A Pilot Survey:
University Students' Beliefs about Pronunciation Learning and Their Expectations

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Abstract: Despite the encouragement to implement communicative language teaching until the end of secondary level education in Japan, the opportunities for student oral production in English in schools are still limited mainly due to teachers' lack of training and knowledge about teaching oral production. This trend has caused the insufficient pronunciation practice before students reach university. Even though universities may be able to offer courses to compensate for the insufficient opportunities for pronunciation learning because of fewer washback effects from high stake tests, it is still important to know the university students' expecations. The purpose of the present study was to investigate Rikkyo Univeristy students' past experience in pronunciaiton learning, their beliefs about pronunciation learning, and their expectations about pronunciation teaching at Rikkyo University. An online questionnaire was conducted, and the results were analyzed in frequency counts and mean scores. The findings suggest that Rikkyo University should consider offering an elective course for pronunciation learning to meet the students' expectations.

Keywords: pronunciation, experience in pronunciation learning, learners' expectations

1. Introduction

More than a decade ago, a survey conducted in Britain revealed that a number of practicing ESL teachers seemed to neglect pronunciation teaching (Burgess & Spencer, 2000). Since then, similar surveys have been conducted in other countries including both ESL and EFL settings (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2009; Couper, 2011; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Henderson, Frost, Tergujeff, Kautzsch, Murphy, Kirkova-Naskova, Waniek-Klimczak, Levey, Cunningham, & Curnick, 2012; Macdonald, 2002). The findings were quite similar concerning teachers' neglect in teaching pronunciation as well as the main cause of their neglect being their lack of training and knowledge about pronunciation pedagogy. Several studies have looked more closely at what teachers actually do in class and what teachers' cognitions have impacts on their actual practice (Baker, 2013). However, what learners actually consider pronunciation learning, to what extent they emphasize pronunciation in their English learning, and what they expect to learn at schools have been under-researched.

1.1. Required English Courses

Rikkyo University currently offers six required courses in English for freshmen, plus a wide range of elective courses for some freshmen who are exempted from their required courses, as well as for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. English minor courses are available for those who successfully completed their required courses and wish to minor in English.

The required courses are English Presentation 1, English Presentation 2, English Writing, e-Learning, English Discussion 1 and English Discussion 2. All of these required courses have their own unified syllabi, and all instructors are required to follow the syllabi. According to the unified syllabi for English Presentation 1 and 2, English Writing, and e-Learning, and English Discussion 1 and 2 (Rikkyo, 2013a), none of these courses have objectives specifically related to development of students' intelligible or comprehensible oral productions. Similarly the instructor handbooks that are published twice yearly for those teaching English Discussion 1 and 2 do not mention any objectives specifically for improving students' pronunciation though they state that one of the main objectives of English Discussion 1 and 2 is to enhance students' fluency rather than accuracy (Rikkyo, 2013b, 2013c). As the program as a whole does not promote students' learning of pronunciation, whether pronunciation teaching should be integrated into everyday teaching practice depends on the teachers' pedagogical decisions. Such decisions should be influenced by their educational and professional backgrounds, their beliefs about pronunciation teaching and learning, and most importantly their students' needs.

1.2. Trends in Primary and Secondary Education in Japan

Students' needs in terms of learning English pronunciation are often unclear to both teachers and learners since their exposure to authentic oral and aural language use is often limited in Japan; however, the trend in English education in Japan seems to focus on communicative language use where pronunciation plays an important role. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented several measures to meet the needs which include the hiring of Assistant Language Teachers who are native speakers of English for public elementary schools, junior high schools and high schools (MEXT 2010) and the introduction of English instructions in Grade 5 in all elementary schools in Japan (MEXT 2009).

The effects of the recent implementations are still hanging in the air, but still there seem to be some washback effects deriving from the university entrance examinations. A number of junior high schools and high schools still focus on literacy skills building to meet the students' needs to pass the high school and university entrance examinations respectively. In such contexts, students seldom receive instructions on pronunciation. In fact, according to Benesse (2009), 1.4% of junior high school teachers reported they used English exclusively in class, only 35.1% of the teachers practiced communicative English teaching, 39.4% of them used English 50% of the time, 43.3% used English 30% of the time, and 2.7% seldom used English in class. These figures suggest that a majority of students in junior high schools and high schools do not receive instructions focusing on oral productions.

