

# College Students' Views on English Pronunciation: Intelligible vs. Nativelike Pronunciation

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## 大学生の英語発音に対する意識：知的な発音 VS. ネイティブレベルの発音

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### Abstract

Setting a goal of second language (L2) pronunciation learning for acquiring not nativelike pronunciation, but intelligible pronunciation is widely acknowledged by Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professionals (Morley, 1991). However, the importance of intelligible pronunciation has been mainly discussed in the English as a second language (ESL) context, and it has been rarely investigated how the English as a foreign language (EFL) students actually perceive their L2 pronunciation. This paper explores college students' views on English pronunciation in the EFL context where students learn English as a required subject at a Japanese college.

**Key words:** pronunciation learning, intelligible pronunciation, nativelike pronunciation, the EFL students

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### 抄 録

外国語学習において、ネイティブレベルの発音ではなく知性ある発音の習得に学習の目標をおくことは幅広く認識されている (Morley, 1991)。しかし、知性ある発音の重要性は主に英語を第二言語として学ぶ環境 (ESL context) で論じられており、外国語として英語を学ぶ学生 (EFL students) が発音に対してどのような認識をいっているのかは、ほとんど検証されたことがない。本稿は英語を必修教科の外国語として学ぶ大学生の発音に対する意識を論ずる。

**キーワード：**発音学習、知性ある発音、ネイティブレベルの発音、  
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## Introduction

It is generally agreed among TESOL professionals that the acquisition of second language (L2) pronunciation is not a simple linguistic matter but it is interfered with various factors (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Wong, 1987 b). Considerable amount of research suggests that L2 phonological acquisition is greatly affected by (a) learner age (Krashen, 1977; Lenneberg, 1967; Long, 1990 Oyama, 1976; Patkowski, 1980a; Ramsey & Wright, 1974; Scovel, 1969, 1988), (b) language aptitude (Carroll, 1962, 1981; Skehan, 1989), and (c) learners' native language (Esling & Wong, 1983; Flege, 1980, 1981; Lado, 1957).

Furthermore, the recent development of the scope of second language acquisition (SLA) research has also revealed that sociocultural and psychological elements of learners play crucial roles in the acquisition of L2 phonology. A growing body of empirical evidence supports that affective factors such as language ego and ego boundaries as well as learners' motivation influence the degree of the acquisition of L2 phonology (Guiora, 1972; Lukmani, 1972; Schumann, 1975). Pennington (1994) asserted that learners are faced with three barriers in learning L2 pronunciation: (a) physiological barrier, (b) sociocultural barrier, and (c) psychological barrier. When learners consider that they cannot change their pronunciation, it refers to physiological barrier, whereas when learners think that it is not good to change their pronunciation, it is called sociocultural barrier. When learners are faced with physiological barrier, they think that they do not need to change their pronunciation. Pennington (1994) suggested that learners need to overcome these all barriers for the acquisition of pronunciation; otherwise, learners' changes in their phonological performance will be impeded.

As it has currently acknowledged that a wide range of biological, linguistic, affective, and socio-cultural factors closely influence L2 phonology acquisition, and L2 phonology learning experiences the dynamic process (Pennington & Richards, 1986), the goal of L2 phonology learning has shifted: The most important learning goal of L2 pronunciation is now considered that acquiring intelligibility in the target language rather than acquiring nativelike pronunciation (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Morley, 1991; Munro & Derwing, 1995). The new goal of acquiring intelligible L2 pronunciation has been increasingly advocated outside the classrooms, given the fact that L2 English speaker outnumber those who use English as first language (L1). Consequently, more and more researchers have begun to raise doubts about attaining nativelike proficiency as a learning goal in English from a practical viewpoint where the role in pronunciation is considered as a tool of global communication (Cook, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Pennington & Richards, 1986; Wong, 1987b).

