

A Preliminary Study of Phonetic Features in the Test of English for International Communication

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1. Introduction

The Test of English for International Communication (henceforth TOEIC) is widely used in Japan to assess university students' and business workers' English skills. This test has two different types: one assessing all four skills and the other measuring listening and reading skills. The latter type is basically used in Japanese universities.

A unique aspect of this listening comprehension test is the use of four standard English accents: American, British, Canadian and Australian. This is challenging to Japanese test-takers because only standard American English has been a de facto model in Japanese school education since the end of World War II and TOEIC includes English accents that are not familiar to them. It is worth, therefore, examining the listening section of TOEIC from a phonetic point of view.

As a preliminary study, this paper uses Terakura et al. (2019) as an example¹ and explores some important phonetic features found there. The question numbers and page numbers correspond to the ones used in its explanatory set. For example, when Question 10 on page 20 is referred to, this is shown as (10: 20) in this paper.

1 On 23 July 2019, Utsunomiya University held a TOEIC seminar focusing on useful strategies for the test. The lecturer was recommended by ALC – a leading publishing company dealing with English textbooks in Japan. The material and its accompanying recordings used there include useful information for analysis in this paper, but since the use of them in this paper has not been approved by the representative of the company, the author decided to use Terakura et al. (2019), which is one of the latest publications on TOEIC by the company.

2. The TRAP vowel

Since GA is the most familiar accent among Japanese learners of English, many of them may know its major features, such as the rhotic accent (e.g. 'car' and 'park'), the voiced /t/ (e.g. 'city' and 'better') and the /t/ deletion (e.g. 'twenty' and 'international'). However, they may not be familiar with the fact that the TRAP vowel in GA tends to be pronounced with closer quality so that it may sound like the DRESS vowel. This feature, which is also heard in Canadian English, is especially noticeable when it is followed by the alveolar nasal (e.g. 'man' and 'dance'). There are many examples that are found in Terakura et al. (2019), some of which are: 'manager' (American 16: 24), 'bag' (American 21: 26), 'handout' (American 38-40: 36), 'Wang' (American 50-52: 44), 'Anthony Chang' (American 77-79: 62), 'can' (American 77-79: 62), 'hands' (American 4: 146), 'standing' (American 4: 146), 'handle' (American 86-88: 196) and 'branch' (American 86-88: 196); 'bags' (Canadian 2: 18), 'hanging' (Canadian 2: 18) and 'man' (Canadian 5: 20). Among them, 'bag' and 'man' may be most problematic because they may sound like 'beg' and 'men', which exist as real English words. This may confuse the test-taker. To avoid this confusion, it is important to accurately understand the context in which these words are used. The pronunciation of persons' names ('Wang' or 'Weng' and 'Chang' and 'Cheng') is particularly problematic in real communication.

This feature of the TRAP vowel sounding like the DRESS vowel is not always the case among North American English speakers. For example, the vowel of 'hand' is pronounced /æ/ by a Canadian English speaker (3 : 146). This change in the TRAP vowel does not occur in BBC pronunciation because this vowel tends to move in the opposite direction, namely toward Cardinal Vowel 4. The vowel of 'standing' is not changed to the DRESS vowel by an Australian speaker (2 : 146).

3. Elision

In English, segments or syllables can be elided. Some examples of elision of segments in Terakura et al. (2019) are: 'won't we' (Canadian 35-37: 34), 'weren't really' (Australian 41-43: 38) and 'print shop' (American 35-37: 162). The common phonological condition here is that there are two consonants in the coda of the first word and one consonant in the onset of the second word, and that the final consonant of the first word is the voiceless alveolar plosive. In such a case, this plosive can be elided in English. Similarly, the voiced alveolar plosive also undergoes elision, as in 'the second month'.

Elision occurs inside words. Some examples found in Terakura et al. (2019) are: 'our' (Australian 71-73: 58), where the middle vowel of the triphthong is elided; 'kindly' (British 86-88: 68), where the voiced alveolar plosive is elided; and 'recently' (Canadian 89-91: 198), where the voiceless alveolar plosive is elided. A consonant can also be elided in the following words: 'handsome', 'windmill', 'handbag'², 'friendship', 'kindness', 'landlord', 'landscape', 'lastly', 'restless', 'wristwatch', 'Westminster', 'coastguard', 'dustman', 'mostly',

² 'Windmill' and 'handbag' can also undergo assimilation from the alveolar nasal to the bilabial nasal after elision.

'perfectly', 'exactly' and 'facts' (Cruttenden 2014: 256). In the case of 'facts', this word and 'fax' can be homophones. As in the case of two connected words, the voiced alveolar plosive or the voiceless alveolar plosive is elided, and a sequence of three or more consonants is necessary for such plosive elision to occur.

In the case of elision of 'our', Roach (2009: 20) explains why such elision occurs and what happens after this elision:

It seems that triphthongs in BBC pronunciation are in a rather unstable state, resulting in the loss of some distinctions: in the case of some speakers, for example, it is not easy to hear a difference between 'tyre' taɪə, 'tower' taʊə, 'tar' ta:.

Like BBC pronunciation, the Australian English accent seems to undergo the same process of simplification or smoothing of the triphthongs. This may be a feature of non-rhotic accents of English.

Schwa³ can also be elided in BBC pronunciation in words such as 'auditory', 'commentary', 'dictionary', 'lavatory' and 'secretary' (Trudgill and Hannah 2008: 57). In GA, however, these underlined segments are pronounced with a strong vowel (the THOUGHT vowel in 'auditory' and 'lavatory' and the DRESS vowel in the other three words). Likewise, the second syllable of 'library' is pronounced with a strong vowel, while it is reduced to schwa in BBC pronunciation (British 29: 30), which sounds very different from the

³ Schwa is important in vowel reduction. Auxiliary verbs tend to undergo reduction. Some examples found in Terakura et al. (2019) are: 'has' (British 35-37: 34), 'can' (British 56-58: 176) and 'has' (American 86-88: 196). The voiceless glottal fricative is elided in the first 'has' but not in the second 'has'.

American pronunciation to the Japanese ear. Elision of schwa may cause an unexpected difficulty in understanding BBC pronunciation. There is an interesting example in Roach (2009: 217) on this matter: ‘If he’s coming today, there ought to be a letter around’. This is recorded as a fast speech, so ‘a letter around’ is pronounced [ə letɹ ʔaʊnd] as a result of a linking /r/ and elision of schwa. Two syllabic /r/s make this utterance sound different from the one with no elision of schwa. The same type of change can also be heard in /n/ (e.g. ‘Not until next Monday’).

It should be noted here that in examples such as ‘boat tour’ (British 35-37: 34) and ‘deliver it to’ (Canadian 38-40: 36), the underlined voiceless alveolar plosive is not elided. Even when it is not audible, it exists as an unreleased stop.⁴ Some textbooks wrongly explain this case as an example of elision. Elision and an unreleased stop are different sound features.

Elision occurs in syllables. One example found in Terakura et al. (2019) is ‘usually’, which is pronounced /'ju:ʒəli/ (Australian 7: 22). Similarly, ‘particularly’ is sometimes pronounced /pə'tɪkjəli/.⁵

4. Epenthesis

As the opposite process of elision, there are cases where another segment is added, which is called epenthesis. One type of epenthesis is found in Terakura et al. (2019): ‘drawing’ (British 74-76: 60 and British 74-76: 188), which is pronounced /'drɔ:ɹɪŋ/. This additional /r/ is known as intrusive /r/, which is an insertion of /r/ in cases where two vowels

appear in sequence at a morpheme boundary and /r/ is used to link them even though there is no ‘r’ in the spelling of the final part of the first morpheme. Roach (2009: 115) gives other examples of this kind: ‘Formula A’, ‘Australia all out’, ‘media event’. The reaction to intrusive /r/ still seems to be complex.⁶

Another familiar type of epenthesis is the insertion of /t/ after /n/ in words such as ‘dance’, ‘fence’, ‘sense’, ‘bounce’, ‘tense’, ‘anthem’ and ‘pension’ and the insertion of /p/ after /m/ or /n/ in words such as ‘triumphs’, ‘warmth’ and ‘confuse’ (Cuttenden 2014: 258). In the case of ‘tense’, this word and ‘tents’ can be homophones.

5. Segments

The vowel of ‘sure’ is commonly known among learners as the diphthong /ʊə/ in BBC pronunciation and /ʊr/ in GA, but /ʃʊ:/ is increasingly popular in the former, as shown in Figure 1⁷.

4 It should be noted that the same feature is also found when ‘itta’, for example, is pronounced in Japanese.

5 Syllable reduction in these two words were used in BBC 6 Minute English ‘The decline of the apostrophe’ (accessed on 10 January 2020).

6 [1] ‘RP shows no such inhibitions, with intrusive /r/ being the norm... Similarly, intrusive /r/ occurs as the RP norm word-internally where the need is to avoid the hiatus.’ (Upton 2004: 228). [2] ‘Prescriptivists seek to limit the use of linking /r/ to those cases where there is an <r> in the spelling; nevertheless many examples of linking /r/ occur where there is no <r> in the spelling, such /r/s being labelled as ‘intrusive.’ (Cuttenden 2014: 316) [3] ‘Some English speakers and teachers still regard this (= intrusive r) as incorrect or substandard pronunciation, but it is undoubtedly widespread.’ (Roach 2009: 115) [4] ‘The reality is that an intrusive r makes pronunciation easier, especially when speech rate increases, and it takes some effort to suppress it. But, whether people are successful in avoiding it or not, it is a present-day sociolinguistic fact that intrusive r is considered by many people to be a ‘bad’ pronunciation.’ (Crystal 2018: 190) [5] ‘Some even claimed that ‘intrusive r’ was not a feature of RP. However, we have many recordings, going back over 80 years, of RP speakers using unwritten linking /r/, including actors and newsreel narrators... The main change since RP regarding unwritten linking /r/ is that it’s no longer condemned; most SSB speakers today make no effort to suppress it. It can be heard in practically every BBC news broadcast.’ (Lindsey 2019: 87-88).

7 This figure is taken from Wells (2008).

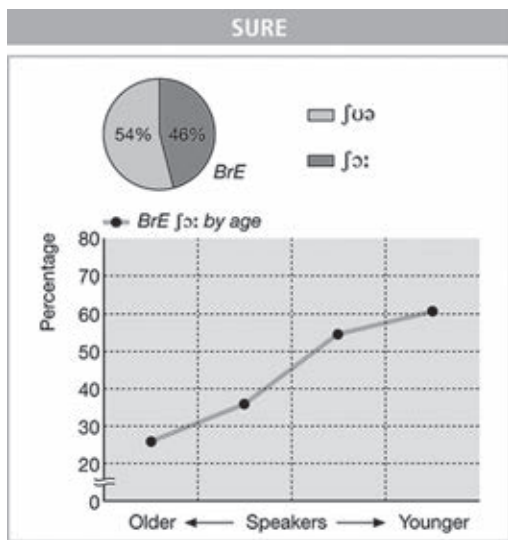


Figure 1 The Use of 'Sure' Among Speakers with BBC Pronunciation

In Terakura et al. (2019), this traditional pronunciation is used in the British English accent (56-58: 176 and 92-94: 200), while the long vowel is used in the Australian accent (19: 26). Learners should know that 'sure' can also be pronounced with the long vowel in the Australian accent as well as in BBC pronunciation. It is expected from Figure 1 that over time, the prioritised pronunciation may be /ʃɔ:/ in BBC pronunciation. Moreover, they should also be aware of the general tendency of the probable vowel change from /ʊə/ to /ɔ:/ in this accent.

Words with '-ile' such as 'fragile' and 'futile' are pronounced /aɪl/ in BBC pronunciation and /əl/ or as a syllabic /l/ in GA. The second syllable of the word 'mobile' (22: 28) is spoken by an American speaker with a syllabic /l/. It may be a natural pronunciation for this speaker, but 'mobile phone' is a British term⁸. In such a case, the British pronunciation should be more desirable.

The SQUARE vowel is in the process of changing

8 'Cellphone' is the American term for the same device. The stress placement is different between the two terms. Here the American speaker pronounces the British term with correct stress placement.

its quality to a long vowel /ɛ:/ from the traditional diphthong /eə/ in BBC pronunciation.⁹ The word 'chairs' is pronounced as the diphthong (British 5 : 148), but it is also pronounced as the long vowel (British 1 : 146 and Australian 6 : 148). It may be a controversial issue whether speakers belonging to the same accent group should use the same pronunciation at least in the same test or reference book, but variety seems to outweigh consistency in Terakura et al. (2019).

As a major feature of Australian English vowels, Trudgill and Hannah (2008: 23) state that 'word final /ə/ is often very open', and this type of pronunciation is used in Terakura et al. (2019) when 'year' (83-85: 66) and 'member' (62-64: 180) are pronounced. This use of an open vowel sounds a little strange to the ear which is accustomed to the stress-timed rhythm of English, but this pronunciation is adopted here probably because of the idea that each speaker should use his/her natural pronunciation.

There are cases where two weak vowels /ɪ/ and /ə/ can be interchangeable, especially in words including the suffix '-ity', but when the first syllable of 'accept' is pronounced /ɪ/ (Australian 41-43: 38), the listener may confuse it with 'except' or may misinterpret it as the mispronunciation of 'expect'. In addition, this pronunciation is contrary to what Trudgill and Hannah (2008: 22) state about the Australian English accent:

Like south-of-England non-RP accents, but to a much greater extent, AusEng has /ə/ rather than /ɪ/ in unstressed syllables. Thus, not only does /ə/ occur in the final syllable of *horses* and *wanted*, it also occurs in the final syllable of

9 Although dictionaries and textbooks still transcribe this vowel with the diphthong, the latest edition of Curttinen (2014: 118-119) gives up on this and transcribes it with the long vowel.

naked, David, honest, village, etc. This applies also in the unstressed syllables in words such as *begin* /bəˈɡɪn/ and *laxity* /læksətiː/¹⁰. This feature is known, following Wells (1982)¹¹, as the Weak Vowel Merger – a diagnostic of this is that words such as *rabbit* and *abbot* rhyme.