Even in elementary schools where there are few washback effects from the entrance examinations, teachers do not seem to conduct communicative language teaching. Benesse (2010) reported that about 68.1% of the elementary school teachers lack confidence in giving instructions in English. The survey results indicate that washback effects from the entrance examinations are not the only reason for little implementation of teaching focusing on effective communication. More specifically, lack of teachers' confidence in teaching communicative English as well as their own oral and aural skills are other major influences on their decisions not to teach oral productions.

1.3. Current Study

In the light of the current situations in primary and secondary schools in Japan as well as the relatively high flexibility in terms of teaching approach and seemingly few washback effects at the university level, university seems to be an ideal place to address students' needs in pronunciation. Even though teachers may be able to address their needs in pronunciation, it is important to know what students actually consider pronunciation learning, and little research to date has paid attention to the students' expectations in terms of pronunciation learning and what previous experience they have had before beginning their study at university. Therefore, the present study was conducted in attempt to answer the following three research questions:

1. To what extent have Rikkyo University students considered pronunciation learning to be important while learning English?
2. What do they believe they should do in terms of pronunciation learning?
3. In what course(s) do they expect Rikkyo University to teach pronunciation?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The author sent an online questionnaire attached to an email to 238 students currently studying at Rikkyo University, and 183 students responded to the questionnaire. The response rate was 76.8 percent, which can be considered quite successful. All of them are the author's current students or previous students. Since the questionnaire did not include any items that help the author identify the individual participants, any biographical information including age and gender as well as the information about their course registration was unavailable in the survey.

2.2. Data Collection

An online questionnaire that consisted of three parts was conducted in October, 2013 using Rikkyo Spirit Mail. The first part was to ask about the participants' previous experience in pronunciation learning (See Appendix 1). The second part was designed to ask about the participants' beliefs about pronunciation learning (See Appendix 2). The final part was to elicit their expectations about what Rikkyo University can offer them in terms of pronunciation teaching (See Appendix 3).

As mentioned above, Rikkyo Spirit Mail was used to collect as many responses as possible, but the participants' Spirit Mail addresses are considered personal information, and should therefore be handled with care. Regarding this matter, the author consulted the Personal Information Protection Committee for advice and followed their guidelines based on Rikkyo University Personal Information Protection Regulations.

In order to obtain a high return rate, a "hybrid method" was implemented (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010). An email with embedded questionnaire items and a hypertext that directed the respondents to the survey page was sent to 238 potential respondents.

Although emails were sent to the potential respondents, when they responded to the questionnaire, only the date and time at which they responded and their questionnaire responses were recorded. Moreover, the questionnaire responses did not include any items that help to identify the participants, and the responses were saved and safeguarded on the password-protected online storage that the university offers.

2.3. Data Analysis

The purpose of this study is to see the current trends in the group of samples rather than draw any general conclusions. Therefore, only descriptive statistics including frequency counts and mean scores were used, and therefore, presented to show the results.

3. Results

3.1. Pronunciation Emphasis in English Learning

In this part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their past experience in pronunciation learning. The question items asked whether they considered pronunciation learning important during different age ranges where 1 means that they considered pronunciation learning very important and 6 shows that pronunciation was not the emphasis of their English learning. Since some might have had no experience of English learning especially at early ages, a response indicating no learning experience was offered.

As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents emphasize their perceived importance of pronunciation learning in English learning as they grow older. More specifically, looking at the responses to ask about their experiences when they were 12–14 years old, 15–17, and 18–20 years old, the older age range has more students responding that they felt pronunciation was important. A similar tendency was found in even earlier age ranges although most of the respondents did not have any English learning experience then. However, it should be noted that during the ages 9–11, the most common response was "somewhat important" (n=33), but that of during the ages 12–14 was "somewhat unimportant" (n=47). This difference might show an increasing emphasis on literacy skills in junior high schools compared to elementary schools.

Table 1　Pronunciation Emphasis in English Learning Experience

Please tell me about your experience in English pronunciation learning. To what extent did you consider pronunciation learning to be important in the following ages?
1: very important, 2: important, 3: somewhat important, 4: somewhat unimportant, 5: unimportant, 6: not important at all, 7: no learning experience

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
0–2 years old	3	3	6	6	5	3	157
3–5 years old	6	8	14	11	9	7	128
6–8 years old	11	11	25	23	17	11	85
9–11 years old	13	19	33	29	22	24	43
12–14 years old	17	33	42	47	20	23	1
15–17 years old	32	40	46	30	23	12	0
18–20 years old	38	49	42	26	21	6	1
21 years old and older	18	24	22	11	7	3	98

3.2. Beliefs about Pronunciation Learning

The questionnaire results are summarized in Table 2. The figures show to what extent the respondents agree or disagree with the given statements where 1 indicates "strongly agree" and 6 means "strongly disagree." The smaller the mean scores are, the more strongly the respondents agree with the statement.

