

# Teaching English pronunciation to young Japanese learners for English communication

日本人幼児への英語発音指導について  
— 英語コミュニケーションに焦点を当てて

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## Introduction

In today's world, which is rapidly becoming more and more globalized, English seems to have established its status as the sole means of verbal communication. Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) issued a policy to create human resources with good English ability and has been putting much emphasis and effort into the reform of the nation's educational system. The reform included the lowering of the starting age for learning English. Starting 2020, English is now a compulsory subject for students in the third grade and above. As a matter of course, the number of children who seek English instruction outside of their official schooling is on the rise.

Yamaha English School, one of the leading after-school English schools in Japan, has more than 40,000 students all together, in over 1200 branch schools throughout Japan. According to its website, They claim that as high as 93% of the students continue. The website also states that the age range is from 0-year-old to 12-year-old. (6<sup>th</sup> graders)

It is generally understood that language learning starts with listening and speaking, especially with young learners. In the present Course of Study for elementary schools, issued by MEXT and in effect since 2020, it is clearly stated that third and fourth graders only engage in listening and speaking, with reading and writing starting later in fifth and sixth grades.

Young children normally acquire their first language by just being exposed to the actual use of the language. Unlike adult learners, they do not need to be given explicit instruction on the language in order to learn it. Many people believe that children have much better hearing ability than adults. If their hearing is excellent, a logical consequence is they will start noticing the sounds of the target language with ease and speed and eventually start comprehending the language without actually being taught.

It may be actually the case when it comes to very young children in their process of language learning, whether it may be their first language or not. In various parts of the world can be found environments where children learn to become multilingual speakers.

In a country like Japan, where a vast majority of people communicate in just one language, Japanese, teaching a foreign language presents a serious challenge, whether it be for adults or children. For adult

learners, there is no doubt that language learning requires much effort and time on their part. When it comes to children, however, many people say that it must be much easier for them to learn a foreign language because they have excellent hearing ability and they will not have any problem with learning, especially with pronunciation, But is it really true? That was the motivation for the present study.

### **Background for this study**

In this section, I lay out the educational setting I am engaged in to clarify what has motivated and triggered my present study. I have specialized in teaching English to young Japanese learners for the past ten years. I own and run an English school for little children called OYAKOEIGOCLUB in Nagoya. I have been teaching there ever since it started in 2013, and I took over the school from the previous owner in 2019.

Right now, I have about 90 students between the ages of 0 through 12. I myself teach as the main teacher and I have two more teachers who come to help out on busy days. One of them is an Italian, and the other is an American. The maximum number of students in one class is 8.

I briefly describe what kind of activities happen in a typical one lesson. A typical one lesson is 50minutes long. In a typical, regular lesson for kindergartener and elementary school students which is 50 minutes long, I start every class by taking attendance. I do this every time because it is a great way for me to connect with the children and also it is a great way to create opportunities for the children's output. Then I usually show them some flash cards with English words and visual images so that the children can associate those images with the words. I do this to teach them new and old vocabulary words.

The children come for a lesson once a week, and each week I add some new words to the flash cards. However, I do not show them just new words. I always show them a lot of flashcards from previous lessons again and again. I try to show them as many flashcards as possible. That way it helps the students to remember and retain the words that they already know, and also it is a great opportunity for children to produce more output.

We sing songs, a lot of songs each time. We read books. Typically, we read about six to eight picture books in each lesson. I do not hesitate to read even the kinds of books that the students already know very well because they never get tired of reading the same book over and over.

Towards the end of the lesson, I give them some writing and drawing activities and always finish the lesson by explaining about their homework. I give them homework every class, which mainly consists of reading aloud some sentences and phrases from their textbooks and the picture books they are working on.

Clearly the focus of my teaching is to improve their aural English ability and I am very keen to teach them the kind of pronunciation that is easy to understand in international communication. I have been trying many different approaches to teach English pronunciation to little children. I have tried explicit instruction as well as implicit instruction.

Many people seem to believe that children can learn the pronunciation just by being exposed to a language. However, through my own experience of teaching English to young Japanese children for ten years, I could not help questioning such beliefs. I have noticed that young children as young as four years

old already having difficulties with English pronunciation.

Another aspect that I observed while teaching young children is that they seem to have anxiety issues about their inability to imitate the English sounds that they hear. The fear that they are feeling may be an obstacle to their pronunciation learning. If the issue of anxiety seems to be in the way of their pronunciation learning, what kind of methods and techniques may be useful?

I decided that I needed to explore this issue and started making experiments in my teaching to see if it is possible to teach English pronunciation to young children and also to find out what are some obstacles blocking their learning. Therefore, my research questions in the present study are the following:

Research questions:

1. Is it possible to teach pronunciation to young Japanese learners of English?
2. How can language teachers try to lower their anxiety levels?

