

# Better Pronunciation NOW

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## **Introduction**

In March 2003, The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology officially announced its plan “Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities.’ ” In short, this plan prescribes the attainment of two objectives. First, to foster Japanese junior and senior high-school graduates’ development of English abilities, and second, to foster students’ ability to express themselves in their native language of Japanese. The action plan also proposed a five-year time frame in which to achieve these goals. (Tanabe, Y. 2004, pg 3) In a move to further achieve these aims, MEXT has made the study of English mandatory in primary schools beginning in April 2012. Both proposals have been met with much debate, because even after the institution of the original action plan eight years ago, only a handful of high school graduates possess enough English communicative proficiency (as opposed to vocabulary or grammatical knowledge) to buy a loaf of bread or find the post office without the use of visual or other aids. Indeed, “...it would appear that the primary objectives of the syllabus prescribed by MEXT, along with the goals put forward in the Action Plan remain, as yet, largely unfulfilled.” (Caine, N. 2005, pg 10)

As Gilbert succinctly states, “Intelligibility involves both speaking and listening comprehension.” (Gilbert, J. 2005, pg viii) Interestingly, one of the hallmarks of the “Japanese with English Abilities” action plan was a move toward revamping the antiquated grammar-translation method of teaching in favor of a communicative competence approach. However, even as Brown points out: “The acquisition of the communicative and functional purposes of language is, in most circumstances, far more important than a perfect native accent,” (Brown, H. 2000, pg 60) the fact that a majority of high school graduates are unable to comprehend simple English when spoken at natural speed by native speakers is perhaps the most surprising “failure” of the original plan. Why is this? I posit that the use of (kata) kana as *furigana*

pronunciation guides for English is the culprit for this sad phenomenon. In this paper, I will explain why (kata) kana is not only an inadequate tool for improving pronunciation, but also an active deterrent to listening comprehension. Using my own classroom research, I will show why it is imperative that the use of katakana be eradicated in order to improve Japanese speakers' productive and receptive English skills.

## **Japanese and Kana**

Kana, both hiragana and katakana, are constructs of Japanese, and as such are beautifully suited as aids in pronunciation of unknown kanji, or unusual/rare readings of (people's) names or names of places. However, it is inherently unsuitable for use as an English pronunciation guide. I cite two reasons for this. First, native speakers of English do not use any form of "*furigana*," and the overwhelming majority of native speakers are not familiar with any system of pronunciation keys, such as the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) used in this paper. Most native speakers are taught to read English as it stands, in many cases with a system known as "phonics," a method of teaching reading and pronunciation based upon ordinary spelling rules. In the event that an unknown word appears in text and the pronunciation is not clear or readily "guessable," a native speaker would most likely consult a dictionary to discover the proper or acceptable pronunciation(s) of that word. For example, he finds the word "Alsatian," in IPA: "æɪ'seɪfən." Being unfamiliar with "f," he can consult the pronunciation key appended to the dictionary to find: "f- she, crash." Unlike Japanese students who, at a very early age, are taught katakana and also its use as a guide to pronunciation of unknown kanji, the vast majority of native speakers of English are not taught any phonetic key while learning to read and thus must internalize phonetic rules during that process. Therefore, learning to read English text is accomplished without the "luxury" of a kana-type system. The reading of English text can be achieved without any such system, as the legions of literate English speakers prove.

Second, and more central to the problem, because Japanese and English pronunciations are vastly dissimilar, and because kana is a construct suited only to Japanese, it does not possess a significant number of attributes essential to English pronunciation. Furthermore, I argue that its use is far more than simply ineffective. In fact, the use of katakana *furigana* is detrimental and ultimately prohibits effective

communication. Through hundreds of hours of controlled classroom observations and thousands of hours of general observations of both the receptive and the productive English skills of native Japanese speakers of English, I've determined four basic areas of disparity between A) how English is comprehensibly produced and comprehended; and B) the ways in which the use of katakana interferes at best and destroys at worst comprehension and production. I've dubbed this list “かたかなは敵” (katana is your enemy {when speaking and hearing English}). These four key words and phrases outline the essential differences between English and Japanese as well as provide tools to improve pronunciation and listening comprehension. Following is a discussion of these points with suggestions for implementing a “katakana-free zone” in the English classroom.