Table 2　Students' Beliefs about Pronunciation Learning

Please tell me what you think about English pronunciation. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: somewhat disagree, 5: disagree, 6: strongly disagree

Statement	Mean
Pronunciation learning is important.	1.74
Pronunciation learning is necessary for effective communication.	1.89
I wish to acquire native-like pronunciation.	1.47
Pronunciation should be learned at young ages.	1.71
It is important to learn how to pronounce sounds.	1.96
It is too late to learn pronunciation at university.	3.62
Pronunciation learning should be included in English education in universities.	2.65
Pronunciation learning should be included in English education in elementary schools.	1.87
Pronunciation learning should be included in English education in junior high schools.	1.90
Pronunciation learning should be included in English education in high schools.	2.13
Pronunciation is improved through listening training.	2.49
Pronunciation should be learned from native English speaking teachers.	2.10
A natural talent determines whether one can pronounce well.	4.26
I am satisfied with my current level of pronunciation.	4.66
I would like to improve my pronunciation.	1.64
Meaning gets across even when pronunciation contains some errors.	3.22

As can be seen, a vast majority of students considered pronunciation learning important, and they believed that English education in schools should include pronunciation teaching. Also they agreed to have a pronunciation segment in their English learning in

elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools and universities with a tendency showing that they preferred pronunciation teaching in elementary schools. More importantly, most of them were not satisfied with their current level of pronunciation, and they were willing to improve their pronunciation, hopefully to the level of native speakers.

3.3. Students' Expectations about Pronunciation Education at Rikkyo

The first part of this section was designed to learn the respondents' expectations regarding pronunciation teaching offered at Rikkyo University. More specifically, they were asked whether they would agree to learn pronunciation in required English courses or in an imaginary pronunciation course. They responded using a six-point scale where 1 indicates their strong agreement and 6 shows their strong disagreement.

Regarding students' expectations about pronunciation teaching in required English courses at Rikkyo University, as shown in Table 3, they agree that English Discussion, English Presentation, and e-Learning courses deal with pronunciation indicating a slight preference for English Discussion and English Presentation courses over other required courses. However, an imaginary course designed for pronunciation as an elective course gained the strongest agreement from the respondents with a mean score of 2.07.

Table 3   Students' Expectations about Pronunciation Teaching at Rikkyo

What do you think about learning English pronunciation in the following courses?
1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: somewhat disagree, 5: disagree, 6: strongly disagree

Course	Mean
English Presentation	2.32
English Writing	3.40
e-Learning	2.86
English Discussion	2.16
Elective course designed for pronunciation	2.07

The other half of this section was to ask whether the respondents would agree to have a pronunciation course and whether they would be willing to take a pronunciation course if such a course were offered. The smaller the mean score is, the stronger their willingness to learn pronunciation in that course.

As shown in Table 4, the respondents' reactions towards the offering of a required pronunciation course are mixed with a mean score of 3.40, which indicates approximately a half of them agreed and the other half disagreed with the statement. However, the idea of offering an elective pronunciation course gained more agreements from the respondents with a mean score of 2.60, and moreover, their willingness to take a pronunciation course if such a course were offered was quite positive with a mean score of 2.67. In fact, 77 percent of the respondents showed their willingness to take an elective course in pronunciation.

Table 4   Students' Views towards a Pronunciation Course

Please tell me what you think about a pronunciation course. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: somewhat disagree, 5: disagree, 6: strongly disagree	
Statement	Mean
A pronunciation course should be offered as a required course.	3.40
A pronunciation course should be offered as an elective course.	2.60
If an elective pronunciation course were offered, I would like to take it.	2.67

4. Discussion

From the results of the students' emphasis on pronunciation learning during different age ranges, the respondents do not seem to have had enough pronunciation practice in their primary and secondary education as opposed to the communication emphasis suggested by MEXT (2009, 2010). These findings echo the actual teachers' practice in junior high schools and elementary schools reported by Benesse (2009, 2010). It should also be noted that the respondents commonly showed their emphasis on pronunciation at university ages. That is, they expect to learn pronunciation at university.

Although the students expect to learn pronunciation now, the unified syllabi for required courses offered at Rikkyo University do not include objectives specifically focusing on pronunciation teaching. The students do not necessarily agree to have a required course focusing on pronunciation teaching, but they showed some positive reactions towards an elective course for pronunciation learning. Therefore, offering an elective pronunciation course should meet many respondents' expectations about pronunciation learning at Rikkyo University.

