

On Guiding Students in Recitation Practice

Tadashi BANNAI

(Received November 26, 1988)

Abstract

One of the most effective ways to improve not only comprehension of English but also expression is practicing recitation of a short story. Students should choose a story which they have already studied and concentrate their practice to achieve standard pronunciation, stress, rhythm, pause and intonation.

A teacher can help students by guiding them in recitation using the language laboratory system and evaluating their speech on tapes recorded during their practice.

The purposes of this paper are 1) to confirm the efficiency of such a method through examining the procedure of guiding students in recitation practice 2) to point out several hints for guiding them.

1. The Significance of Recitation Practice

In order to master English, it is necessary to become accustomed to how English phonemes sound and to acquire standard pronunciation ability. Even for understanding the meaning of written sentences, auditory impressions are helpful. Making use of as many characteristics of English phonetic aspect as possible in oral communication is important since nonstandard rhythms or breaks in the sense groups may cause confusion to the listener¹⁾.

Though it is not difficult to 'know' the characteristics of the English phonetic aspect, it is difficult for Japanese to use them appropriately. Students need to practice this aspect in speech. One of the most important steps in the practice procedure is listening repeatedly to standard English through tapes²⁾, which were recorded by native speakers. Another important step is the recording of students' recitation on cassette tapes in order for them to listen objectively and understand how to improve their pronunciation by themselves. The popularity of language laboratory system and portable tape recorders now makes these steps easy.

In the next chapter, I will examine specific characteristics of English phonetic aspect in terms of practicing recitation.

2. English Phonetic Aspect and Recitation Practice

2-1 Pronunciation

Japanese learners of English often find pronunciation difficult. The main reasons are as follows :

1) English has phonemes that do not exist in Japanese, consequently, Japanese speakers tend to substitute from Japanese vowels/consonants which most resemble the English phonemes³⁾.

2) Japanese students sometimes confuse the strength (that is, the stress) with the length of English

*Assoc. Professor of English (General Education Section)

vowels. Pronouncing certain vowels with length instead of proper strength may make little difference in terms of auditory sensation, but such pronunciation often causes destruction of the rhythm⁴⁾.

The only way to avoid substitution for phonemes that do not exist in Japanese is to listen to standard English repeatedly and to practice pronouncing them correctly. It is necessary for a student to concentrate carefully in order to adapt his ear and tongue to revive English phonemes. Once a student is conscious of the distinction between the strength and the length of vowels, however, he can expect to master that task more easily.

2-2 Stress

There is no question of the importance of pronouncing words with correct stress accents. If a speaker uses incorrect stress accents, the listener may be confused. A student can master them by listening to standard English repeatedly trying to become aware of how they sound and then practicing pronunciation of each word with a correct stress accent.

It is well known that there are several rules of stress accents which are applicable to words that have certain inflections⁵⁾ and that there are several patterns of shifts in stress accents with conversion⁶⁾, and so it is not difficult to achieve correct stress accents. However, more than a few English words pronounced with stress accents are heard quite differently from the images based on their spellings. Beginners especially must realize that they can never be too careful with stress accents.

Sentence stresses are much more complicated to master. A student should begin to learn weak vowels and weak forms. Then he must develop the ability to decide which words are stressed in consideration of rhythms and the context. A student has to choose them based on interpretation of the line of a character and of what the writer means by the sentence⁷⁾. In addition, a student must pay attention to vocal successions, elisions and assimilations⁸⁾, for they have great influence on both pronunciation with appropriate sentence stresses and how the sentences sound.

2-3 Rhythm

Contrary to Japanese, rhythms in English sentences are stress-timed, so there is no limit in the number of syllables for each beat⁹⁾. Therefore a student should master them by all available means in order to speak or read English aloud with correct rhythm.

A student needs to practice pronouncing a group of weak-form syllables in each beat lightly and quickly. It is also necessary to practice pronouncing each beat slowly, if it consists of few syllables. In any case, it is necessary to listen to native English speakers repeatedly before speaking in order to model one's speech after standard English rhythm¹⁰⁾.

2-4 Breath-groups and Sense-groups

Pausing for breath is basically left to a speaker's judgement, but Japanese students sometimes make a mistake of pausing for breath among a sense group. Breath-groups are closely related to the length of the speaker's breath span and the pace of his speech, but ultimately, another important factor is comprehensibility for the listeners. Thus pausing for breath is one of the points about which we must be careful from the earliest stage of learning English¹¹⁾.