## Literature Review

It seems to be widely believed that children acquire a language naturally and effortlessly. Moreover, it seems to be a common understanding that it is impossible or even harmful to try to explicitly teach them about languages.

This may be partly attributed to the influence of Stephen Krashen's theories (Krashen, 1986). Stephen Krashen is a noted linguistics scholar of the 80's. The Acquisition-Learning distinction is the most fundamental of the five hypotheses in Krashen's theory, which is widely recognized among linguists and language teachers.

According to Krashen, there are two different approaches to mastering foreign languages: one is through "acquisition" and the other is through "learning."

The "acquisition" is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act.

The "learning" refers to the formal instruction and it involves a conscious learning process that aims to generate conscious knowledge 'about' the language including knowledge of grammar rules. According to Krashen 'learning' is less important than 'acquisition'.

In the field of second language acquisition, "learning" comes with a deductive approach in a teacher-centered setting, while on the other hand, "acquisition" implies an inductive approach in a student-centered setting. Let us now discuss how children master their first language, or so to speak, mother language. Based on Krashen's discussion, it may be said that children acquire their first language, rather than they learn it. If children acquire their first language, does this theory also apply to their second language education? Do we, as language teachers, need to bear in mind that children always need to acquire the language by implicit instruction and that we need to avoid providing them with explicit instruction?

Unfortunately, a thorough search on CiNii for research studies on teaching pronunciation to preschoolers could not find a single work on the topic. This may suggest that the topic in question, which

is “teaching English pronunciation to young learners” is not really something that is sought after by researchers. Rather, there may even be a general consensus among researchers and language teachers that it is not a plausible discussion.

One study explores pronunciation instruction to elementary school age learners of English. The subjects for the study were given word repetition tasks in different settings and it was demonstrated that they are more likely to produce correct sounds when given recorded oral models in comparison to settings where they are shown the spellings of the words or when given visual images (such as pictures) of the words. One thing worth noting is the big influence of borrowed foreign words in Japanese that are commonly written in katakana. It is reported that the students had a strong tendency to pronounce those words using so called “katakana pronunciation.” (Ishihara et al, 2021)

Another theory of Stephen Krashen that seems to play a role in the current study is the Affective Filter hypothesis.

The Affective Filter hypothesis embodies Krashen's view that a number of variables can function as affective filters in second language acquisition. These variables include: motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and personality traits. Using this theory, Krashen explains that a low level of anxiety is likely to yield success in second language acquisition. If anxiety levels increase, they may form a 'mental block' that prevents successful acquisition from happening. In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition.

A number of studies have been conducted that deal with anxiety issues in language learning. (Motoda, 2005; Monoi & Hanei, 2017; Yashima, 2003; Young, 1990.) These studies suggest that elementary school age learners of English do feel different levels of anxiety and therefore it is necessary for not only English instructors but also their homeroom teachers to make sure that they create safe spaces in their classes where children can feel at ease about trying new experiments and feel safe about making mistakes in front of their peers. Although there exists no research into language teaching for preschoolers, it may be assumed that the same applies to even younger children.

## Study

First, I discuss the first research question; is it possible to teach pronunciation to young Japanese learners of English?

As stated above, past research suggests that children benefit a great deal from repetition with a model, which has been further confirmed in my everyday teaching.

In my observations, very young children, such as three-year-old children, capable of pronouncing any English sound that they hear. Many three-year-old children enjoy repeating. They like and they enjoy practicing and repeating. Therefore, teachers do not need to try to “teach” pronunciation at this stage. All they have to do is to create opportunities where they can enjoy repeating as much as possible, and it is very easy for them to acquire and develop the kind of pronunciation that is clear and intelligible this way.

Therefore, it can safely said that young children do benefit from repeated oral repetition in their process of learning a second language learning. It may not even be so much of teaching because teachers

do not engage so much in teacher-center style teaching, but nonetheless it can be a form of teaching since teachers are supposed to provide a good model which children listen and emulate, instead of just being exposed to the English use by teachers.

I next discuss the second research question: how can language teachers try to lower their anxiety levels?

From my observation of the preschool age children that I teach English to, it seems that they start feeling a little insecure about learning English around the age of four. They start feeling more and more anxiety because they feel that they do not know enough English for communication. That is around the time when they start using “katakana English” pronunciation, which they hear from TV or from their friends and family. Children that live in Japan cannot avoid the influence of “katakana English,” and those katakana English words become something very familiar to them. It may be an obstacle to their English learning, but it is the reality.

