Mnemonic Formulae for English Pronunciation

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1. Introduction

The present paper explores ways to contextualize EFL pronunciation lessons and proposes a handy mnemonic device that will help Japanese students to recognize the phonemic features of English vowels and consonants. In order to reduce the boredom that students suffer from repetition practice, I have prepared a set of semantically and pragmatically meaningful sentences that will spark their curiosity; the sentences are also rhythmically regulated for easy pronunciation, based on metrical-phonology principles. I hope that such mnemonic formulae will function like a mathematics multiplication table or the key-word approach that Japanese high-school students employ to remember the dates of historical events.

Many of the EFL teachers in Japan claim that pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for classroom instruction. Japanese students tend to react negatively to pronunciation or phonetics courses because of the monotonous parrot-like-repetition practice routinely administered. However, we cannot dispense with repetition altogether because kinesthetic familiarity remains the key to their acquisition of accurate pronunciation. Children learning their first language are submerged in an environment that induces constant aural/oral repetition in various forms and contexts. The types of repetition range from the mechanical reproduction of linguistic chunks to semantically expanded or extended repetitions. They engage in frequent repetition not only for the purpose of rote memorization but also as part of their communicative efforts to confirm the delivery of their message to the addressee (Rydland and Aukrust, 2005). Unfortunately, EFL students do not enjoy such environmental support. However, it is possible to generate the solution to this problem by preparing a variety of repetition practices and to compile the material (e.g. a set of interesting example sentences) that students can use repeatedly without experiencing unbearable boredom.

1.1. Aural/Oral Skills versus Communicative Skills

Recent Japanese EFL curricula tend to place more emphasis on the overall communicative skills, instead of such low-level processing as pronunciation. However, aural/oral trainings are the most important area of language education, especially at an early stage of its process. Skehan’s (1998) model (quoted in Kiss & Nikolov 2005, 108-109) shows that the auditory/acoustic ability is essential at an early stage of one’s language learning process while the language analytic and
memory abilities serve greater purposes in expediting his/her language learning at later stages and over a longer span of time. The importance of auditory/acoustic abilities is further evidenced by the fact that echoic memory lasts longer than iconic memory at the level of sensory storage (Field 2003, 13). If trained properly, students will learn the language more efficiently through acoustic images than visual images. The basic pronunciation practice and, most likely, the bottom-up listening comprehension, are indispensable not only for the sake of pronunciation practice per se but also for their overall language acquisition.

1.2. Conflicts between Teaching Methods

The aim of this study is to find a way to facilitate Japanese students' acquisition of accurate pronunciation. But the more general goal that underscores my current endeavor is to recycle the useful features of every existent method. EFL teachers/researchers are, for instance, inclined to consider the Audiolingual Method to be an antediluvian method of no practical purposes. However, unlike reading comprehension, composition, or the analytical discussion of grammatical points, which require highly logical analysis, pronunciation practice should be treated more as a form of physical performance than an academic training because it is heavily dependent on kinesthetic familiarity and muscular coordination. The kinesthetic feelings can never be fully developed without substantial repetition.

Incidentally, the presentation of model forms—the other main pillar of ALM above mentioned—is also crucial for the teaching of accurate pronunciation. As regards this discipline, recent research studies have already suggested that the current EFL/ESL education is overly weighted in favor of meaning-focused teaching methods (Gass et al. 1999, Williams 1999, Shehadeh 1999, Izumi & Bigelow 2000) and that it should be optimally combined with form-focused instruction. Again, the replacement of meaning with form is not the issue; instead, we can find the solution only by balancing the two focuses of instruction for perfect integration. In the pronunciation lesson, form represents phonetic sounds, but each target phonetic point can be presented in a semantically interesting sentence that serves to contextualize it.

There is no doubt that the simple, mechanical repetition has its negative aspects. EFL students will lose interest in such a task because, in the process, they do not enjoy the sense of satisfaction that can be derived from cognitive learning or realistic communicative interactions. However, deceived by general trends, EFL teachers and researchers tend to lose sight of positive features of the old system and lean toward another method that has its own limitations. My ultimate goal is to eliminate the detrimental factors connected to traditional approaches and, at the same time, to recycle all of their positive, practical features for the classroom teaching and syllabus design.

