Teaching English with the IPA

Josef Messerklinger, Asia University

ABSTRACT
The International Phonetic Alphabet is an invaluable tool for teaching language, and all English teachers should know and be able to use it. The IPA can be used to teach conversation as well as pronunciation, and since all Japanese students learn it in junior and senior high school, making the IPA a part of the communicative classroom is very easy. Nonetheless, Japanese students’ pronunciation often becomes inaccurate and eventually fossilizes. The main reason for this is reversion to the use of katakana; rather than use the IPA, it is far easier for students to apply a script that they are already familiar with. Another problem may be inconsistent, or lack of, error correction. Another cause may be that they have learned from a poor model. By reintroducing the IPA teachers can help students become aware of proper English pronunciation. Often, when students are given a word to read written in everyday alphabet they will pronounce the word using sounds that are familiar to them. By writing out the word in IPA, students must focus on the sounds much as native speaker children do when learning to read. For example, when students see the word “cinema” they are likely to pronounce it /ʃɪnəmə/ rather than /ˈsɪnəmə/. Based on these arguments, this paper proposes several activities for teaching communicative English using the IPA.

INTRODUCTION
The use of the International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA, for language teaching seems to have been forgotten by native speaker teachers of English, yet it was a language teacher and not merely a linguist, Henry Sweet, who pioneered the use of these symbols to teach the spoken language (Tench 1992, pp. 90-91). The abandonment of the IPA by foreign English teachers in Japan is especially ironic given the value of the symbols for teaching spoken communication. On the other hand, the symbols are taught to students in junior high school and regularly used in high schools and as part of university entrance testing. Despite their familiarity with the symbols, it cannot be said, unfortunately, that the average Japanese student has native like or even comprehensible English pronunciation. This is not an indictment of the symbols themselves nor is it a condemnation of the hard work of Japanese teachers of English, quite the contrary.

Whether foreign teachers think these symbols are an added burden for students or not (Tench IBID p. 96), the groundwork for using the IPA in the “communicative” classroom has been laid in junior and senior high school. And while busy junior and senior high school teachers may not have been equipped or had the time to use the symbols to their potential, the opportunity is wide open for native speaker teachers to follow through with accurate models of the sounds that the symbols represent in English and consistent error correction of student performance of these sounds. Furthermore, since the students already know the IPA, making it a part of the class routine is actually very easy. Some ideas for using them will be explained in this short report along with a few observations about the effectiveness of these techniques.
THE IPA IN THE COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOM

Junior and senior high school teachers get students to categorize words based on their IPA transcription; ship/sheep is the common example of this. This can be excellent review for students if done orally. Give them the word and then get them to categorize it by vowel sound or consonant, depending on which sound you would like to focus on.

Early on, students can also transcribe a few words of Japanese into IPA. Comparisons between English and Japanese can then be made and sounds common to both languages such as /s/ can then be used to correct pronunciation errors such as the differences between /ʃɪ/ and /sɪ/.

Write out a few words on the board in IPA and have students work out what they say. Even the lowest level university student can read these symbols and might embarrass a native speaker teacher who has neglected to learn them. The student, of course, will naturally want to know if they’ve got the word right. Teach them how to ask in English, “Does that say ‘cinema’?” and listen as they get the pronunciation correct until they write the word out in romaji and then say shinema.

Give students a list of unfamiliar words written in IPA and teach them to ask, “What does ________ mean?” (See the appendix for an example list.) Let them ask and then give them the word meanings. Quiz them on the words later. The advantage of teaching new vocabulary this way is that they learn with their ears, as they should; they need to connect the sound with the meaning first. They also get the pronunciation correct the first time rather than rely on dubious decoding techniques to make a guess at the sound—consider pairs such as though and enough.

This simple activity can be adapted for use in a crossword puzzle. Use the word meanings as clues for a crossword puzzle. (See the appendix for an example list.) In addition to asking the word meanings, they can ask for the spelling as well.

Write out a few sentences in IPA and have students read them. This could be a target language function or structure or part of a dialog. As with the above ideas, this focuses the class on the sounds and gives you a chance to help them with pronunciation.

Of course, dictionaries give these symbols as a pronunciation key to help with words that are otherwise undecodable (Bryson 1990 p. 85 gives the example of chough.) Rather than allow students to use katakana as an aid to pronunciation, it makes much more sense to encourage the use of the IPA. Katakana may be useful in Japan, but as the name implies, the IPA is an international set of symbols that can be applied to any language and that all linguists should know. One excellent place where IPA transcription can be used is for reduced forms. Rather than have students write wanna or gonna, have them spell the words correctly, but transcribe the sounds into IPA.