However, in spite of a growing recognition of setting a learning goal of pronunciation as acquiring intelligibility, the notion of intelligibility has not been well established. As Morley (1991) admitted that the notion of intelligibility is “a slippery concept” (p.499), the definition of intelligibility differs among the L2 phonology studies. To date, the definitions of intelligibility can be roughly categorized into the following three ways (Ueno, 1994):

- A. Intelligibility investigated from the perspectives of a native speaker of English as a listener
- B. Intelligibility investigated from the perspectives of both a native speaker of English (NS) and a non-native speaker of English (NNS) as listeners
- C. Intelligibility is not investigated not only from the perspectives of listeners (NSs and NNSs), but also judged from the viewpoints of interaction between speakers and listeners (NSs and NNSs).

Thus far, the majority of researchers have discussed intelligibility from a viewpoint of A (Ueno, 1994), and “most of the work done to date has assumed that intelligibility means intelligibility to a native speaker” (Taylor, 1991, p. 425). Put differently, a large portion of research has investigated L2 learner pronunciation judging from native speakers' standard of intelligible pronunciation. It is well justifiable for this in the ESL context, because numerous studies suggested that it is more likely that people who have deviant pronunciation may face professional or social disadvantage (Anderson-Hsieh, 1992; Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Eisenstein, 1983; Hinofotis & Bailey, 1980; Sato, 1991). Therefore, it may be crucial that intelligibility from the perspectives of NSs is emphasized in the ESL context, so that L2 learners can become intelligible, communicative, and confident speakers of English for any purpose that they desire (Morley, 1991).

Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the notion of intelligibility in the ESL context is completely applicable to the EFL learners, as learners in the EFL settings are assumed to have different or additional needs toward their L2 phonology learning. It may hold true that some EFL learners, who are expected to have interactions with NSs in the immediate future, require the same or similar goal of intelligible pronunciation learning as the ESL learners have. On the other hand, we also need to pay attention to other learners in the EFL context, who learn English as a subject and mainly use it only at schools with their classmates and their instructors. In the context where learners study English merely as L2 subject, it is reasonably assumed that learners feel different perspectives on pronunciation learning that are not observed among the ESL learners. Yet, to date, the EFL learners' views have never been fully investigated in the L2 phonology studies. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how L2 college students who learn English primarily as a required subject actually perceive their L2 pronunciation as a part of their EFL language learning experience. The present study is exploratory in nature, and is a precursor to a larger, more

confirmatory study.

## **Method**

### Participants

Fifty-eight junior college students who were in the second year (all women, ages between 19 and 22) of varying proficiency levels, of three different classes taught by the researcher were participants of this study. All of them took phonetics course when they were in the first year. Most of the participants had about six to ten English classes a week, including topic-based classes in which they studied two different topic areas in English from the following four fields: The Crises of Life, Science and Religions, The Present Age and Human Rights, and The Pursuit of Peace. Participants also took a current event course where they learn and discuss the latest international topics in English by using news. Their future orientation was mixed: Some participants planned or wanted to go to study abroad or four-year universities in Japan, and others intended to work at Japanese companies after graduation. Among the questionnaire participants who gave consent to having later individual interview, two interview participants were selected (Student1, Student 2). As an exchange of their contributions to the study, the interviewed students received a book coupon in return for their cooperation with the study.

### Material

A pilot questionnaire written in Japanese was drafted based on the researcher's observation in the classroom from June through September 2001. It was examined by one native speaker of Japanese in terms of wording and expressions. A modified questionnaire was administrated as the data-collecting instrument (Appendix).

### Design and Procedure

Two types of data were collected for this study: data obtained from the form of questionnaire and data obtained in the follow-up private interviews. Data based on questionnaire were collected in the regular classes at the end of the course through September 2001 to January 2002. Students were briefly explained the purpose of the questionnaire and reminded that the questionnaire would not be related to their grades in the class. For analyzing questionnaire data, the total number of items that students selected were counted, and then the percentage was calculated. For interviews, each participant was interviewed in her native language, Japanese, which were conducted in November 2001, in one classroom at the college with two audiotape recorders. The recorded tapes were transcribed by the researcher on the same day when interviews were conducted. The interviews started with informal chatting and gradually moved on to questions derived from questionnaires that each participant filled out.

## Results

Table 1 presents the degree of confidence in their English pronunciation that students have. It showed that a greater percentage of students do not have confidence at all or somewhat than students who have somewhat confidence in their pronunciation. The present result suggests that a large portion of the participants feel some anxiety over their English pronunciation, whereas none of participants affirms confidence in their pronunciation without hesitation.