Although the flow and pauses in consciousness of a speaker usually makes natural sense-groups/breath-groups in conversation, students have to be careful in pausing for breath when reading English sentences aloud so as not to break the sense-groups.

2-5 Intonation

Most changes of intonation depend on factors such as the speaker, his age, his personality and his frame of mind. Since Japanese students are likely to concentrate exclusively on the end of a sentence considering the principles of 'a rising intonation' and 'a falling intonation', they neglect to pay attention to the interpretation of relation between sense groups or sentences. To make matters worse, in such cases, they often decide which intonation to take in terms of whether the sentence is a declarative one or an interrogative one; or whether it has an interrogative adjective/adverb/pronoun. Realizing that intonations are closely related to the interpretation of relation between sense groups or sentences, students should practice to become aware of English intonations.

Another important thing connected with intonation is the pitch in a word. Not many of students realize the fact that we often have to change the pitch in a word in order to form a proper intonation¹²⁾. At first, they must listen to the standard English repeatedly through tapes to observe how the change of the pitch occurs in a word. Then they can practice recitation with appropriate intonations.

In addition to this, especially when a teacher guides students in recitation practice, he must have students realize the importance of interpretation of the lines of characters and the writer's intention for achieving proper intonation¹³⁾.

2-6 Understanding Content and Recitation Practice

As I stated in the sections dealing with sentence stress, Sense-groups and Intonation, students absolutely need to understand the content of sentences in order to read them naturally. The recitation must be a comprehensible one, considering listeners.

In this sense, the method of guiding students in practicing recitation is one of the most effective ways in teaching the English phonetic aspect. Once students have repeatedly listened to standard English, then they can practice recitation. They need to understand the relation between sense groups or sentences and to realize that recitation must express the interpretation of the lines of characters and the writer's intention.

3. Procedures for Guiding Students

3-1 The Students and The Material

Students; 54 English/American literature majors of Tomakomai Komazawa Junior College
Material; "After Twenty Years" by O. Henry¹⁴⁾

(15 to 25 minutes devoted to recitation)

3-2 Procedure

I instructed the students to understand the content as preparation for recitation, therefore, I chose the text that is popular so that they can get a translation easily. There was no need to make a complete translation into Japanese¹⁵⁾, so we could begin with practicing pronunciation in a language laboratory room. Lessons (once a week, 90 minutes each) were planned as follows:

1st period. The explanation of procedures for recitation practice. I instructed the students to finish understanding the material in three weeks¹⁶⁾, that is, by the time when pronunciation practice would start.

2nd period (Three weeks later). The model reading using the language laboratory system. I pointed out words/phrases with difficult pronunciation, stress accents, sentence stresses and rhythms. I advised them to contrast the model reading with their own tape-recorded recitation. Corrections were made through a monitor.

3rd period. Drawing the students' attention to the relation between understanding of the content and pauses or intonation. Corrections were continued through a monitor.
4th period. The tape recording by the students for evaluation¹⁷⁾.
5th period (Three weeks later¹⁸⁾). Returning tapes with comment and evaluation marks (A~D)¹⁹⁾.

3-3 The Result

Generally speaking, the students who asked for corrections and listened intently to the model reading made great progress in their recitation. On the other hand, while I was correcting students' mistakes through a monitor in 2nd and 3rd periods, I sometimes found a student whose understanding seemed insufficient, due to the fact that she made mistakes in sentence stresses and frequently paused for breaths improperly, breaking the sense-groups. I advised her of the importance of understanding toward achieving natural expression. Most of them took my advice, so that they made considerable progress.

Table I EVALUATION

Pronunciation & Accents	~10% A	~25% B	~40% C	41%~ D
Sentence Stresses & Rhythms	~10% A	~25% B	~40% C	41%~ D
Pauses (Sense-groups)	~ 5% A	~10% B	~20% C	21%~ D
Intonations	~ 5% A	~10% B	~20% C	21%~ D
General Impression (Comprehensibility)	A	B	C	D

('%' indicates mistakes)

Originally, students had different abilities. But by the end of the procedure, some students with less knowledge of English made enough progress that their level matched that of others who originally knew more English but practiced less diligently. At any rate, almost all the students made progress in their expression through these recitation practice lessons.

