

APPROACHES TO TEACHING VOWEL SOUNDS OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE TO NON-NATIVE (UZBEK) LEARNERS

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Abstract

Teaching non-native speakers the phonology of Japanese can be seen as a dual challenge and a unique requirement, necessitating additional investigations. In this article we would like to address the issues on teaching Japanese vowels to the learners of Uzbekistan. The problem will be detected by conducting practical experiment including 30 students. The reading text is appointed to investigate the pronunciation errors made by the students. The solutions for strengthening teaching Japanese phonology will be proposed.

Keywords: phonology, vowels, pronunciation, sound, Japanese.

Introduction

The issues on teaching Japanese phonology to Uzbek learners specially need deeper researches. As there are a lot of variety of the vowel sounds according to dialects of Uzbek nation learning Japanese without sound trainings is impossible. It is needed to familiarize with the phonology of both languages before delving into the problem.

The Japanese language boasts a unique and distinct vowel system that sets it apart from other languages. Unlike many Western languages with five vowel sounds, Japanese features a total of five basic vowels: "a," "i," "u," "e," and "o." What makes these vowels intriguing is their consistent pronunciation, free from the variations and diphthongs found in other languages. Each Japanese vowel retains its pure, monophonic quality regardless of its placement in a word, resulting in a crisp and precise articulation. This distinct vowel system contributes to the clarity and unambiguous pronunciation in spoken Japanese, making it an interesting aspect for learners and linguists to explore.

Vowel sounds can be divided into two groups in Japanese which are ぼいん (boin | 母音) short vowels and ちょうぼいん (chouboin | 長母音) long vowels. The letters a, i, u, e, o (あ、い、う、え、お) refer to short vowels.

あ (a) in English can often be pronounced as "ah," as in words like "father" and "water." い (i) sounds like "ee." Some English examples are "he," "me," and "knee." う (u) sounds like "oo." Some English examples are "moon," "noon," and "glue." え (e) sounds like "eh." Some

examples in English would be “net,” “fed.” お (o) sounds like “o.” In English, some examples would be “nope,” “cold.”

Long vowels are double vowels can be observed in Japanese words like “**aa**”おかあさん (okaasan), “**ii**” 懐かしい (natsukashii), “**uu**” 数字 (suuji), “**ou**”兄弟 (kyoudai). In writing, hiragana requires one more vowel to make the vowel long, but in katakana a dash is added after the character to create a long vowel sound as following: サービス (saabisu) =service; コーヒー (kouhii) coffee; サッカー (sakkaa) soccer, football, ケーキ (keeki) a cake.

Different parts of the mouth, nose, and throat are utilized to produce various sounds at the physical level. Other languages form their vowels when the air flowing from the lungs is unobstructed. Therefore, there are no barriers from the lungs to the moment the sound is articulated.

In the case of Japanese vowels, the sound of each vowel is primarily influenced by the placement of the tongue. Specifically, the height and dimensions of the tongue determine the sound produced. The term "dimensions" refers to the location of the tongue within the mouth.

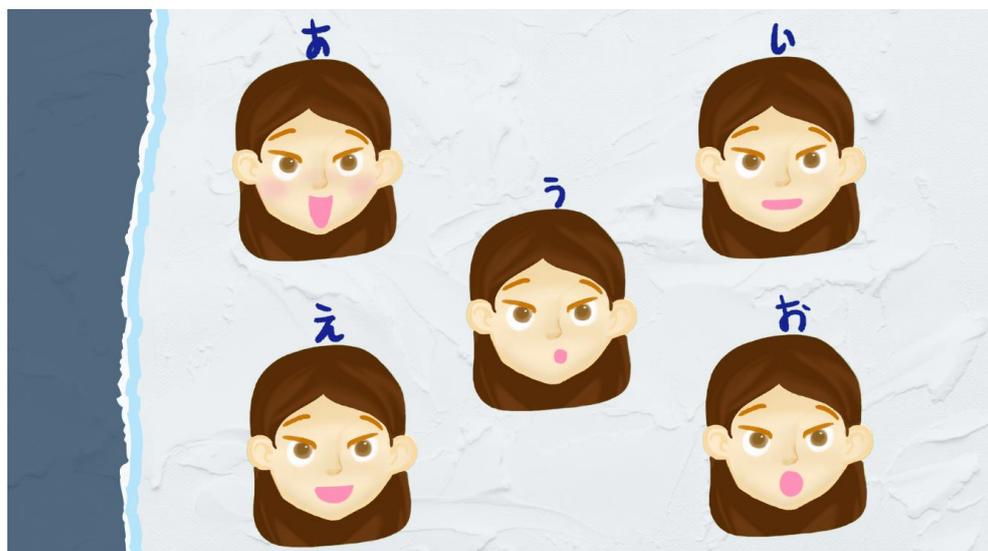


Illustration №1¹

Japanese vowel sounds are different from English vowel sounds as Japanese ones remain pure. This means that the sound of “あ” (a) always remains the same, as does “い” (i) and every other vowel – regardless of the word or context.

In Uzbek language there are six vowel (i, e, a, o, u, o‘) letters and they are classified in several ways. Vowel sounds are classified into categories based on the movement of the tongue and the position of the lips. There are 2 distinctions in the movement of the tongue: horizontal

¹ <https://90dayjapanese.com/japanese-vowels/>

movement of the tongue; vertical movement of the tongue. Based on the horizontal movement of the tongue, vowels are divided into 2 groups: front (or first row) vowels - *i*, *e*, *a* and back (or second row) vowels- *o*, *u*, *o'*. According to the vertical movement of the tongue, vowels are divided into 3 groups: high raised unvoiced consonants (*i*, *u*), mid raised vowels (*e*, *o'*), low raised vowels (*a*, *o*).

According to the duration of the time that contributes to the production of sound, vowel sounds are divided into 2 groups: long vowel sounds; short vowel sounds.

The Uzbek language consists of six vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, /o'/. The /a/ vowel is pronounced similarly to the "a" in "father". In words such as *badan* (body), *vazifa* (task), *talaba* (student) wide "a" is produced. Some loanwords in oral speech can be different from written form. *Bahor* (spring) [bāhar] can be heard as "bahar". O (O / α №313) sound is near to [a:] sound but labial one: *ovo*z (voice), *oy* (moon, month). This sound in the words such as *boks* (boxing), *gol* (goal) is pronounced same with English [o]. the sound "o" in Russian loanwords follow Russian phonetic rules. The /e/ vowel has several sounds [e]; [e:] mainly used at the beginning of words and syllables (*ekin* (crop), *echki* (goat), *aeroplan* (airplane) after a consonant it is read in the form of a medium wide and not labial vowel (*kel* (come), *tez* (fast)). The sound "i" has some varieties as [i]; [ə]; [-]. For instance: *ziyrak* [ziyrak] (vigilant); *kiyim* [kiyəm] (clothes); *bir* [br] (one), *bilan* [blan] with. The sound "u" is long in Uzbek in examples such as *quv* [ghu:v] (cunning); *tuz* [tu:z] (salt). In the words *tovush* (sound); *qovun* (melon) "u" is pronounced shorter or near to [ə]. O' is pronounced like English "o": *o'zbek* [ozbek] Uzbek, *do'lma* (dolma) dolma (type of food cooked with wine leaves).

Uzbek has six vowel letters but more vowel sounds in the active speech. They are various depending on people's geographical location. For example, in oasis regions of Uzbekistan people pronounce some vowel sounds in a bit different way from standard Uzbek language phonology.

Method: Comparative, empiric, observation, experiment.

Discussion: In order to solve the problem of teaching, a reading test was designed with audio record with the students and the difficulties of the students that could not produce Japanese vowel in proper way were detected such as pronouncing "e" [e] like [ə] or [e] and "o" like [uo]. This can bring inefficiency not only in oral speech knowledge but also automatically it affects writing skills negatively. I would like to bring some examples from my own experience:

IKU (to go) – is pronounced as [EKU]; SENSEI (teacher) is pronounced as [SENSIY]

The reading test text:

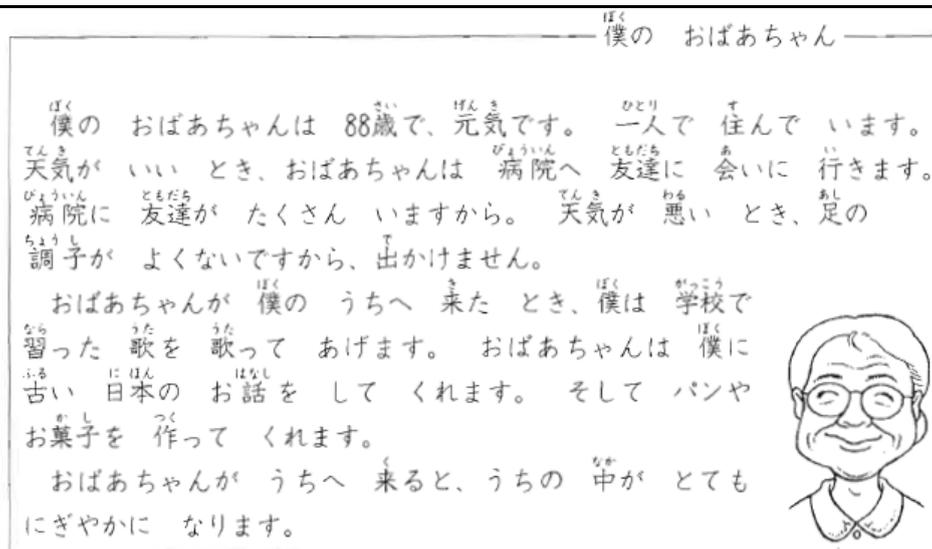


Illustration N°2

Results:

The reading test was conducted among 30 students. In result, the most students from oasis areas failed in pronouncing some vowel. The mistakes done by the students:

- Over 80% of those students pronounce Japanese “o” and the letters on “o” row (お、こ、そ、と、ほ、ぼ、ぽ、ご、ど and etc) not properly. They pronounce [a] IPA: N°313 instead of [o] IPA: N°307 (mistakes: ぼく [baku],おばあさん [abaasan], ともだち [tamadachi]);
- In Japanese the particle が is a nasal G [g] IPA: N°110, however it was pronounced as [j] IPA: N°108 by over 65% of the oasis students. (Mistakes: てんきが [tenkija]);
- 30% of the learners lengthen the vowels of particles such as が [ga:] / [ja:], で [de:]、に [ni:], へ [e:] / [ye:], instead of [ga], [de], [ni], [e].
- 50% of the students cannot realize well the difference between [e] and [i] as well as [u] and [o]. Also they have a lot of word stress errors. Here the mistakes they did while reading the text:

Table N°3.