Again from my observations, it seems that those children feel anxiety about pronouncing the words they don't know how to pronounce. As soon as they start understanding that English is a different language from Japanese and that it has a different sound system, they start feeling anxiety about the English sounds. That is something that does not occur to them when they have not reached this stage yet. When they reach this stage, the amazing repetitive ability seems to be lost.

Since Japanese children's exposure to actual English use is quite limited, it is not surprising that they are more familiarized with “katakana English” than real English. They seem to feel quite uneasy when they hear authentic English sounds which they feel they cannot pronounce. In other words, they feel less anxiety about katakana English sounds.

## **Experiment**

Based on one of my observations about children's familiarity and relaxed feelings about katakana English, I taught experimental lessons where I purposely used katakana English pronunciation.

### **Case 1**

A five-year-old girl who is one of my students at my school. I taught a song called “the days of the week.” It is a song to learn about the seven days in a week from Sunday to Saturday. The girl could not say “Thursday.” It seemed like she had no idea how to make the “TH” sound, which is a voiceless dental fricative consonant. Instead, she said Tuesday twice. The reason for that may be that she was looking at the lyrics and saw that Tuesday and Thursday start with the same letter, T. The student might have been influenced by the spelling. She was able to say Tuesday because she felt she knew how to say it, but “Thursday” was one word she didn't know how to say. It was obviously because that the consonant does not exist in the Japanese pronunciation system.

When I noticed that the girl was only saying Tuesday twice and was not trying to pronounce Thursday, I start saying the word using katakana English pronunciation. I said “SAASDAY” 「サーズデー」 several times in typical katakana English pronunciation.

When she listens to me say SAASDAY repeatedly, she seemed to feel quite at ease because that is the sound she can emulate easily and started to repeat the word with me. We said SAASDAY together over and over again. Then I suddenly inserted the correct pronunciation of “Thursday.” The five-year-old girl, now relaxed and enjoying repeating, started mimicking how I said it. With more explicit instruction on how to actually formulate the TH sound, she eventually was able to lean the TH pronunciation.

## Case 2

The next case is about the word “thunder,” which is again about the TH sound.

One day before our lesson begins, some children and I were talking about the stormy night we had the night before. A four-year-old boy asked me, “What’s the English word for ‘kaminari’?” When I said to him that it was “a thunder,” the boy could not say “thunder.”

When he heard it, he immediately knew it was not a Japanese sound and so he must have thought “I can’t say that.” The boy did not even want to try saying it. Because of the anxiety he was feeling, he must have been afraid of making a sound he did not know how to say.

I used katakana English sound, SANDA. 「サンダー」 I repeated this again and again. When I did this, the boy start saying SANDA with me because it is a sound that they already know well. After some practice, he started to feel quite comfortable saying SANDA. In the beginning, he was too afraid to say anything, but he was at least saying something. And then I started inserting the TH sound little by little. I said SANDA, SANDA, and then, “Thunder,” “Thunder,” and he actually started imitating me and say “Thunder.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

As I stated above, some young children seem to learn from explicit pronunciation training in their English learning, especially with the help of katakana English sounds.

Although some children may have no problem about trying to pronounce such unfamiliar sounds, but on the whole, it seems that there is a tendency that many young children do feel and express anxiety about unfamiliar sounds.

Therefore, it may be said that, with the help of some katakana English sounds, it may help decrease their anxiety levels and help them learn their pronunciation. When children feel anxiety because they feel that they are not familiar with English sounds they are listening, We English teachers might be able to help them by using sounds in katakana English that are closely related to the sounds in question, which is TH in this case. We can replace TH with the S sound, which is also a fricative consonant like TH. S is a sound children are most familiar with. After children feel more secure and confident, language teachers can then gradually start teaching how to pronounce sounds that are unfamiliar for students.

To help those students who have problems with English pronunciation, what most English teachers tend to do is to have them listen to “correct” pronunciation again and again and ask them to imitate it.

If we do so, students may feel even more afraid of making mistakes. My approach is to help them by using Japanese sound a little bit at first in order to help lower the anxiety levels of the students and then

gradually move towards the correct pronunciation

That way, I observed that students were relaxed and comfortable because they first heard the familiar sounds first. With that kind of “scaffolding” done in small steps, it provides students with the courage that helps them attempt to pronounce unfamiliar sounds.

Although in the present study I only presented cases dealing with TH sound, I also apply the same technique for other sounds that do not exist in the Japanese sound system, which I would like to further examine in my future studies.

A big limitation to this study is that it is solely based on my own observation that I wrote down in my teaching journal. My future studies should include more objective data for more thorough discussion, but this is at least a small step into the direction of creating methods for teaching pronunciation for young learners without increasing their anxiety levels

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