2. Various Methods of Contextualization

All in all, the major concern is how to provide rich contexts for the low-level processing of
pronunciation, and I will explore teaching methods and strategies that can be immediately implemented in daily classroom situations. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to deal with each type of contextualization in detail, and, therefore, only the first alternative below (2.1) will be elaborated in the following section (3).

2.1. Repetition at the Sentence Level
Ideally, EFL students should be given opportunities to pronounce the target phoneme in a number of different activities or on different occasions without having to repeat the same phrase or sentence over and over again. However, it is possible, by preparing proper materials, to contextualize pronunciation exercises even at the sentence level as well. A minimal pair or semi-minimal pair should be dexterously embedded in a semantically meaningful sentence that follows a natural rhythmic pattern. Sentence A is an example contrasting the vowels [e] and [æ], and Sentence B illustrates the consonantal difference between [p] and [b].

A. Henry didn’t lose his head; he just lost his hat in an accident. (Same as #3-b in Section 3)

B. Peter gave his dancing partner a friendly pat; Brian beat up his business partner with a baseball bat. (#37)

Several structural or rhythmic patterns are possible, and the procedure for producing a complete set of example sentences will be demonstrated in Section 3.

This type of approach was actually advocated by proponents of ALM when the pertinent method was in the stage of being phased out (Bowen 1979). The minimal pair serves to heighten the learner’s awareness about the phonemic distinction because the replacement of one phoneme with the other changes the semantic meaning. The lexicographic work to find appropriate pairs of sentences for all the English vowels and consonants will be prohibitively time-consuming. Yet the EFL teachers/researchers can start with the task of determining the phonemes that are most likely to confuse Japanese students and then preparing at least one example for each target point.

2.2. Integration into Oral Communication Lessons
The next step is to contextualize pronunciation exercises at a procedural level. The target phonemes might be integrated into a more interactive form of oral communication practice. The instructor might specify a certain conversational situation and engage a pair or group of students in a communicative task, or he/she might initiate a conversation with students, providing them with phonetic/phonological feedback or inducing correct pronunciations during the process of their interaction. Below are some of the dialogues observed in the oral communication lessons that I taught myself.
Situation A

Instructor: How was your reading and writing class?
Student: Oh, it was very [hoʊ]!
Instructor: Was it hot in the classroom? Is something wrong with the air-conditioners?
Student: No. It was [hoʊd]. I didn’t understand a lot of things.

Situation B

Student: I tried to make a correct call when I telephoned my parents [in Niigata].
Instructor: Did you dial the wrong number, or did you want your parents to pay for the call?
Student: I wanted my parents to pay.
Instructor: Then, it’s a collect call.

As another alternative, the teacher might assign an information-gap activity that will automatically require students to repeat a specific vowel or consonant. For instance, a pair of students might be provided with two versions of a map, each of which is missing part of the information. When they try to determine the location of a specific building, facility, or landmark on their maps through verbal communication, they will be forced to pronounce the interdental fricative repeatedly, referring, for example, to the fourth corner or the fifth traffic light.

2.3. Reading Aloud

As a teaching strategy for reading comprehension, reading aloud has been criticized for its negative influence on EFL students’ comprehension (Ono et al. 2001, 86). However, for voice and diction practice, old-fashioned as it might seem, the recitation of a written text—including a passage out of a literature textbook, the text prepared for a public speech, or a drama script—is an excellent way of brushing up their pronunciation. It will be particularly effective when it is conducted under the supervision of a native English-speaking instructor or an expert phonetician. In fact, it is similar to the basic training that those who aspire to be TV and radio broadcasters undergo to prepare themselves for their professional career. Another prominent method of pronunciation training, which is often used in the Japanese EFL class, is the oral interpretation of a literary work. It provides great incentive to the students who appreciate a chance to express nuances by articulating the given lines in an artistic form.

2.4. Explicit Discussion of Phonological Points

Another issue to consider is the timing of explicit explanation of phonological points. In their discussion over the instruction of grammar in general, Ellis (1998) and Fotos (1994) claim that the presentation of an explicitly defined grammatical rule at the beginning of a chapter will deprive students of a chance to discover the rule with their own efforts, which would, in itself, be the most important part of the procedural teaching method. Contrary to common belief, a
clearly defined grammar rule, if presented prematurely, is likely to hinder the student’s learning process, instead of facilitating it. Taking note of this indication, the pronunciation teacher should try to guide students to discover a phonological rule, arranging some oral/aural activities before his/her explicit discussion on theoretical issues.