Table II THE FINAL MARKS

Mark	A ⁺	A	B	C	D
Number of students	5	11	19	18	1

4. Conclusion

As stated in chapter 1 and 2, practicing recitation is effective regarding improvement of a learner's ability in English phonetic aspect. The study in procedures of guiding students in recitation practice and the result (chapter 3) proved that the use of the language laboratory system and evaluating their speech on tapes recorded during their practice were beneficial to them for acquiring the power of expression. Finally, I can point out three hints on guiding them :

- 1) Understanding of the material must be mastered beforehand.

- 2) The next step of repeated listening to a tape enables the student to model his pronunciation according to standard English.
- 3) In guiding students, a teacher shows points clearly such as pronunciation, stress accents and rhythm to practice.

Notes

- 1) If a native speaker makes unnatural rhythms in conversation, he often does so intentionally so as to indicate lack of certainty or skepticism.
- 2) Though English has variations, I am speaking of the standard English such as what is known as 'the General American' and 'Queen's English'. Sometimes tapes are recorded improperly, for instance, with exaggerated stresses, with unnatural intonation caused by nervousness or inexperience of the speaker. Students still need to listen to native speech repeatedly and native speakers are not always available, consequently using tapes is the best way at present.
- 3) Though we have only five vowels and no diphthongs in Japanese, there are more than 20 altogether in English, so it is natural that students should substitute Japanese vowels for English vowels or diphthongs. It is difficult for Japanese students to distinguish the phonemes of /s z/, /θ ð/ and /ʃ ʒ/. Sometimes even the difference between /t/ and /θ/ is not easy. Furthermore, they often substitute /h b/ for /f v/.
- 4) Japanese students often take the pronunciation of 'boy' [bɔi] as [bɔːi]. Even a word 'book' is occasionally pronounced as [buːk]. To make matters worse, not a few Japanese have a habit of keeping such pronunciations being indifferent to sentence stress and rhythm.
- 5) eg. The words with a suffix of {-ity}, {-ion} have a word stress on the syllable just before.
- 6) eg. récord (n.) vs. recórd (v.), Jāpanése (n.) vs. Jápanése (adj.)
- 7) →13)
- 8) Though some weak forms such as [f] in 'of course' and 'have to', [stə] in 'used to' are known among Japanese, many Japanese are not conscious of the fact that most words have weak forms. They often try to pronounce every word in a sentence in its strong form, which makes a strange impression on listeners.
- 9) It shows an apparent contrast between English and Japanese to look over the number of syllables corresponding to musical notes in a song.
- 10) →13)
- 11) This is why it is either impossible or nonsense to read aloud English sentences without understanding of the content.
- 12) In guiding students in this point, however, teachers must be careful in the explanation not to let them confuse the pitch in a word that forms a proper intonation with a fixed pitch accent unique to each Japanese word.
- 13) The same hint is applicable to guiding students in terms of sentence stresses. [→7)] And also it affects directly the matter whether the rhythm should be a light one or a lingering one. [→10)]
- 14) 'The Appreciation of Literary Works' is an elective course strictly for majors of English/American Literature. Consequently, I had them practice recitation of the story as one of the ways for appreciation of the literary work. I used two other textbooks in addition to "Short Stories of O. Henry" (Geirinshobo Co., 1988.).
- 15) I gave a brief explanation on the writer and the work in the first period of practice. Later, when a student put questions to me, I gave her explanations or partial translations.
- 16) We had two lessons centered on translation and interpretation, using another textbook, between the first period and second period (and also between the fourth period and fifth period) of the procedures.
- 17) I required the students to record their recitation on the premises that they must not pre-record or turn in tapes later. They were given forty-five minutes in this period for recording so as to make it possible

to record their recitation twice, if they wanted to correct the first one.

18) →16)

19) I informed the students that the final mark in this recitation would account for twenty percent of the final mark in the course.

Bibliography

Abe, Isamu *et al.* *The Sounds of English*. Modern English Teaching Course Vol. 4 Tokyo: Kenkyusha Publishing Co., 1965.

Ito, Kenzo *et al.* *English Linguistics and English Language Teaching*. Outline of English Linguistics Vol. 12 Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing Co., 1982.

Koizumi, Tamotsu and Makino, Tsutomu. *Phonology I*. Outline of English Linguistics Vol. 1 Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing Co., 1972.

Shimizu, Teisuke. *Methodologies in Teaching English*. Tokyo: Kaitakusha Co., 1980.

Takebayashi, Shigeru. *An Introduction to English Phonetics*. Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing Co., 1982.

Yoneyama, Asaji and Sano, Masayuki. *A New Approach to English Language Teaching*. Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing Co., 1983.