Catching the connection : pedagogy of linking for fluency

Patricia Yarrow

Abstract

Japanese students of English as a second language can easily learn to detect and integrate the natural rhythms of spoken English through recognizing the words that predictably link to the following word. This paper centers on an isochronic teaching technique to alert students to the set of high-frequency words that signal linking and achieve a dramatically improved incorporation of native English speech rhythm. A brief analysis follows of the results of an exercise administered to test linking recognition.

Key words : isochrony, linking, rhythm, vowel reduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Premise

The stark tendency of Japanese students of English as a second language to overrun the second language with the rhythmical meter of their first language continues to hamper achieving fluency. A simple teaching exercise points the way to reliably recognizing vowel subduction to achieve a more native-English rhythm of speaking, and consequently improving listening, hearing, and reading abilities.

1.2 Value of the linking exercise

This exercise addresses a scarcity of solutions for Japanese speakers of English and provides a means for immediate student improvement by catching the connection of linking between certain high-frequency words.

Second language learners may cross a significant gap upon recognizing the existence of linking. If the student is not aware of this key element to natural sounding English, they cannot hear it. If they cannot hear it, they cannot speak it. Through this exercise, their reward will be to hear themselves speak in a more natural English rhythm by becoming aware of key words that signal linking and subverting the final sounds into one quick agglutinate.

1.3 The Dilemma

"Would you like to see the pictures of my trip last year?"[1]

How did you just read that? If you read it aloud, how would you recreate it in your natural rhythm? Many Japanese university students might typically, and with great care, divide the

---

日本大学歯学部　英語
〒 101-8310　東京都千代田区神田駿河台 1 - 8 -13
（受理：2011 年 9 月 30 日）

Nihon University School of Dentistry
1-8-13 Kanda-Surugadai, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-8310, Japan

sentence thusly :

> Example 1 :
> "Would (pause) you (pause) like (pause) to (pause) see (pause) the (pause) pictures (pause) of (pause) my (pause) trip (pause) last (pause) year?"

A native English speaker would likely divide the sentence into the phrases :

> Example 2 :
> "Would you like (pause) to see (pause) the pictures (pause) of my trip (pause) last year?"

How can the student bridge the pattern division gap between the two examples? I suggest the key is learning to recognize a small subset of frequently used words that signal eliding that word into the following contiguous word and into the same span of time of a single unit. By readjusting the nearly "machine gun" staccato dissection of Japanese language timing of individual words into the conjoined phrasing of the English speaker, the change can be breathtaking and gratifying to the speaker. Potentially, once this pattern is established, the students would enjoy a new level of competency.

1.4 An Isochronic Solution

Phonologically, the sounds of a language establish the systemic framework for the delivery of meaning. Part of this framework includes prosody, the grouping of sounds into units through intonation, stress patterns, and, the subject of this paper, *isochronics*, and the "rhythmic division of time into equal portions by a language"[ii].

Linguistically, Japanese is predominantly a *mora* (sound unit) based language, as opposed to a syllabically divided language[iii]. That is, each consonant, consonant-vowel, or double-vowel syllable is allocated the same amount of time. While not strictly speaking the "machine gun staccato" of the more exacting rhythms of syllable timed languages such as Cantonese Chinese, Japanese is closer to this than not, and the phrase succinctly conveys the idea to the student. English is a syllable-based language of stressed-timed rhythm. This reduces the vowels into a "Morse-code rhythm"[iv] through the process of vowel reduction. The dilemma for Japanese students is learning to recast their native mora-based rhythm into the linguistic arrhythmia of English. The key is that the pattern of elision is predictable.

2. Pedagogy of Teaching Links

2.1 Introducing Links to Students

On the premise that once highlighted, linking is easily learned and predictable, the introduction begins by writing on the board a spontaneous sentence not from the textbook :

> Example 3 :
> "Once in a blue moon, the cat eats with a spoon."

The entire class dutifully repeats it back, predominately in the staccato meter of Japanese. I point this out as a "machine gunning" of the sentence with these words whilst pointing to each word :

> Example 4 :
> "bang bang bang bang bang, (pause) bang bang bang bang bang bang."

Then, I visually introduce the idea of certain as yet unnamed words catching the following word either as a hunter leaping upon the following word, or as two magnetically attracted words, illustrated by two fists, coming closer and closer in tension, then suddenly joining together. Finally, I show the two words as literal links : the two hands cupping, forefingers touching the curved thumb, coming near, then finally *linking* as they interlock in a strong bond.

Certain words take on the linguistic role of hunter, magnet, and link. The primary set is the articles : *a*, *an*, *the*. Except in rare cases used for emphasis, these three words *always* link to the following word. They are not allocated two time units, but are spoken as one unit. Now the example sentence becomes :

> Example 5 :
> "Once (pause) in (pause) a blue (pause) moon, (pause), the cat (pause) eats (pause) with (pause) a spoon."

For a light-hearted moment, students can beat out the rhythm on their desks.