The IPA is also a useful tool for listening tasks. Although having students transcribe more than a few lines at a time is probably a bad idea, you can learn a lot about how they are hearing by having them transcribe a word or two or perhaps a few simple sentences into
IPA. This is especially helpful with sounds that learners typically have difficulty with, /r/ and /l/, for example. As explained below, asking them to repeat what they heard or spell the word out sometimes gives a false impression since they are using other skills—namely spelling and pronunciation—and fossilized errors may interfere with their ability to accurately explain what they heard.

The IPA is extensively used for accent reduction training. While such training is not very common in Japanese universities but typical in specialty programs for telephone operators and the like, the time spent on accent reduction in general English courses and oral communication courses will help students become more comprehensible when they speak English.

An accent reduction curriculum would include introduction (or reintroduction) to the IPA, practice identifying sounds using the IPA and eventually transcribing spoken and written texts into IPA, and finally having students read from transcriptions that either they or the teacher has prepared. In ESP courses, the sentences can be important language functions needed to perform a certain type of work, for example reading the gospel and delivering a sermon. The author had a chance to observe such a course recently, and applied these techniques to students studying business hospitality. When dealing with international guests, it is important that hospitality workers speak in an easily understood accent. Although students at first read haltingly from IPA transcriptions, even then their pronunciation was remarkably more accurate than during conversation.

**OBSERVATIONS**

Using the IPA to correct pronunciation is very effective as was demonstrated recently by two classes of low ability university students. One group was given a list of words spelled as usual and the other the same list written in IPA. In one class of 22 students, nearly half the class given the words spelled in alphabet mispronounced the word cinema saying /ʃɪnəmə/ instead. Remarkably, none of the students in a similar class of 20 students mispronounced the word when it was presented to them in IPA. Ironically, the first group recognized the word immediately and could translate it without difficulty, while the second group, although saying the word correctly, had no idea what it meant until one of them shouted, “/ʃɪnəmə/!”

This phenomenon is perhaps similar to the Japanese Beatles copy bands who can sing word perfect covers but cannot speak a word of English. (1.)

Similar to singers who can sing perfectly accented English but cannot speak the language are learners who can understand the spoken language but cannot write a word of it. In fact, Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996 p. 269) warn “non-native spellings may reflect the learners’ imperfect control of the English sound system, transfer from the sound system of their native language, or inadequate understanding and control of English orthographic conventions.” When allowed to use the IPA for dictation, students in the same low-level class scored higher on the dictation quizzes given at the end of each unit in the textbook. This should not be surprising at all, since phonetic spellings are usually simpler than conventional spellings. Consider words that end in silent e or others.
with combinations such as –igh and –ough.

CONCLUSION
Of course, simply using the IPA will not magically transform your students’ pronunciation. It will, however, raise their awareness and can lead to other activities that focus the learners on pronunciation.

REFERENCES

FOOTNOTES

Appendix
Unit 3 word list in IPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>IPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eɪk</td>
<td>ɪnˈfɛkʃən</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɪndʒɪkʃən</td>
<td>ˈveɪərəs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kəf, kɒf</td>
<td>bruz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wund</td>
<td>ˈwʊpəreɪʃən</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unit 3 word list and definitions

ache  slight pain
infection  when a wound becomes dirty
injection  when a drug is put into your body with a special needle
virus  a very small living thing that makes you sick
cough  when air comes out of your throat suddenly making a harsh sound
bruise  a dark mark on your skin where you hurt yourself
wound  a cut made in your skin
operation  when a doctor cuts open your body to repair a part that is hurt
tranquilizer  a medicine that makes people calm or sleepy
patient  someone who is seeing a doctor
surgeon  a doctor who operates on patients
prescription  a piece of paper from a doctor that says what medicine a patient should have
vomit  when food comes from your stomach and out your mouth; usually when you are sick
diarrhea  like vomit but from the other end
work out  to do physical exercise
weightlifting  a kind of exercise for your muscles
aerobics  a kind of exercise for you heart and lungs
vegetarian  someone who does not eat meat or fish
alcoholic  someone who cannot stop drinking alcohol
meditate  to stay silent and calm for a period of time
addict  someone who likes something very much and cannot stop doing it
apologize  to say you are sorry for something bad that you did
forgive  to stop being angry with someone
argue   to shout and say angry things; to explain why you think
        something is true
emotion feelings like happy, angry, sad, surprise, fear, etc.