5. Conclusion

Although the participants in the present study do not represent the whole population of Rikkyo University students, offering an elective pronunciation course as well as integrating pronunciation teaching in required courses is worth considering.

However, as Foote, Holtby, and Derwing (2011) found, a number of teachers have not received sufficient training in pronunciation pedagogy. Integrating pronunciation teaching in other skills courses seems increasingly difficult as it requires thorough knowledge about pronunciation pedagogy. In this sense, further research investigating the teachers' knowledge about pronunciation pedagogy as well as their confidence in teaching pronunciation should provide a better understanding of what can be offered to students, and what should be offered for teachers to help them teach what students need in terms of pronunciation.

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Appendix 1 (Experience)

発音学習に関してあなたの経験を聞かせてください。次の年齢のときに英語の発音学習をどの程度重視しましたか。(Please tell me about your experience in English pronunciation learning. To what extent do you think pronunciation learning was important for you during the following age ranges?)

1：とても重視（1: very important）

2：重視（2: important）

3：どちらかと言えば重視（3: somewhat important）

4：どちらかと言えば重視していない（4: somewhat unimportant）

5：重視していない（5: unimportant）

6：全く重視していない（6: not important at all）

7：英語学習なし（7: no learning experience）

0-2 歳（0-2 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3-5 歳（3-5 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6-8 歳（6-8 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9-11 歳（9-11 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12-14 歳（12-14 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15-17 歳（15-17 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18-20 歳（18-20 years old）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21 歳以上（21 years old and older）	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix 2 (Beliefs)

英語の発音に関するあなたの考えを聞かせてください。次の各文に対してどの程度賛成あるいは不賛成しますか。(Please tell me what you think about English pronunciation. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements.)

1：強く賛成（1: Strongly agree）
2：賛成（2: Agree）
3：どちらかと言えば賛成（3: Somewhat agree）
4：どちらかと言えば不賛成（4: Somewhat disagree）
5：不賛成（5: Disagree）
6：強く不賛成（6: Strongly disagree）

発音学習は重要である。	1	2	3	4	5	6
上手くコミュニケーションを取るには発音学習が必要である。	1	2	3	4	5	6
ネイティブのような発音を習得したい。	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音学習は若いうちにやるべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音の仕方をしっかり学ぶことが重要だ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
大学から発音を学ぶのはもう遅い。	1	2	3	4	5	6
大学での英語学習には発音を取り入れるべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
小学校での英語学習には発音を取り入れるべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
中学校での英語学習には発音を取り入れるべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
高校での英語学習には発音を取り入れるべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
リスニングの訓練で発音はよくなる。	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音はネイティブの先生から学習するべきだ。	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音が上手くなるかどうかは才能で決まる。	1	2	3	4	5	6
私は今の発音で満足している。	1	2	3	4	5	6
私はもっと発音がうまくなりたいと思っている。	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音が間違っていても英語は通じる	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix 3 (Expectations)

次の授業内で発音を教わることに対してどう思いますか。（What do you think about learning English pronunciation in the following courses?）

1：強く賛成（1: Strongly agree）
2：賛成（2: Agree）
3：どちらかと言えば賛成（3: Somewhat agree）
4：どちらかと言えば不賛成（4: Somewhat disagree）
5：不賛成（5: Disagree）
6：強く不賛成（6: Strongly disagree）

英語プレゼンテーション（English Presentation）	1	2	3	4	5	6
英語ライティング（English Writing）	1	2	3	4	5	6
E ラーニング（e-Learning）	1	2	3	4	5	6
英語ディスカッション（English Discussion）	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音練習のために作られた選択科目 （Elective course designed for pronunciation）	1	2	3	4	5	6

発音のためのクラスについて伺います。次の各文にどの程度賛成あるいは不賛成しますか。（Please tell me what you think about a pronunciation course. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?）

1：強く賛成（1: Strongly agree）
2：賛成（2: Agree）
3：どちらかと言えば賛成（3: Somewhat agree）
4：どちらかと言えば不賛成（4: Somewhat disagree）
5：不賛成（5: Disagree）
6：強く不賛成（6: Strongly disagree）

発音のためのクラスを必修科目にするべきだと思う。 （A pronunciation course should be offered as a required course.）	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音のためのクラスを選択科目として入れるべきだと思う。 （A pronunciation course should be offered as an elective course.）	1	2	3	4	5	6
発音のためのクラスが選択科目にあれば受講したい。 （If an elective pronunciation course were offered, I would like to take it.）	1	2	3	4	5	6