Next, I introduce a secondary group of words that also reliably link to the next word : their prey, their attractors. These words include : *as*, *by*, *do*, *for*, *go*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *to*. When words from this group form strings of two or three links, they are double or triple linked. This single, double, or triple linkage serves to illustrate the length of linkage.

Notice that in general the linking words are articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), conjunctions (*and*), prepositions (*at*, *for*, *in*, *on*, *to*), and verbs (*do*, *go*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *will*, *would*).

At this point, the students once more read aloud the example sentence :

> Example 6 :
> "Once (pause) in a blue (pause) moon, (pause), the cat (pause) eats (pause) with (pause) a spoon."

I demonstrate how the sounds link, not as entire words, but the linking word specifically links to the initial sound of the following word. This led to call and response of "inab", "thuc", "asp".

Lastly, students repeat the entire sentence while consciously listening to themselves. The English they produce has become significantly more natural sounding, perhaps for the first

time. This can be a moment of surprise and illumination for any level of student.

2.2 Follow-up

In later classes, students reinforce their new skill by reading aloud several sentences from their English Communication textbooks. This practice strengthens their ability to recognize linking words and with time and practice overcomes the initial strangeness of hearing themselves produce this new rhythm.

3. Linking Exercise Process and Results

3.1 Recognizing Linking Words Exercise

I administered a one-page exercise in recognizing linking words to 260 university students in March and June of 2011. These included first through fourth year English Communication students from the following universities :

128 students from Nihon University, School of Dentistry

81 students from Kanto Gakuin University

27 students from Meiji Gakuin University

24 students from Seiei University.

After introducing the concept, I asked them to indicate all links in seven sentences by drawing a *shallow curve* (shown below as an^caret) below the space between the linking words. I deliberately chose an example of a high level of literary English for pursuing the links, as comprehension was not my primary goal. For the example, I am indebted to Donald Keene in his recent book, *So Lovely A Country Will Never Perish*[v].

The seven sentences with primary and secondary links are :

1. The^Occupation, carried out by the^Americans and^their allies, brought a^large number of^white men to^Japan in^the^role of^conquerors. (9 links)

2. This boded ill for^relations between the^races, but contrary to^expectations, the^Occupation on^the^whole went well and^resulted in^an^establishment of^friendship rather than^an^increase of^enmity. (13 links)

3. Ironically, the^defeat brought Japan the^recognition that Yamada supposed could come only with victory in^war. (3 links)

4. The^Japanese language, previously taught hardly anywhere outside the^Japanese Empire, came to^be^studied in^universities in^all advanced countries, along with^the ^history and^literature of^Japan. ... (10 links)

5. Japanese merchandise was^sought abroad not because it^was cheap (the^reason before the^war) but because it^was high-quality. (5 links)

6. Possibly more Western people were^attracted to^Zen than Japanese were^drawn to^Christianity. (4 links)

7. One wonders if so much prestige would^have accrued to^Japan if Japan had been victorious. (2 links)

3.2　Linking Exercise Results

After tabulating the number of links found by each student for each sentence, I calculated the median number of links found. While individual students may have found none to an overabundance of links, the median proved closer than I expected :

Sentence 1 produced a median number of 3 additional links, ranging from 0 to 5.

Sentence 2 produced a median number of 5 additional links, ranging from 1 to 7.

Sentence 3 produced a median number of 0 additional links, ranging from -2 to 0.

Sentence 4 produced a median number of 4 additional links, ranging from -2 to 5.

Sentence 5 produced a median number of 2 additional links, ranging from -1 to 3.

Sentence 6 produced a median number of 2 additional links, ranging from 0 to 2.

Sentence 7 produced a median number of 0 additional links, ranging from -1 to 1.

Students found just about the right number of primary and secondary links once they knew what to look for. In summary, linking is not a difficult concept to grasp once one is aware of it.

4.　Conclusion

The importance of linking is a somewhat overlooked aspect of English pedagogy. I hope this exercise in "catching the link" will be of use as it is enjoyable to teach, shows immediate improvement, and is easy to reinforce in subsequent classes.

My wish is that students of any level may one day hear these encouraging words, thanks to a firm grasp of linking : "You speak English very well!" or, perhaps, "You must have lived abroad!" and most gratifyingly, "Your English is very natural!"

Endnotes

[i] Buckingham, Angela and Norman Whitney, *Passport Plus : English for International Communication* (New York : Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 21.

[ii] "Isochrony" on Wikipedia. "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isochrony". 7 August 2011. Accessed 11 September 2011.

[iii] David Abercrombie, *Elements of General Phonetics* (Edinburgh Univ Press, 1967)

[iv] McKenzie-Brown, Peter, "The Stress-timed Rhythm of English", http://languageinstinct.blogspot. com/2006/10/stress-timed-rhythm-of-english.html October 09, 2006, September 11, 2011.

[v] Donald Keene, *So Lovely A Country Will Never Perish : Wartime Diaries of Japanese Writers*. (New York : Columbia Univ Press, 2010), 175.