

## Is it better to learn how to ‘hear’ the sounds of a new language, or practice saying them?

### What this research was about and why it is important

Pronunciation is one of the hardest parts about learning a new language, especially if it is very different from your native one. Each language or dialect has their own set of unique sounds and intonation patterns. So, what is the best way to go about learning the new sounds of a foreign language? At first, it may seem natural that to improve your pronunciation, you should just practice speaking. However, previous research has suggested that your ears have as much to do with pronunciation as your mouth does. This study compared four groups of students, trained in different ways and on different targets of pronunciation, to see which combination was the best. Our results suggested that students trained to listen carefully and identify English syllables had the biggest improvement in their own pronunciation.

### What the researchers did

- Learners were 115 Japanese university students, aged between 18-20. Students in Japan learn English from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, so each student had at least 6 years of English training before the start of the study.
- A list of 10 English words which are hard for Japanese speakers to pronounce were chosen for the test. The students were asked a series of questions, made to translate Japanese into English, and read off a word list, which resulted in them saying each of the 10 words three times each. The students didn't know which words they were saying were being tested until the word list, which was at the very end of the test.
- Each group had two special pronunciation lessons, for 30 minutes each, in one of the following styles: listen and identify English sounds (e.g., did I say an ‘f’, a ‘v’, or a ‘b’?); listen and identify English syllables (e.g., clap your hands for each syllable you hear); listen and repeat sounds (e.g., lightly bite down on your bottom lip and push air out to say the ‘f’ sound); listen and repeat focusing on syllables.
- The test was repeated after the two lessons were finished, and again after a gap of two weeks.
- Three English professors (native speakers) individually listened to the test recordings and scored each student's pronunciation. All three professors' scores generally agreed with each other.

### What the researchers found

- All groups greatly improved their pronunciation as a result of the two lessons.
- At first, the group which was practicing listening and repeating English syllables improved the most. However, after a two-week gap of having no lessons, this group's scores dropped a bit while the three other groups continued to climb.
- By the end of the study, the group which practiced listening and identifying the correct number of syllables had the most improvement in their own pronunciation, followed by the group which practiced listening and identifying correct sounds.

### Things to consider

- One of the biggest takeaways of this study was that all the students improved as a result of the special lessons. Teachers should be encouraged to add pronunciation instruction to their lessons wherever possible.
- For teachers who would like to start teaching pronunciation but are not quite sure how, this study offered four techniques that were all shown to be effective, in addition to providing a discussion of other possible ideas and links to other researchers' studies.
- This study helped add evidence to support the hypothesis that training in listening skills can carry over to help improve students' pronunciation as well.
- A unique aspect of the study was that it compared “listening vs. speaking” and “sounds vs. intonation” at the same time, using multiple groups. A key finding is that both listening groups improved more than both speaking groups, and that they continued to get better even after the lessons ended. This result should be followed up on in further research.
- As this study only looked at 115 Japanese university students, much more research is needed. Future directions could include different language pairs, younger (or older) students, different sounds, etc.

Materials available from <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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