### **Key #1: “on”**

On the first day of my pronunciation seminar, after explaining the concept behind “かたかなは敵,” I speak the single word “on” and ask my students to spell it. In nine years of research and more than 22 instances of using this approach with no fewer than 600 students, not one single first-year university student has ever comprehended this word upon first speaking. Predominantly, the students' (hereafter referred to as Ss) first guess is “an.” As they guess, I write their guesses on the board. Other typical guesses are: “arm;” “own;” “earn;” and “un-.” When at last the correct spelling is realized, the Ss are understandably shocked. When asked to analyze the reason for lack of comprehension, the Ss recognize that they have been using the katakana “オン” (rendered in IPA for English as “oŋ”) as the pronunciation key to this word, effectively making the North American pronunciation “ɒn” unintelligible. Furthermore, when asked if the sound “ɒ” exists in Japanese, the overwhelming majority of students declare that “ɒ” does *not*. Even after reciting “ア, カ, サ, タ, ナ, ハ, マ, ヤ, ラ, ワ,” it is not unusual to find the Ss still unable to “hear” “ɒ” in Japanese. I postulate that katakana has fashioned the Ss comprehension to the degree that a single letter “o” in a syllable, pronounced “ɒ” 74% of the time, (Carney, E. 1994, pg 104) simply cannot be heard, despite the fact that “ɒ” exists in Japanese. It goes without saying that being a native speaker of Japanese, with its five vowel sounds, can pose a problem in the pronunciation of languages such as English which have a significantly larger number of vowel sounds. However, what is truly shocking, perhaps even alarming, is that the use of katakana has rendered comprehension and, as a byproduct, production of a sound *that exists in*

*Japanese* almost impossible.

In order to address and ameliorate this katakana-fashioned “deafness,” I argue that Ss should at the very least be introduced to the one-vowel and two-vowel rules as taught to native English speakers. Even though it is likely that native Japanese speakers will struggle with vowel sounds such as “æ,” “e,” “i,” and “ʌ”, access to “v” should not be denied them simply because conventions of katakana recognize the letter “o,” regardless of other proximal vowels, as “oo.” Because “v” is a sound that exists in Japanese and thus the students are completely capable of making this sound, the use of “oo” in place of “v” should be strictly monitored as a first step in improving pronunciation and at this stage, more importantly, comprehension.

### **Key #2: “textbook (s)”**

Arguably, one of the most significant differences between Japanese and English on a segmental level is the use, in English, of consonant clusters. “...there is (a) factor which determines the identification of a sound segment, namely its distribution, or the range of positions in which it can appear in a word.” (Widdowson, H. 1996, pg 42) This observation opens a window into one of the most pernicious problems in using katakana as an English pronunciation guide. Many languages such as English use a single letter conveying (in most cases) a single phoneme, and in some cases no sound at all (consider “e” in “cave”). In contrast, one “letter” in katakana (with the exception of “ン”) contains a vowel sound. Thus, the “distribution, or range of positions” in which a consonant sound “can appear in a (Japanese) word” is limited due to its “inability” to be taken as a separate phoneme in written Japanese. In other words, with the exception of “ン,” consonants are limited to distribution in accompaniment with a vowel sound. Because of this and in further drastic contrast to English, each kana “letter” represents a syllable unto itself. Therefore, it is not surprising that the conceptualization of a single syllable as a collection of more than one “letter” can be challenging to a native Japanese speaker.

To introduce this concept, I write the word “textbook” on the board and ask the students to determine the number of syllables: two. I then ask them to determine the number of syllables as would be denoted by *furigana*: six. I add an “s” (textbooks) and again ask them to determine the number of syllables. In English: two. In Japanese? *Seven*. In analyzing why the number of syllables is different in English and in *furigana*, and also why the number of syllables does or not increase by merely adding an “s,” the Ss discover for themselves the use, in English, of consonant

clusters.