Table 1: Percentage of Students With and Without Confidence in their English Pronunciation

<i>N</i> = 58			
Yes	Somewhat Yes	Somewhat No	No
0% (0)	25.9% (15)	48.3% (28)	25.9% (15)

( ): the number of students

Table 2 shows the distribution of the reasons students do not have confidence at all or somewhat. Among six reasons listed in the questionnaire, students' concern about their pronunciation correctness ranked first, (84.2%), followed by the reason that their pronunciation deviates from native-like pronunciation (78.9%). As many as 21.1% of students attributed their lack of confidence to their lower voice in speaking English. Negative feedback from peers and instructors were selected as reasons by 7.9% and 2.6% of students respectively.

The result reveals that students worry about the correctness of their pronunciation and they contrast their pronunciation with nativelike pronunciation. Five students showed additional comments on reasons;

- Because I think my pronunciation is not as good as classmates who have good pronunciation.
- Because my voice is low, I worry about my pronunciation
- Because it is difficult to have appropriate intonation.
- When I am at a loss for words, I feel anxiety about pronunciation.
- When I talk to native speakers of English, I am not sure whether or not my pronunciation will be understood.

(The participants' comments were originally given in Japanese. They were later translated into English by the researcher.)

Table 2: Types of Reasons for Students Without Confidence

<i>N</i> = 38						
Types of reasons	Nature of pronunciation	Low voice	Correctness	Peer feedback	Instructor feedback	Others
	78.9% (30)	21.1% (8)	84.2% (32)	7.9% (3)	2.6% (1)	13.2% (5)

( ): the number of students

Table 3 shows the types of reasons they have somewhat confidence. Among six reasons listed in the questionnaire, 80% students acknowledged that phonetics course that they took in the first year contributed to confidence, followed by peer good feedback (20.0%), and instructors' positive feedback (13.3%). The percentage of students who considers communicable pronunciation attributes them confidence in pronunciation was 6.7%. For other reasons (13.3%),

- Because I have been exposed to native-speakers' English since I was a child.
- Because my English pronunciation has ever been praised by native speakers of English.

Table3: Types of Reasons for Students With Confidence

Types of reasons	Phonetics	Nativelike pronunciation	Communicable	Peer evaluation	Instructor Evaluation	Others
	80.0% (12)	0.0% (0)	6.7% (1)	20.0% (3)	13.3% (2)	13.3% (2)

N=15  
( ): the number of students

The interview to student 2 supported the role of phonetics in building to pronunciation confidence, as in Example 1 (the participants' accounts in all examples below were originally given in Japanese and they were later translated into English by the researcher):

Example 1: (Student 1)

I finished phonetics course where I learned basic pronunciation in the first year. My pronunciation has changed at the end of the year compared with that of the onset of learning, which has helped build confidence.

Table 4 presents a percentage of students who have experienced pronunciation anxiety. More than 93% of students admitted that they have ever felt anxiety about their English pronunciation.

Table4: Percentage of Students With Experience in Pronunciation Anxiety

N=58	
Yes	No
93.1% (54)	6.9% (4)

( ): the number of students

Table 5 shows that students' anxiety is influenced by conditions where they speak English including the context and interlocutors. The percentage of participants who have felt anxiety when they spoke to L1 English instructors was 74.1%, followed by when they talked to the entire class (70.4%). The percentage of participants who have felt anxiety when they talked to L1 Japanese instructors in English and group members in English ranked third (33.3%). For other comments, students have felt anxiety over pronunciation

under the following conditions;

- When I speak English after a long blanks (such as after holidays)
- Whenever I speak English, even to someone who cannot understand English.
- When I homestayd in the US.
- When what I meant was misunderstood solely because of my pronunciation
- Every time when I speak English

Table 5: Conditions leading to Pronunciation Anxiety

N=54

Types of conditions	Addressees (Instructors)		Context		Others
	L1 English	L1 Japanese	the class	the group	
	74.1% (40)	33.3% (18)	70.4% (38)	33.3% (18)	11.1% (6)

( ): the number of students

For anxiety about addressees, an interview with student 2 revealed her complicated anxiety about pronunciation in the classroom; She feels unease most when she talks to L1 Japanese instructors in English, as in Example 2.

