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English Pronunciations

Although English is spoken by many people, English is not an easy subject to learn. Since this language has many inconsistencies and words that do not make sense when used in a daily setting. Because of the combinations of those reasons and many others, English becomes a very difficult language to learn, more so for non-native speakers. To figure out if some non-native English speakers truly understood how to read and speak certain words without trouble, one Japanese person, who did not learn English as their first language, was chosen to test their pronunciations of words. This volunteer is my friend's mother. Due to the embarrassment of this interview, she decided to stay anonymous. However, to make identification easier, I shall address her as Jennifer, if needed. I interviewed Jennifer by asking her to read and answer basic questions, pronounce a list of words, and also attempted a normal conversation afterward.

My interviewee, Jennifer, was born in Japan, Tokyo prefecture and lived there for most of her life until she moved to the United States around the 1970s. She preferred to keep age confidential, thus the amount of time of where she lived and moved will also be kept secret. Jennifer had an intriguing education experience since she told me her first language in her school was Spanish. She doesn't remember the reason it was, but I took this into account in case it affected her pronunciations or not. Other than that, her language has always been primarily Japanese. She only studied English in junior high for 3 years. Outside of school, she never used

English much until she moved to the United States. In the United States, Jennifer has had many more opportunities to speak and learn more English. Opportunities such as talking to her children, their friends and people she meets from participating in extracurricular programs such as school bands and scout programs. With these changes in speaking English, she makes an effort to communicate properly with people. Practice such as this interview she agreed to help with, gives her more moments to speak in English.

For this interview, I chose to concentrate on words that contained the consonants /l/, /r/, /b/ and /v/. The words had a mixture of the consonants in the onset and codas. The list begins with random words with no patterns, and then minimal pairs. Before I began the interview, I made a hypothesis that Jennifer would most likely have a hard time pronouncing her /b/s and /v/s differently. As well as her /l/s and /r/s. Some of the examples of /v/s in the onset were vest, village, and vine that I asked to have pronounced. Most of these words had a clear voiced labiodental fricative sound. For instance, she pronounced vest as [vɛst], which is the correct American English pronunciation of the word. On the other hand, she said village wrong. She pronounced [vɪlɪdʒ] as [bɪrɪdʒ], a kind of combination between the American English word and Japanese. I also noticed there was a pattern happening as the interview went on.

In the list of words with /v/ in the coda, she began to make a lot more mistakes such as sounding [hæv] as [ha:bu]. Similar words that she pronounced wrong were [weɪv] as [we:bu] and [dʌv] as [da:bu]. She gave these words long vowels. As a result, she turned these English one-syllable words into a two-syllable word which turns this into a credible pattern. As I guessed before, she could not pronounce her /v/ and /b/s differently, but it got better after a while. We worked down the list, and I had more than one-syllable words such as approve,

observe, gravity, swerve and shove. Below those words were a list of /b/ coda words such as adverbs, habits, fiber, and bubbly. She pronounced all of those multiple syllable words correctly in the American English pronunciation with the voiced labiodental fricative, /v/, and the voiced bilabial plosive, /b/. This proved half of my hypothesis wrong, but there was still the other half to analyze.

For the consonants /l/ and /r/, I did not start with random words. The list begins with minimal pairs then some words that are clustered with both consonants. Just like the last few /v/ and /b/ words, Jennifer pronounced the minimal pairs of /l/ and /r/ words correctly. Words such as room, loom, road, load, read and lead. I believe it was due to the confidence that she knew some of those words and tried very hard to make sure she pronounced the /l/ and /r/ sound. Towards the end of the minimal pair list, she began making more mistakes. I have confidence that it's because they're more obscure words to her, such as pirate, pilot, rung, lung, Jerry and jelly. Since they're more words that she probably would not use in an everyday conversation, she did not know how they pronounced and attempted the word.

The first mistake was [rʌŋ]. She pronounced this as [ræŋ]. Although this is not part of the /l/ and /r/ pronunciation analysis, this gave me a sign that she was either getting anxious or very much could not pronounce them correctly. Continuing that trend, she pronounced [paɪlət] as [paɪræt]. Her Jerry and jelly sounded very similar, for example, there was a long vowel in both of them. She pronounced them both as [dʒe:rɪ], a mixture of American English and Japanese. The words that she made the worst pronunciations on were the ones that had both consonants. Some of the consonant cluster example words were regularly, rarely, rural, clearly and culturally. They were mostly the same, but she would not be able to pronounce the /l/ correctly in these

words. For instance, [kʌltʃərəli] became [kʌruːtʃərəri] and [rɛgjələlɪ] became [rɛgjərɚrɪ]. The third word in that consonant cluster list was [klɪrli] which sounded like [krɪri]. Jennifer took a while before saying these words, especially rarely and rural. She asked to skip those words because she did not know the word and I feel it was too embarrassing for her to sound out at this point in the interview. But following the pattern that she had shown with the other consonant cluster words, I can safely assume the same would happen with [rɛrli] and [rʊrəl]. To further have concrete evidence to safely confirm my assumptions I moved onto having a conversation with my interviewee.

First and foremost, I confirmed with my friend's mom which words she had known and which she did not know of. Afterward, we just had conversations such as how her day was and what activities they had done before the interview. One specific question I asked her was, "I remember you have cats? How many cats do you have?" She replied with "I have two cats." Just like how she pronounced "have" previously, she once again enunciated the word as [haːbu] instead of [hæv]. Another word I noticed her mispronounce that was on the list was "vowels". I told her the kind of consonants that I analyzed and she replied, "/l/ and /r/ are usually hard for Japanese people to sound out, but so are vowels." In this sentence instead of [vaʊəlz], she said vowels beginning with a voiced bilabial plosive, /b/, which ended up sounding [baʊəlz]. In the same sentence, her pronunciation of "usually" was also incorrect in terms of how American English pronounces it. It should have been pronounced as [juʒəwəli], yet she was only able to sound out [jɯʒəwəri]. The beginning of it sounded like "yu" as in "yume", the Japanese word for dream, and she ended the word with [ri] instead of [li]. With that additional evidence I concluded

that she simply could not pronounce most words that have the consonant /l/ in them correctly in American English.

In the end, my hypothesis ended up being semi-correct. I originally thought that should have trouble sounding out /b/ and /v/ differently, which seemed to be true towards the beginning. I suspect this has to do with the many experiences she has had ever since moving to the United States as well as talking with her children. But as the interview continued, I was proven wrong. She was able to differentiate her /b/s and /v/s. Although she was able to sound those two consonants, she had increased trouble with /l/s and /r/s. This was very apparent when I asked her to read the words that had both consonants. Asking her to answer basic questions, read a list of words and have a conversation as a part of this interview helped in my analysis of American English mispronunciations by native Japanese speakers. In conclusion, I believe native Japanese speakers have trouble sounding out the consonants /l/, /r/, /b/ and /v/s, but with enough practice and exposure to English words, they can overcome that pronunciation barrier.