 3 do not know each other. Japanese 1 does not know USA 2 nor does she know USA 3. Moreover, he/she has heard only of USA 1. Even so, the fact that the third author spends 89% of her interactional time receiving input and producing output in English is important for the development of English proficiency.

3.0 Acoustic Phonetic Analysis

The third author was recorded reading the text in Appendix 1. The vowels in the highlighted words were extracted and measured acoustically. The results were compared and contrasted with data from female speakers of GAE. This methodology goes as far back as 1952 when it was pioneered by Peterson and Barney. It has been replicated countless of times to study dialect variation. For the past 15 years or so, Koffi (2019) been using this approach to study the intelligibility of L2-accented English. Vowels are deemed extremely useful in assessing intelligibility because, though relatively small in number, they carry a huge relative functional load. Their role in assessing intelligibility is so important that Prator and Robinett (1985, p. 13) give piece of advice to future teachers of English and their students:

If you wish to understand and be understood in English, you must be able to distinguish and make the distinction among the vowel sounds with great accuracy.

The role of vowels in assessing intelligibility cannot be stated more accurately and more precisely than as noted above. Producing English vowels accurately is important for Japanese speakers because, as show in Figure 2 below, their native language has few phonemic vowels than English:

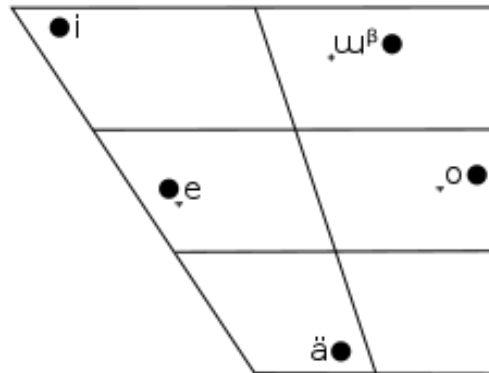


Figure 2: Japanese Vowel Chart (Okada, 1999).

Whereas English has 11 phonemic vowel monophthongs, Japanese has only 5. Broad similarities between the two vowel systems include /i, e, a, o/. The Japanese /ɯ/ is similar to the GAE vowel /u/ but not quite. It is described as an unrounded high back vowel whereas its counterpart in GAE is rounded. The remaining English vowels, namely, /ɪ, ε, α, ʌ, ɔ, ʊ/, do not have immediate equivalents in Japanese.

3.1 Measurements

Many acoustic phonetic features were extracted from the third author's pronunciation. These features include F0, F1, F2, F3, F4, intensity, and duration. Even though they all contribute in one way or another to vowel quality, we will focus the bulk of this paper on F1 because, according to Ladefoged and Johnson (2015, p. 207), it alone contributes 80% of the intelligibility of vowels. Furthermore, masking thresholds reported in Koffi (2019) indicate that complete masking occurs if the acoustic distance between two phonemic vowels is ≤ 20 Hz. With these thresholds in mind, let's examine the measurements in Table 2, ignoring all the correlates except F1.

Words		fleece	kiss	face	dress	trap	lot	thought	goat	foot	goose	strut
Vowels		[i]	[ɪ]	[e]	[ɛ]	[æ]	[ɑ]	[ɔ]	[o]	[ʊ]	[u]	[ʌ]
GAE	F0	235	232	219	223	210	212	216	217	232	231	221
Japan	F0	250	221	237	213	218	206	202	222	223	221	204
GAE	F1	310	430	536	610	860	850	590	555	470	370	760
Japan	F1	385	452	465	586	809	789	483	481	502	400	761
GAE	F2	2790	2480	2530	2330	2050	1220	920	1035	1160	950	1640
Japan	F2	2459	2055	2727	1931	1742	1360	997	1017	2055	1984	1689
GAE	F3	3310	3070	3047	2990	2850	2810	2710	2828	2680	2670	2780
Japan	F3	3390	3071	3324	3087	3118	2967	2870	3131	3059	2992	3101
F4		4378	4300	4441	4175	4289	4216	4066	4211	4549	4334	4380
GAE	Dur	306	237	320	254	332	323	353	326	249	303	226
Japan	Dur	140	75	131	108	137	181	125	129	85	136	127

Table 2: Acoustic Measurements

The F1 and F2 measurements obtained from the third author's pronunciation were used to create the acoustic vowel spaces in Figures 3 and 4:

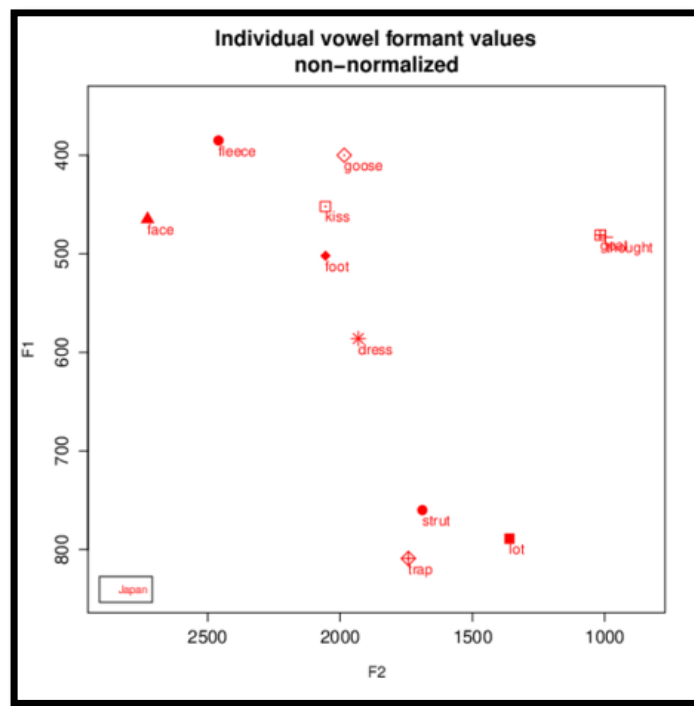


Figure 3: Author's Acoustic Vowel Space

Figure 3 displays the third author’s vowels by themselves. Some cursory observations are in order. First, we see that the “goose” vowel [u] is centralized in her speech. So, is the “foot” vowel [ʊ]. The “kiss” vowel [ɪ] and the “dress” vowel [ɛ] are also centralized. Last, but not least, the “thought” vowel [ɔ] is raised so high that it overlaps with the “goat” vowel [o]. We note in passing that Japanese does not have the vowels [ɪ, ɛ, ʊ, ɔ]. Even, the “goose” vowel for which there is an equivalent in English is produced rather differently, as shown in Figure 4 below. Furthermore, even though [æ] has a close equivalent in Japanese, they do not have the same vowel quality. The native Japanese [a] is central vowel, as shown in Figure 2 whereas in English, it is a front vowel, as shown in Figure 4. The third author still produces the English [æ] as a central vowel.

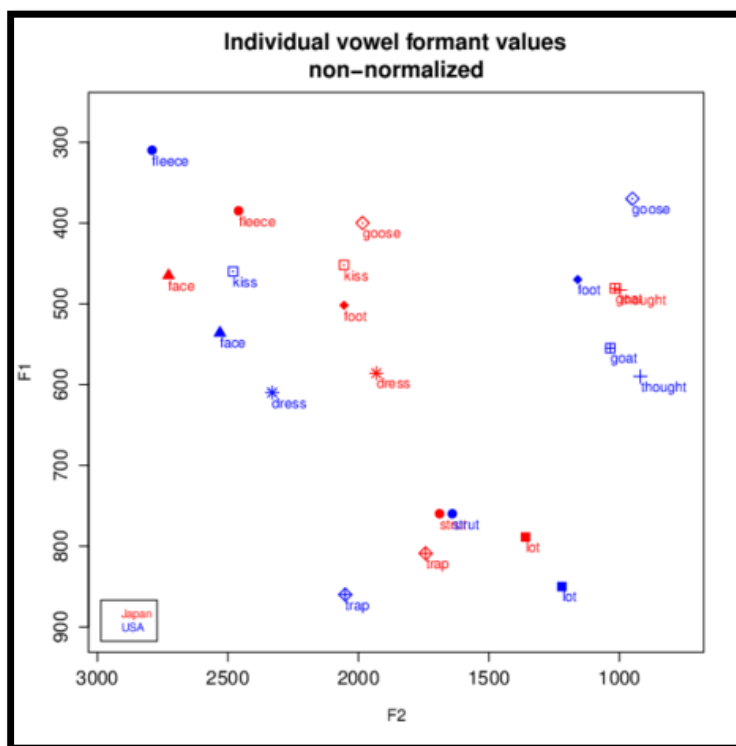


Figure 4: Comparative Acoustic Vowel Space

3.2 Intelligibility Assessment

According to the Critical Band Theory used by Koffi (2019), absolute masking occurs when the acoustic distance between two segments is ≤ 20 Hz on the F1 frequency bandwidth. For the purposes of intelligibility, a distinction is also made between internal and external masking. The former occurs when segments produced by the same individual overlap with each other in acoustic space. The latter occurs when the vowel produced by a speaker, in our case the third author, overlaps with vowels in GAE. For the former, we see that her “kiss” vowel [ɪ] (452 Hz) masks her “face” vowel [e] (465 Hz) because the acoustic distance between them is only 13 Hz. According to Catford (1987, p. 88), the relative functional load (RFL) of [ɪ] vs. [e] is 80%. This means According to the scale in Koffi (2019, p. 50), this confusion leads to poor intelligibility. If the discourse context lacks sufficient redundancy, if the third author says <ick>, for example, it