Even the simple reading-aloud exercise—if a model reading is withheld at the beginning on purpose—might serve the purpose of allowing students to go through a trial-and-error experience. However, Giambo and McKinney (2004) have reported that phonological awareness trainings promoted the oral English proficiency of Spanish-speaking kindergarten children more significantly than a mere story-telling condition. Therefore, the trainings focused on specific phonetic features or phonological processes might be more effective when the resources and trained instructors are available.

2.5. Traditional Methods and the Japanese Culture

While parrot-like repetition can be replaced with a more active, creative type of learning, students should also be urged to acknowledge the positive aspects of the traditional methods. The contemporary Japanese youths have been raised in an affluent environment in terms of the opportunities for frequent overseas trips, access to the media, meticulously designed language programs and advanced educational technology. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why they do not appreciate the basic training methods that require a load of mechanical work, in spite of the fact that the same old methods are often effective and useful in their own ways. However, students should be, at least, encouraged to appreciate the merits of their own cultural and pedagogical customs as well.

The patience and perseverance that was formerly required of Japanese students may be exemplified by the way Japanese martial arts practitioners carry out their training. In a typical training session at a karate school, for instance, the practitioners spend ninety percent of their training time on the repetitive drills to brush up their basic techniques. As their skills become advanced, they eventually learn to apply those basic techniques to practical tactics in combat situations or for artistic performance, but their basic pattern practice continues throughout their career, regardless of their experience or rank. Then, their continued efforts will ultimately lead to complete mastery of high-level techniques. Such pedagogical customs that were rooted in the Japanese culture should be appreciated and utilized, instead of being discarded.

Once, I was impressed and, at the same time, mildly amused at the sight of a junior-high-school baseball team training to learn proper form for catching a grounder. They lined up sideways like a team of line dancers, moved to the side together, squatted and touched the backs of their hands on the ground in perfect unison as if scooping loaches from the river together. As a Japanese, I could instantly understand that they were trying to catch an assumed grounder even though they were not wearing gloves at the moment and no one was actually tossing balls at them. However, this type of practice method is rather atypical in baseball or
most of the other European or American sports, and people from other countries might not have made heads or tails of what they were trying to do. Yet, the fact remains that the rigid and orderly form of repetition has been rooted deeply in the Japanese culture and has proven effective in its own way. The junior-high baseball players even demonstrated trained gracefulness in their synchronized movement, and such behavioral habits should be affirmed and treasured as an asset, instead of being treated as a detrimental factor. Even if linguistics or pedagogical researchers indicate that mechanical repetition per se is useless, the learners should be given a chance to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the traditional methods from an objective point of view. A stock of linguistic chunks may not serve to accomplish all the pedagogical purposes in EFL education. Yet they serve their practical purposes, especially when implemented in tandem with other methods, and thus should not be abandoned altogether.

3. Sample Sentences

Most of the pronunciation textbooks on the market include a set of example sentences, but they are often trite or artificial, in addition to being extracted completely out of context. Even at the sentence level, however, it will be possible to provide much richer contexts for pronunciation practice by preparing more meaningful and carefully composed sentences. For the purpose of making the sentences more pronounceable, we can also make minor arrangements to have the target vowels or consonants placed in accented syllables so that they will be projected. As shown below, several different types of sentences can be prepared in terms of phonological or syntactic patterns.

3.1. Phonological Variation

In English, the accent normally falls on the last stressed syllable. Thus, the simplest and, perhaps, the best position to place the target phoneme is at the end of a tone unit. (In #3-b and #5, a minor prepositional phrase follows the second accented syllable, but this should not make the sentences any less pronounceable.)

#1-a. [ɔu][ɔ] The UFO sighting was a hoax; it turned out to be a flock of gigantic hawks.
#1-b. [ɔu][ɔ] The wounded soldiers were moaning, and the bereaved families were in mourning.
#2. [ŋ][ɔ] A nail was sticking out of his cot, and he got his haunches caught.
#3-a. [æ][æ] Don't shoot the messenger; don't even shoot the passengers.
#3-b. [æ][æ] He didn't lose his head; he just lost his hat in an accident.
#4. [æ][ʌ] Magician hid a pigeon in his hat, and then he picked up his equipment and retreated to his hut.
#5. [ɔ][ɔ] The government needs to confirm that its guideline has been conformed to.
#6. [o][ɔ] She found a genie's pot when browsing in the market near the port.
However, it is difficult to generate many sentences that fall in exactly the same sentence-stress pattern. Therefore, a certain degree of compromise ought to be tolerated. The target phoneme might be placed in the initial position of each clause—or tone unit (#7 and 8)—or in the middle of a clause (#9, 10-a, and 10-b).