Example 2 (Student 2)

I feel more tension when I talk to Japanese instructors in English. I don't know why. Perhaps I feel that native speakers of English would be more lenient with my L2 English. I don't feel much tension when I talk to L1 English teachers, but I'm sometimes reluctant to talk to L1 Japanese teachers in English, because both of us know that we understand Japanese (laugh).

Table 6 indicated the elements of pronunciation that students want to acquire. The percentage of students who want to acquire intonation was 75.4%, whereas that of those who need to acquire segmentals was 47.4%. A greater percentage of students (54.4%) showed that they want to acquire GAE (General American English) than students who want to acquire Received Pronunciation called RP (26.3%). As many as 33.3% students considered that they want to acquire loud voice, and only one student among 57 students answered that she has never thought of English pronunciation that she desires to acquire.

Table 6: Preferable Pronunciation Elements

N=57

Pronunciation Elements	Segmentals	Suprasegmentals (intonation)	loud voice	General American English	Received Pronunciation	Other countries' pronunciation	Others	Nothing
	47.4% (27)	75.4% (43)	33.3% (19)	54.4% (31)	26.3% (15)	1.8% (1)	3.5% (2)	1.8% (1)

( ): the number of students

The interview to student 1 supported the results of questionnaire (Example 3) and her desire to acquire GAE stems from her adoration toward the US pop culture, which is brimful in

Japan.

Example 3: (Student 1)

(Researcher: Why do you want to acquire American English rather than British English?)

Well, as we live in Japan, we are exposed to more American English in movies or music. I prefer fluency in American English, partly due to a longing for the U.S. culture, which, I think, is frequently observed among many Japanese people.

On the other hand, student 2 revealed that she wants to acquire different elements of pronunciation depending on interlocutors in the classroom, as in Example 4.

Example 4: (Student 2)

(What elements of pronunciation do you want to acquire?)

When I talk to my classmates, I want to speak in a native-like pronunciation. The atmosphere is important (when I talk to classmates.), as fluent pronunciation sounds cool (...). To instructors, I want to speak in a precise pronunciation, in a very precise pronunciation.

Table 7 shows students' belief in the relationship between pronunciation and confidence. A majority of students agree that better pronunciation leads to confidence when they speak English.

Table 7: Percentage of Students with Belief that Better Pronunciation leads to Building Confidence  
*N* = 57

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
61.4%	36.8%	1.8%	0%

Student 1 admitted that she has gained confidence by improving her pronunciation. As a result, she said that now she can take an active part in a classroom discussion.

Example 5: (Student 1)

(Do you think that better pronunciation leads to confidence when you speak English?)

Yes, very much. My pronunciation has been gradually improving, and now I want to practice (my English pronunciation more) and I now feel that I want to initiate to talk to somebody (in English). If I pronounce much better and cooler as I long for, it will give me more confidence.

(Then, you are taking advanced phonetics course called Oral Interpretation at college"?)

Yes.



## Discussion and Conclusion

Before the results are discussed, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study. Because the number of participants of the present study was small, all of them were selected from intact classes, and the questionnaire was not statistically analyzed, any inference about generalization is hypothetical and we need further studies to substantiate the results. Nonetheless, the present study implies meaningful L2 learners' views on pronunciation in the EFL context that have rarely been discussed. First, the results provide that students feel anxiety over their English pronunciation and the context and the addressees greatly determine their concern. Second, the finding suggests that college learners' personal preferences for pronunciation. In addition, the results of the questionnaire suggest the importance of pronunciation in English learning, as a large portion of learners believes that acquiring better pronunciation leads to building confidence in speaking English. This corresponds to Madden and Moore (1997) in which they found that all university participants thought good pronunciation was important to them. On the other hand, the results of personal interviews with learners revealed that learners experience diverse needs for pronunciation in the EFL classroom.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that pronunciation learning in the EFL context may not be regarded in the same light as the ESL context that has been predominantly studied in the field of L2 phonology studies. Rather, they put forward that there are some rooms for amendments to the goal of pronunciation instruction at least as far as the EFL context is concerned. Morley (1991) admitted the importance of special attention to pronunciation to special groups of learners in special need and she listed three types of groups in the EFL context (p. 492).