may be misperceived as <*sake*>. Her “trap” vowel [æ] (809 Hz) also overlaps her “lot” vowel [ɑ] (789 Hz) since the acoustic distance of 20 Hz is just at the threshold on intelligibility. Lexical minimal pairs such as <*cap*> and <*cop*> may cause intelligibility problems since their RFL is 76%. As noted previously, her “goat” vowel [o] (483 Hz) and her “thought” vowel [ɔ] (481 Hz) are perceptually indistinguishable because the acoustic difference between them is only 1 Hz. The RFL of these two vowels is 88%, which is high. Consequently, minimal pairs such as <*bought*> and <*boat*> are produced similarly. When the third author produces the pairs of vowels under consideration, intelligibility issues can surface. As for external masking, only her “goat” vowel [o] (481 Hz) masks the “foot” vowel [ʊ] in GAE pronunciation. However, since the RFL of these two vowels is only 12%, confusion does not compromise intelligibility too much.

4.0 Conclusion

Given the strategic political, military, and economic alliances with the USA, English has become an important language in Japan. However, proficiency levels are not in keeping with explicitly stated policy goals. The relative abundance of English teachers who are native speakers (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006) has not resulted in higher proficiency levels. This may have a lot to do with entrenched pedagogical practices in public schools. Proficiency expectations are so far limited to reading and writing. Cultural values may also be a handicap for oral proficiency because teachers do not want students to lose face on account of their pronunciation. Fortunately, abundant online resources such as this one at <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs.htm> can be used effectively by students to boost their oral proficiency. The minimal pair drills that this website and others like it offer can also be helpful to advanced speakers such as the third author. Even native speakers of Japanese who teach English but are not confident with their pronunciation can use it to improve their pronunciation. Since the third author is living in the USA and has native speakers of English in her social network, she should take advantage of every opportunity to have them supply her with vocabulary items that help her shore up her competence in social pragmatics. This suggestion would work for other Japanese speakers of English who are studying the USA and find themselves in the same situation as the third author.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Ettien Koffi, Ph.D. linguistics, teaches at Saint Cloud State University, MN. He is the author of four books and author/co-author of several dozen articles on acoustic phonetics, phonology, language planning and policy, emergent orthographies, syntax, and translation. His acoustic phonetic research is synergetic, encompassing L2 acoustic phonetics of English (Speech Intelligibility from the perspectives of the Critical Band Theory), sociophonetics of Central Minnesota English, general acoustic phonetics of Anyi (a West African language), acoustic phonetic feature extraction for application in Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) and Text-to-Speech (TTS), and voice biometrics for speaker verification. He can be reached at enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu.

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Appendix²

Note: The vowels in bold and capital letters are those that were measured acoustically in this study. PLEAsE call Stella. Ask her to bring these things wIth her from the store: Six gOOd spoons of fresh snow pEAs, five thIck slabs of blUE cheese, and mAybe a foot-long sandwich as a snack fOr her brother BOB. We alsO need a small plastic snake, the little yElloW bOOk, a rUbber dUck, and a paper I-pAd. She should not forget the dOg video game and the big toy frOg for the kIDs. She must leave the fAKed gun at home but she may bring the ten sea turtles, the mAt that my mom bOUght, and the black rUg. She can scOOp these things into three rEd bags and two Old backpacks. We will gO meet her, Sue, Jake, and Jenny Wednesday at the very last train station. The station is between the bus stop and the cOOkie store on Flag Street. We mUst mEEt there 12 O'clock, for sure. The entrance Is at the EEdge of the zOO in Zone 4 under the zebra sign. York's Treasure Bank is the tall building in the lEft cOrner. She cannot miss it.

² This is an augmented version of the Speech Accent Archive text found at <https://accent.gmu.edu/>. The original text lacked the “foot” vowel [ɒ]. Furthermore, some segments had severely limited distributions. The expanded version remedies these insufficiencies.