#7. [ei][l] Set the table first, and then, sit for dinner with other people.
#8. [u][u] The box isn’t heavy; the books are heavy.
#9. [æ][l] The president ordered us to hash over our error; he didn’t tell us to hush it up.
#10-a. [u][u] Don’t put your foot on the table; we will put food on the table.
#10-b. [u][u] What that fool said was full of crap.

Otherwise, an unstressed syllable should be inserted between the two target phonemes so that stressed and unstressed syllables will alternate.

#11. [b][aʊ] It was hot and hard to work in the office today.

3.2. Syntactic Variation

The sample sentences can also be classified into several categories, according to the syntactic relationship between the first and second clauses. The simplest pattern consists of two clauses connected by a coordinate conjunction (#1-b, 2, 4, 7) or semicolon (#1-a, 3-a, 3-b, 8, 9, 10-a). Otherwise, the first and second clauses might constitute the main and subordinate clauses as in #6, 12, 13, and #14; Sentence #5 that contains a that-clause falls in the same structural category.

#12. [e][æ] If the kids are wet, let them wait outside.
#13. [ʌ][u] When they shot a film near the coast, they had trouble with poor acoustics.
#14. [ʌ][ɪ] When the team played on its home ground, it won a grand victory.

One phoneme might be found in a part of the subject phrase and the other embedded in the verb phrase in a subject + be-verb + complement sentence (#15 and 16).

#15. [æ][l] A ranger in a truck cab was watching a lion cub.
#16. [e][æ] The salesman’s duty is to sell as many products as he can.

Yet another possibility is to put the first of the two target phonemes at the end of the main clause and the second in a sentence-final tag. In #17, the two key words are presented in coordinate noun phrases so that they rhyme.

#17. [æ][v] I asked you to bring me the map, not the mop.

Several variations can be found according to the parts of speech as well. In #18, the target
sounds are both embedded in verbs, and in #19, they are both found in nouns:

#18. [i][t] They didn't leave Tokyo; they still live in Tokyo.
#19. [e][ŋ] Hiroshi winced with pain, having pricked his own finger with the tip of his mechanical pencil.

On the other hand, in the following three sentences, the words that contain the target phonemes constitute different parts of speech.

#20. [oʊ][t] The coach then called the name of each team member.
#21. [ɛ][æ] I am totally fed up with the stupid new fad.
#22. [u][u] The drowning man was pulled out of the pool.

3.3. Consonants

In Sections 3.1 and 3.2 that deal with vowels, I have categorized the example sentences into different syntactic and phonological patterns. As regards the consonants, however, I am taking the liberty of saving myself the trouble for such categorization and shifting the focus of discussion onto the typical phonetic points that Japanese students have trouble distinguishing.

Some of the phonological features that Japanese students experience difficulties with—either at the perceptive or productive level—include: the contrast between [d] and [l] in final position (#23), the [r] and [l] contrast in all positions (#24), and the distinction between [v] and [b] (#25), [z] and [s] (#26), and [ŋ] or [ŋŋ] (#38). The pronunciation of the alveo-palatal fricative [ʃ] (e.g. measure) as opposed to the affricate [ʤ] produced in the same place of articulation (e.g. major) also presents a challenge to them (#27); so does the presence and absence of aspiration in voiceless stops (#28). For some students, it is also difficult to pronounce consonant clusters in sentence-final position as in #36.

#23. [d][l] It is rude to ask a woman's age, but there isn't a rule not to ask about someone's savings.
#24-a. [l][ɾ] The lead performer will also read the text.
#24-b. [l][ɾ] He was shocked to find lice in the served rice.
#24-c. [l][ɾ] Thai athletes pray before they play.
#25. [v][b] The police vowed to crack down on reckless drivers, but the drivers didn't bow down to the authority.
#26. [ð][z] Then, the Zen monk came and started to recite the sutra.
#27. [dʒ][tʃ] Ichiro plays in the Major League; Jiro measures the ocean in leagues.
#28-a. [p][pʰ] He spied on the man who ate the pie.
#28-b. [kʰ][k] Benjamin flew his kite in the sky during a thunderstorm.
#29. [d][ɾ] He heard his heart pounding like a drum.
#30. [m][n] In ancient times, people could see the moon at noon.