- A. International business personnel, scientists, technologists, and other professional whose careers demand the use of both effective written and spoken English as a lingua franca
- B. College and university professors and academic research scholars in many disciplines in higher education
- C. Students who ultimately wish to enter English-speaking colleges and universities

In addition to these three types of groups, the researcher here adds the fourth group as follows:

- D. Students who learn English as a subject in the EFL classroom. They use English mainly with classmates and instructors.

The difference between group C and D is that students in group C intend to experience in the ESL settings at some time in the future, whereas students in group D do not intend to do so or have not decided any specific goals of English learning. Therefore, to those who

in group D, the class is the almost only place to produce any type of English speech in the form of class participation including discussions and presentations. Subsequently, it is assumed that L2 learners in the EFL classroom may have special needs or expectations of phonology learning in addition to intelligibility that has been frequently discussed in the ESL context. In Jenkins' (2000) recent book, she asserts new dynamic perspectives on intelligibility of pronunciation in the new era when English is used by NNSs as a lingua franca with other NNSs:

Speakers need to develop the ability to adjust their pronunciation according to the communicative situation in which they find themselves. This means that they need to be able to assess the relative necessity of pronunciation intelligibility for their interlocutor of the moment and, where this is high, to make the crucial adjustments that will guarantee it for that particular interlocutor. (p. 165)

As this study should be considered as a preliminary study, it is premature to frame a hypothesis applicable to the entire population in this paper. However, the findings of this study may warn L2 phonology researchers about any single conceptualization of intelligibility as a goal of pronunciation learning.

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## Appendix

### English Pronunciation Questionnaire (translation)

Direction: This study will be conducted for academic research and the results of the study will not affect your grades. Try to answer each question as honestly as possible.

You do not need to fill in your name. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

#### Question 1 Do you have confidence in your English pronunciation?

Yes    Somewhat yes    Somewhat no    No

#### Question 2 (To those who answered "Yes" or "Somewhat yes") Check all reasons why you selected "Yes" or "Somewhat yes".

- Because I took phonetics course in which I learned pronunciation in details.
- Because I feel my pronunciation sounds like nativelike English.
- Because I think my pronunciation is good enough as I can communicate my thoughts to my classmates in the class.
- Because my classmate (s) has (have) praised my English pronunciation
- Because my instructor (s) has (have) praised my English pronunciation
- Others (Reasons: \_\_\_\_\_)

#### Question 3 (To those who answered "No" or "Somewhat no") Check all reasons why you selected "No" or "Somewhat no".

- Because my pronunciation does not sound like nativelike English
- Because I drop my voice when I speak English
- Because I am not sure whether my pronunciation is correct
- Because I have ever been told that my pronunciation is bad by my classmate (s)
- Because I have ever been told that my pronunciation is bad by my instructor (s)
- Others (Reasons: \_\_\_\_\_)

#### Question 4 Have you ever felt uneasy about your English pronunciation when you speak English?

Yes    No

#### Question 5 (To those who answered "Yes" in Question2) When have you worried about your English pronunciation? Circle every occasion in which you have felt anxiety in pronunciation in the following cases

- Talking to L1English instructor
- Talking to L1Japanese instructor
- Talking to the entire class
- Talking in the group, others)
- Others (When: \_\_\_\_\_)

#### Question 6 Choose all elements of English pronunciation that you want to acquire in the following.

- I want to acquire accurate pronunciation of every word.
- I want to acquire English-like intonation.
- I want to pronounce English loudly.

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- (    ) I want to acquire American English. (Ex. CNN)
- (    ) I want to acquire British English. (Ex. BBC)
- (    ) I want to acquire other countries' English.
- (    ) Others (Examples:                                    )
- (    ) I don't have any special elements of pronunciation or I have never thought of that.

**Question 7 Do you think that better pronunciation would lead to building confidence when you speak English?**

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree