AN ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AS PRONUNCIATION TEACHING MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT
As a preliminary step towards conducting a teacher survey on pronunciation teaching in order to design a phonetics course for current and prospective English teachers in Japan, this paper analyses six government-approved English textbooks used in junior high schools. The purposes are to examine the types of pronunciation activities in the textbooks and to discuss the knowledge of phonetics required for Japanese teachers of English. The analysis reveals trends such as an emphasis on suprasegmental features and the incorporation of phonics. Although details of the textbook activities vary greatly, most of the textbooks cover core features of the English sound system and provide a satisfactory number of pronunciation exercises. To make effective use of textbooks as pronunciation teaching materials, however, teachers need to have a solid grounding in phonetics.

Keywords: pronunciation teaching, phonetic symbols, phonics, suprasegmentals, teacher training

1. INTRODUCTION
Pronunciation teaching is one of the biggest challenges that Japanese teachers of English face. Morley explains that a teacher needs to help students as a coach, and just like coaches in other areas such as debate, drama, voice, music, and sports, a pronunciation/speaking coach ‘supplies information, gives models from time to time, offers cues, suggestions and constructive feedback about performance, sets high standards, provides a wide variety of practice opportunities, and overall supports and encourages the learner’ [5 p. 507].

To fulfil all these roles, teachers need to be equipped with a variety of skills and knowledge. They need to know practical techniques and strategies as well as understand the sound systems of the target language and the learners’ first language.

This paper analyses six government-approved English textbooks currently used in Japanese junior high schools. Compared to the past editions, the current textbooks seem to have more exercises. The aims of the analysis are to categorise and assess the pronunciation-related activities that are included in the textbooks and to identify the knowledge of phonetics that teachers need to possess in order to teach pronunciation more effectively and with confidence.

Our ultimate goal is to describe the status quo of English pronunciation teaching in junior high school classes in Japan, investigate teachers’ concerns and needs, and design a phonetics course specifically tailored for current and prospective English teachers.

2. METHOD
The following is the exhaustive list of junior high school English textbook series approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan [4] in 2011, and to be used for the school years 2012–2015:
1. New Crown (Sanseido); hereafter NC-1, 2, 3
    Takahashi, S., et al. 2011
2. New Horizon (Tokyo Shoseki); NH-1, 2, 3
3. One World (Kyoiku Shuppan); OW-1, 2, 3
    Matsumoto, S., et al. 2011
4. Sunshine (Kairyudo); SS-1, 2, 3
5. Total English (Gakko Tosho); TE-1, 2, 3
    Yada, H., Yoshida, K., et al. 2011
6. Columbus 21 (Mitsumura Tosho); C21-1, 2, 3
    Togo, K., et al. 2011

Each series consists of three volumes, corresponding to the three grades in Japanese junior high school.

As for the choice of an English variety as a model, the only government guideline [4] is to adopt a ‘contemporary standard pronunciation’, and no specific variety is recommended. Yet, all the textbooks seem to be in favour of American English, and accordingly, General American is adopted.

The authors thoroughly collected and compiled the descriptions relevant to pronunciation in the textbooks. Each item was then categorised and given a label according to its nature: For example, to a description involving the distinction between the vowels in hot and hat, a sound pair many Japanese learners of English have difficulty with [8], the label LOT-TRAP (based on Wells’ lexical sets [10]) was assigned. Some of the labels used are as follows:
Vowels: FLEECE-KIT, START-NURSE
Consonants: /vl/-/bl/, /ʃ/-/lʃ/, /s/-/ʃ/, clear/dark /l/
Phonics: long/short vowels, silent letters, the two sounds of c and g
Connected speech: linking, elision, assimilation
Stress and rhythm: content/function words, word stress, compounds, rhythm
Intonation: tone unit, tone type, nucleus

All the textbooks have explanations and/or demonstrations of letter-sound correspondences based on phonics rules, which play a certain role in pronunciation teaching in Japan. For this reason, descriptions pertaining to phonics are included in the analysis even though phonics is not a phonetic phenomenon. Based on the results, the specific elements of phonetic knowledge that teachers are expected to know were extracted.