Japanese	Proper transcription	Mistakes made by the students on the survey
てんき	TENKI	TINKI / TYENKI
げんき	GENKI	GINKI / GYENKI
くれます	KUREMASU	KURIMASU / KOREMASU / KUREMÁSU
あげます	AGEMASU	AGIMASU / AGEMÁSU
ぼく	BOKU	BaKU / BUOKU
あいに	AI*NI	AYNI / AINI
ちょうし	CHOUSHI	CHOSHI

よくない	YOKUNAI	YOKəNAI
ひとりで	HITORI DE	HITÓRIDE / HITORIDÉ
びょういん	BYOUIN	BYOYIN / BYOIN / BYəIN
うた	UTA	ÚTA / OTA
にぎやか	NIGIYAKA	NÍGIYAKA / NIGIYÁKA
でかけません	DEKAKEMASEN	DEKAKIMASEN / DIKAKIMASEN / DIKAKEMASEN
ととも	TOTEMO	TÓTEMO / TOTTEMO / TəTEMO / TOTEMMO

Suggestions:

According to the lecturers of other languages such as Persian, Arabic, Indonesian, they also have come across the similar situation with the students' pronunciation trainings like stress errors, mixing the vowels out and so forth. The solution could be some voice trainings as well as listening and speech practices. We have observed and applied into practices some of the training tools during our classes. Three trainings were adopted successfully and effects are being noticed.

✚ “Throwing voice”

Forgetting about your blushing face and speak loud! Say vowel as loud as you can. Teacher should control the property of pronunciation. As a student reaches the appropriate pronunciation, he/she continuously is suggested to “throw his voice” loudly in front of other students. This will assist for both correct accent and building confidence while speaking in Japanese language.

✚ “Shadowing”

Shadow speaking² is a simple activity that assesses your students' ability to match the pace, intonation, and pronunciation of a short audio passage. To begin, have your students listen to the passage. Then, have the students speak along with the recording during a second play through. If the passage is easy to remember, your students should be able to recite it after one or two repetitions. If the passage is more complex, provide them with a transcript. During the third play through, lower the volume slightly in the middle of the recording. Gradually decrease the volume further during the fourth play through. Eventually, mute the volume in the middle of the recording, challenging your students to maintain the pace and intonation without auditory cues. Before reaching the end of the recording, increase the volume again to determine which students remain in sync with the original passage.

✚ Tongue twister trainings:

- と な り の き ゃ く わ よ く か き く う き ゃ く だ [tonari no kyaku wa yoku kaki kuu kyaku da] The guy next door is always scratching;

² <https://www.fluentu.com/>

- すももももももものうち [sumomo momo momo no uchi] Plums are part of alga as well as peaches;
- 肩かたたき機 [katataki] Shoulder massage machine;
- 東京とうきょう特許とつきよ許可局きよかきよく [toukyou tokkyo kyoka kyoku] Tokyo patent permit office³;
- 右目みぎめ右耳みぎみみ 右耳みぎみみ右目⁴ [migime mimi mimi mimi me] Right eye right ear right ear right eye.

According to E.D. Polivanov, a researcher of Japanese literature, the most challenging aspect of Japanese phonetics is accentuation. To enhance your Japanese pronunciation, it is beneficial to listen to recorded speech. Native speakers can guide you in proper intonation, toning, and pronunciation of difficult sounds. It is suggested to attentively imitate the announcer, practice in front of a mirror, and engage in articulation exercises provided in Japanese language courses. Watching documentaries, educational programs, news, and cartoons will also assist in grasping the language's rhythm.⁵

Conclusion

Teaching Japanese vowels to Uzbek students, who are non-native speakers, has presented some challenges that require further research on effective teaching methodologies. More than 60% of the students who participated in an experiment struggled with pronouncing and stressing the Japanese vowels [i], [o], [e], and [u]. This difficulty can be attributed to the fact that the students from Uzbekistan have their own distinct dialect, which affects their ability to accurately perceive and reproduce the sounds of both Uzbek and Japanese words. To address these issues, we implemented various training techniques such as voice projection exercises, shadowing, and tongue twister contests, which aim to improve the students' pronunciation of the Japanese vowels.

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⁴ <https://ling-app.com/ja/japanese-tongue-twisters/>

⁵ <https://www.divelang.ru/blog/useful/fonetika-v-yaponskom-yazyke/>