To be comprehensible, English words must be pronounced with the proper number of syllables. Consider these examples: “sport” versus “support,” “drive” versus “derive,” “wrapped” versus “rapid.” In each pair, the difference is the use, or lack thereof, of a consonant cluster. (Syllable emphasis will be discussed in section 3.) Since each kana by its nature denotes a single syllable and has no convention for transcribing a single consonant phoneme (with the exception of “ン”), it simply cannot be construed in any way to suggest the clustering of several consonants. Mastery of fluent consonant clusters is clearly a challenge for speakers of languages in which they do not occur. However, just as clearly, to use katakana as a pronunciation aide with respect to syllable number does much more than hinder proper pronunciation: it champions failure as it renders comprehensible output, on a segmental level, impossible, since of its nature it cannot but add extra syllables where they do not exist.

### **Key #3: “kimono”**

On a suprasegmental level, the differences between Japanese and English begin to emerge on an even greater scale. For example, Japanese vowels all have roughly the same “value,” that is to say that none are reduced to the point of schwa. In contrast, English has three distinct “values” assigned to vowels in a polysyllabic word. Each word has one strongly stressed syllable, known as the main stress. The vowel in this syllable will be long and clear. All other syllables are either short and clear: “sub-stress” (a student-coined and apt term; I’ll use it here) or short and unclear: schwa.

To demonstrate this in my seminar, I speak the (originally) Japanese word “kimono” with a deliberate, North American pronunciation: “kə’moʊnə.” I instruct the Ss to repeat this word; after all it is “Japanese.” Typically, they begin with “ka” and try to make sense of something they “hear” as “kaməʊna.” As discussed in section one, Japanese has but five vowel sounds, so as the wisdom of transference tells us, creating unfamiliar sounds can be challenging. However, that challenge is further exacerbated by the use of a katakana “cheat sheet,” allowing learners to openly fall back upon the sounds with which they are already functional. I argue that this becomes especially egregious in the case of schwa since it is the most common vowel sound in the English language and its use in contrast with main stress and sub-stress syllables can be key in recognizing the difference between words such as

“eligible” and “illegible.” Granted, adding a bit “too much” clarity to an unstressed (schwa) syllable (as long as it doesn’t compete with the main stress) is not the most flagrant of pronunciation errors. However, using katakana as a guide openly invites these errors, hinders the listening comprehension necessary to recognize the three distinct “values” of English vowels, and ultimately counteracts student improvement.

#### **Key #4: “Did he eat yet?”**

Finally, the grammatical structures of Japanese and English are markedly different. That might sound like an obvious observation, but here I will show how these differences have a significant impact on how English (as opposed to Japanese) is pronounced.

To demonstrate this point, I speak the sentence, “Did he eat yet?” exaggerating the oversimplification of “didi:” as opposed to “did hi:.” No matter the number of times I repeat the sentence however, the students are usually left to interpret this sentence from an analytical, instead of a listening comprehension, approach. They begin to recognize that the sentence ends on a high pitch, denoting a yes/no question. As they continue to analyze, they realize that the first word must be a “do” verb or a “be” verb. From this they deduce that the first word is indeed “did.” By this point, a few have already detected that the last word is “yet.” Now they are faced with coming up with the two most important elements of the sentence: the subject and the verb. Once the sentence is deciphered, I ask them to translate it into Japanese. Initially, “彼はもう食べましたか?” is common. I ask them to shorten it and “彼は食べた?” followed by “食べた?” are typical responses. Eventually, I am able to induce the Ss to shorten the sentence to “食った?” Finally, I ask the students to turn around and translate “食った?” back into English, and “Ate?” is the usual response. I point out that if a native speaker heard the word “ate” with no other context, he would assume the speaker was saying, “Eight?” and respond with something like, “No, I’m eighteen!”