—(58)—
#31. [w][ʌ] (pronounced differently in some dialects) The weatherman could not decide whether or not to give a warning.

#32. [s][θ] A dead mouse lay at the mouth of a sewer.

#33-a. [s][ʃ] Mark is a city boy, but John is just a shitty boy.

#33-b. [s][ʃ] She was sick of the men who kept seeking her companionship.

#34. [t][h] He fired his old secretary and hired a new, competent one.

#35. [ɪ][ʃ] My grandfather has his ears checked every year.

#36. [l][p][l] "We want help!" Afro-American children shouted in chorus after a big hurricane turned New Orleans into the living hell.

In order to urge students to concentrate on a single, specific point, I personally prefer to include only one minimal pair in each sentence. However, occasional exceptions might be tolerated—or included by design—in the hope that students will enjoy them as tongue twisters. Sentence #42 is also effective for the purpose of teaching different allophones of the same phoneme.

#37. [p][b] Peter gave his dancing partner a friendly pat; Brian beat up his business partner with a baseball bat.

#38. [l][r] People say Mary is pleasantly plump; in fact, she is presently pregnant.

#39. [ŋ][ŋ] The singer got really angry when the pianist’s finger slipped and hit the wrong key.

#40. [dʒ][ʒ] The judge had a seizure after he got the massage.

#41. [b][v] The mayor looked big and vigorous in his best, tailored vest.

#42. [t][tʰ][r] He’s not really a good doctor! Try to talk to a city doctor.

4. Future Research Directions

Every method or material has its potentials and limitations, and the repetition practice is a prime example that illustrates this pedagogical conflict. Especially, when students are made to repeat the sentences that they have already been familiarized with, both its positive and negative consequences will surface in the clearest way. Kinesthetic familiarity and the students’ psychological reaction to the same, tedious activity need to be weighed against each other. The need to balance between the two contradictory conditions might be compared to an analogical situation outside the EFL class. When students listen to a professor’s abstract lecture, they might stop paying close attention at one point or another because they cannot handle the huge amount of technical details. (The professor might be expected to repeat or recycle the vital points expertly.) On the other hand, when the same young men and women listen to their parents’ repeated advice to correct their undesirable habits, they would also stop paying attention to their words in spite of the fact that the message is one-hundred-percent clear. The precious messages can be communicated and utilized to serve practical purposes only when they
are presented in an appropriate manner and register.

As I declared at the beginning, I have restricted the present study to a general review of the various methods for contextualizing pronunciation practice and to the presentation of a set of simple mnemonic sentences. The future research will have to analyze EFL students’ reaction to the provided material either through their performance in classroom activities or in the form of check-up tests. This paper has demonstrated only one or two example sentences for each pair of target phonemes. However, if we produce thirty or forty meaningful sentences for each target point, it will be possible to allow students to familiarize themselves thoroughly with the phonological units without having to repeat the same sentence a number of times. Also, it is worth an investment of substantial time and efforts to examine the actual cases of miscommunication derived from phonetically similar pronunciations. Corpus analyses based on both native speakers’ conversations and EFL learners’ interactions might generate the data to help develop authentic teaching materials.

Furthermore, the issue of repetition itself should be related to various other disciplines of EFL education. Outside the area of phonetics, the learners’ efforts for repetition can be observed, for example, in the form of continual drafting and editing of a text in composition or the repeated appreciation of a literary work in reading comprehension. The repeated presentation of the old information does not have to be restricted to a single mode of communication. Liu (2004) has shown that comic strips serve as an effective instrument to facilitate the EFL students’ reading comprehension at a certain proficiency level; that is to say, repetition can even be materialized in the combined form of verbal and visual messages. When the instruction is focused on several different aspects of language learning at the same time, the attention to the accuracy of one’s pronunciation will naturally be somewhat attenuated. On the other hand, it can be incorporated in a more genuine and integrated manner of language use. Consequently, our ultimate goal might lie in the balancing between the two focuses, based upon the students’ abilities and experience at each stage of their EFL education.

References