When referring to explanations given in the textbooks (usually in Japanese) in the following discussion, the authors provide literal translations in italics without any modification of the symbols to indicate pronunciation. For example, in all six textbooks, brackets ([ ]) instead of slashes (/ /) are used along with phonemic symbols, most of which are in accordance with the IPA. However, small capitals are not used (e.g. cake [kēk] for /kēk/), presumably so as not to confuse the students with unfamiliar symbols.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Segments

Having a five-vowel system in their mother tongue, Japanese learners of English often experience difficulties in distinguishing/identifying English vowels. Yet, the approach to the problem differs among textbooks. While two textbooks (OW, C21) deal with all the vowel categories at least once in their activities, one textbook (TE) focuses on a limited number of vowels (e.g. FLEECE, FACE, MOUTH). Two textbooks (NH, SS) present about 10 difficult minimal pairs (e.g. STRUT-LOT, GOOSE-FOOT, SQUARE-NEAR) in their activities. Overall, very little is mentioned about weak vowels or the difference between strong and weak vowels (only once in NC, NH, and OW, respectively).

As for consonants, certain ones (e.g. /l/, /l/, /θ/, /s/) are repeatedly dealt with whereas others (e.g. /p/, /t/, /d/, /l/) are rarely mentioned. In addition to the problematic consonant pairs /l/-/s/ and /t/-/l/, voiceless-voiced pairs such as /l/-/l/, /θ/-/θ/, /p/-/b/, and /t/-/d/ are dealt with in the majority of the textbooks even though they are not difficult for Japanese speakers to distinguish. As for allophones, three textbooks explain the difference between clear and dark /l/ (NC, SS, C21), but no mention is made of /l/-voicing or allophones of voiceless stops.

Three textbooks (NC, NH, C21) attempt a phonetic explanation of difficult consonants by making use of the sagittal section of the vocal tract and/or by providing articulatory explanations, taking a sound in Japanese as a reference point (e.g. to pronounce /r/, say /r/ without the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth).

Although all the textbooks explain basic phonics rules [3] such as the pronunciation of one-letter consonants, short and long vowels, many of the two-letter consonants (e.g. ch, ng, sh, th) and vowels (e.g. ea, ee, ay, ou, ow, oo), and the two sounds of c and g, the thoroughness of these descriptions differs. The most extreme case is TE, in which all the explanations of segmentals are devoted to showing which spelling corresponds to which sound along with some sample words (e.g. ea [iː] season, sneaker, eaten; ow [au] how, flower, allow; aw [aː] draw, saw, law; a-e [ei] cake, name, face), while no information is provided on the phonetic features or articulation of the sounds.

Even in other textbooks where the description of phonics and phonetics is more balanced, the level of detail varies. For example, in explaining the two sounds of c and g, rules are explicitly indicated in NC: *Look at the sample words carefully. ’C’ and ‘g’ are pronounced as [s] and [dʒ], respectively, when followed by either ’e’, ’i’, or ’y’ [NC-2 p. 116].* On the other hand, in all the other textbooks, only sample words are listed and no rules are mentioned.

3.2. Connected speech

All six textbooks emphasise the importance of linking, especially in the following two positions: a consonant followed by a vowel (e.g. group_of, look_at) and a consonant followed by another consonant that shares the same place of articulation (e.g. with_them, went_to). An alveolar nasal followed by a vowel (e.g. one_of, can_I) is one example of a problematic case for Japanese learners since they tend to replace a word-final /n/ with a moraic nasal.

Among the sound changes, coalescent assimilation seems to be the most favoured, and it is treated in four of the textbooks (NC, NH, SS, C21). One textbook (NH) uses katakana transliteration (e.g. an egg アネッガ, meet you ミーチュー). Three textbooks (NH, OW, C21) introduce elision, but its explanation needs improvement. For example, a laterally released word-final plosive is included as an example of elision (e.g. good _luck).
The explicit presentation of the rules of sound changes is limited. Usually, the textbook instructions tell learners to simply focus on how the words are joined together to keep the rhythm, and they only urge learners to practise.

3.3. Stress and rhythm

To signal word stress, a few exercises on this topic, and three (NH, SS, C21) explain that the nucleus should be placed on words that represent ‘important information’ or ‘the word that answers the question’.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Phonetic symbols

Although a phonetic transcription accompanies every newly introduced word, it is merely supplementary information about how the word sounds, and there are no activities on the use of the phonetic symbols in any of the textbooks. This may be partially because the writing system of Japanese is not alphabetic and many Japanese learners find it difficult to interpret what each symbol represents.

An alternative way to show which letter(s) represent which sound(s) is the phonics system, which has recently gained more popularity in Japanese classrooms, possibly because there is no intervention of another set of symbols and the relationship between spelling and sound is more direct and explicit.

Care must be taken in the use of phonics, however, because there are a number of words that do not follow the rules, especially at the introductory level (e.g. the pronunciation of g in girl and get). Teachers have to be able to tell rule-conforming words from exceptions.

4.2. The use of katakana

The use of katakana is peculiar to teaching materials targeting Japanese learners. In an analysis of the previous editions of the textbooks, NC was reported to use katakana transcription alongside the phonetic transcription in both the body of the textbook and the appendix [9].

In the current editions of the textbooks, however, katakana is only sporadically used for supplementary purposes. For example, four textbooks (NC, NH, SS, C21) enable learners to compare the pronunciation of English words with corresponding loanwords written in katakana, and one textbook (NH) uses katakana characters when giving an articulatory description of English sounds that do not exist in the Japanese sound system, and when explaining sound changes (see Sections 3.1 and 3.2). The overall use of katakana has decreased.

4.3. Focus on suprasegmentals

The textbooks provide a substantial number of exercises for suprasegmental features. This reflects the government’s Curriculum Guidelines, which clearly state that students need to understand and
become familiar with the basic characteristics of English such as stress, intonation, and phrasing to enhance their English speaking and listening skills [4]. The guidelines also specify the following points to be incorporated in the teaching of English sounds: (i) contemporary standard pronunciation, (ii) sound changes that result from linking, (iii) basics of stress patterns in words, phrases, and sentences, (iv) basics of intonation in sentences, and (v) basics of phrasing in sentences [4]. Four of these points are concerned with pronunciation at the sentence and suprasegmental levels. The importance of teaching suprasegmental features has been emphasised in the past few decades [1] [5], and the shift of focus from segments to suprasegmentals has also influenced the government guidelines in Japan.

Among the content on suprasegmental features, more exercises on nucleus placement should be included, given that it is considered one of the most important features in communication [2]. Teachers need to fully understand the rules of English rhythm and intonation to be able to guide students through these exercises.

4.4. Activity types

Among the six textbooks, variations are observed in the ways the same phonetic phenomenon is approached. In explaining /l/-/tʃ/, for example, one textbook (OW) simply lists words containing the two consonants, while another textbook (NH) attempts step-by-step instructions for learning the difference, pointing out that the distinction does not exist in Japanese and introducing a tongue twister as an exercise. Yet another textbook (NC) goes one step further by inviting students to work in pairs [NC-1 p. 73]:

Listen carefully to the ‘l’ and ‘r’ in the following words, and practise. Work in pairs and find out what is going on with the tip of the tongue when pronouncing the two sounds:
like, leg, live, leave, right, red, river, really

NC is characteristic in that its activities often contain a process of guiding students to figure out phonetic differences that might otherwise be too minute for native speakers of Japanese to notice, and to discover the rules themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated six government-approved textbooks for junior high schools in Japan. It revealed that the majority of the textbooks cover the elements in phonetics necessary to enable students to understand the basic characteristics of English sounds, with an emphasis on suprasegmentals, although the presentation of materials varies.

Needless to say, teachers are the key to students’ successful understanding. Teachers need to have sufficient knowledge in order to effectively use the textbooks as pronunciation teaching materials.

Unfortunately, however, many junior and senior high school teachers in Japan have little background in phonetics since it is not a required subject in teacher training curricula at Japanese universities [7]. Each university can decide whether to include it in the curriculum or not. As a consequence, a phonetics course may be optional or obligatory, and its length may be one semester or a whole year. In this situation, it can be assumed that quite a few teachers teach in the classroom without the necessary knowledge and skills.

The next step of our project is to conduct a questionnaire survey on a considerable scale. Teachers currently teaching in public junior high schools will be asked to participate in the survey, which will ask questions about the time they spend teaching pronunciation, their understanding of the phonetics elements identified in the present study, and concerns they may have in pronunciation instruction.

Once the results of the survey are obtained and the teachers’ needs are clarified, we will design a phonetics course for prospective English teachers and teachers who have not previously learned about phonetics. The course will first cover the basic concepts of phonetics and basic characteristics of English in comparison with Japanese. Without this knowledge, teachers will not be able to facilitate students’ practice in an effective and beneficial way, nor theoretically understand the problem areas for Japanese learners. For example, to teach the exercises in accent and rhythm, teachers need to understand the notion of the syllable and the differences between English and Japanese syllable structures. The course will also provide training in practical skills such as recognising students’ problems, giving constructive advice, and evaluating student progress.

Phonetics is indispensable for English teachers since it helps them guide student learning and improve their own pronunciation skills so as to provide the students with a good model. The authors strongly hope that the benefits of learning phonetics will be properly acknowledged by people involved in English education in Japan.

6. REFERENCES