Although the above process is most often fun and rewarding for the Ss, it illustrates a deeply important functional difference between Japanese and English. Whereas in Japanese, words that are used as a function of grammatical structure can be omitted, in English they cannot be. Conversely, each Japanese syllable (denoted by a single kana “letter”) may not be reduced (as discussed in section 2), while English employs these types of reductions regularly. While most Japanese students are taught contractions as a function of English grammar (I suspect this is because

this particular reduction is denoted by a change in spelling, *not* because of a pronunciation difference) they are not generally taught about other types of reductions, such as the deletion of the “h” sound at the beginning of pronouns within a sentence or the “schwa-ification” of the vowels in prepositions. Finally, as one recent student put it, “Japanese words are not affected by other words in a sentence; English words are.” Very true. Consider the Japanese name “Jun’ichi.” A native English speaker with no training in Japanese struggles to hear the difference between “Jun’ichi” and “Junichi.” As I am fond of telling my students, English words that begin with a vowel are “naked” and like to clothe themselves with the ending consonant of the word before. They will even create their own clothes (consider “a banana” verses “an apple,” or even the “the banana” verses “the (y) apple). Thus, English pronunciation is often affected by the proximity of words as well as the main focal “thought” in any given sentence. Consider the sentence, “Ask her.” As a general rule, this sentence would most likely be pronounced “‘æskɜː.” However, if the speaker wanted to suggest that although he doesn’t know the answer, she might, the same sentence would most likely be pronounced “æsk‘hɜː.” Yet, these fundamental differences in the way English is spoken simply cannot be signified in any meaningful way by using katakana; the sentence “Ask her,” no matter the context, is likely to be rendered into katakana as “アスクハー,” a two-syllable sentence made five, with no consonant cluster and no way of denoting whether or not the “h” in “her” is spoken or silent, not to mention the automatic substitution of “e” for “æ” and “e” for “ɜː.”

To facilitate better comprehension and in turn, production, I argue that students should be made aware of the dissimilarity between the reductive aspects of grammatical structures in English versus the syllabic reduction used in Japanese. Not only should students be introduced to contractions early in instruction, but also the reduction to schwa of the vowels in prepositions, articles and pronouns and the silent “h” in embedded pronouns beginning with that letter. To make Ss aware of these reductions would enable better receptive abilities, which in turn would improve productive abilities.

## Conclusion

As I have mentioned a number of times here, English pronunciation is not easy for native Japanese speakers to master. Speakers of any language struggle to

produce sounds they cannot hear, and struggle to hear sounds they cannot produce: a negative sort of chicken or egg conundrum. As mentioned, English has many more vowel sounds, and of course the completely absent “ð/θ” voiced and voiceless “th” sounds, as well as “v” and the infamous “l/r” problem cause further complications. However, it is precisely because these sounds do not exist in Japanese that katakana should not be used as a guide for pronunciation, on top of all of the other reasons I’ve outlined here. Breaking the negative “chicken/egg conundrum” in favor of a positive one, in which fostering the receptive and productive aspects, can create an environment where sounds are (at least) attempted to be produced properly and thereby improving the chances they will be received accurately, should be the goal.

On the first day of my pronunciation seminar, I ban the use of all katakana *furigana* in my classroom. Many students argue with me regarding this issue, saying “How will I remember how to pronounce this without a guide?” I tell them, “Remember it by remembering it.” Perhaps this sounds unsympathetic, but I remind them of the four keys of the “かたかなは敵” list, as well as remind them that virtually every single native English speaker learned how to speak, and more to the point read, unknown words without ever knowing katakana, let alone IPA or any other phonetic alphabet. While I do not actively oppose the teaching of a phonetic alphabet such as IPA, I suggest that the methods employed by the phonics system of teaching reading (to native English speakers) are more effective in causing the students to concentrate first upon the spelling and then upon what is happening in their mouths as they form the sounds. Improved pronunciation leads to improved comprehension and vice-versa: chicken begets egg, egg begets chicken. As I quoted Gilbert at the opening of this paper, *both* skills are necessary.

Although the mastery of both the production and reception of comprehensible English requires effort and perseverance, the concept that katakana can be a helpful crutch during the ongoing process is irreparably flawed. Its use does far more damage than good, as it harms Ss’ ability to interface with English as it is truly spoken and understood, and encourages obvious and unnecessary errors. Ultimately, I argue that the use of katakana as a pronunciation guide to English is perhaps the single biggest reason why MEXT’s dreams of producing “Japanese with English Abilities” has been so distressingly unrealized.



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