Jones et al. (2011) transcribes the first syllable of ‘accept’ as /ə/ or /æ/. The latter is also desirable to disambiguate this word from any other. The author does not know whether /ɪ/, which is used here, is a new trend occurring in Australian English or the speaker’s idiosyncratic trait, but in tests like TOEIC, the first syllable of ‘accept’ should be pronounced /ə/ or /æ/.

Another noteworthy Australian vowel recorded here is the vowel in ‘piece’ (68-70: 184), which is pronounced [e:]. Like the first syllable of ‘accept’, the use of this pronunciation is beyond the listening skill required in TOEIC.

It is well known among Japanese learners that when /t/ is followed by /j/, it becomes /tʃ/. Thus, they tend to pronounce ‘student’ or ‘Tuesday’ by replacing the voiceless alveolar plosive and the following palatal approximant with the post-alveolar affricate. A similar sound change occurs when /d/ is followed by /j/ and the two sounds are replaced by /dʒ/, but this is less familiar to these learners. In Terakura et al. (2019), ‘during’ is pronounced in two ways: /dʒ/ by an Australian speaker (32-34: 32) and /dʒ/ by a British speaker (74-76: 188). This yod coalescence is used by a Canadian speaker when she utters the word ‘reduce’ (89-91: 198).

The word ‘schedule’ is pronounced differently

in BBC pronunciation and GA. It is pronounced /ˈʃedʒu:l/ in the former and /ˈskedʒu:l/ in the latter. In Terakura et al. (2019), the former pronunciation is used by British speakers in the following words ‘reschedule’ (74-76: 60), ‘scheduled’ (98-100: 76) and ‘schedule’ (19: 154), and the latter pronunciation is used by a Canadian speaker and an American speaker when they utter ‘schedule’ (30: 158).

The word ‘garage’ is also pronounced very differently in BBC pronunciation and GA: /ˈɡærɑːʒ/ and /gəˈrɑːʒ/. Japanese learners may be unfamiliar with both because neither sounds like the katakana pronunciation. The former pronunciation is used by a British speaker (4: 18). The pronunciation of this word is varied as shown in Figure 2¹².

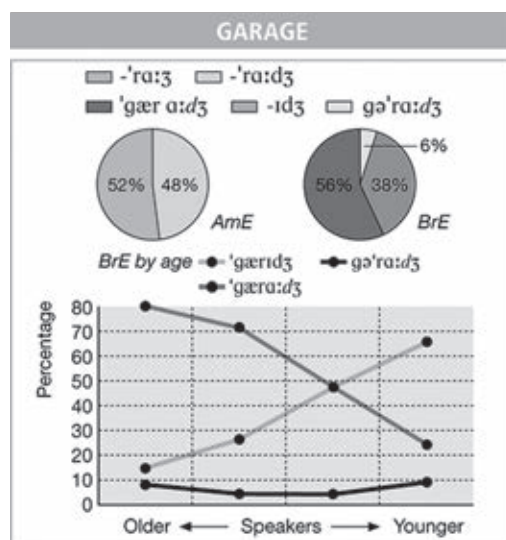


Figure 2 The Use of ‘Garage’ Among Speakers with BBC Pronunciation and GA

From this figure, it is understood that the choice of the pronunciation is appropriate in this question, but judging from its popular pronunciation based on the age difference, there will soon be a time when

10 In BBC pronunciation, schwa has been more common in the second syllable of ‘laxity’ rather than /ɪ/ since the mid-20th century. See Wells (1997) for more details.

11 Wells, J. C. (1982) *Accents of English: An Introduction*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12 This figure is taken from Wells (2008).

'garage' should be pronounced /'gærɪdʒ/ in BBC pronunciation in standardised tests like TOEIC.

6. Conclusion

Listening to spoken English is not an easy task for many Japanese learners of English. English is a lingua franca for international communication, but it is not used as a means of daily communication in Japan. It is obvious that one of the best ways to acquire communicative skills in English is to go to an English-speaking country and use the language every day, but this educationally advantaged environment can only be achieved by a small number of 'lucky' Japanese learners.

These days, communicative English skills are emphasised in education as well as workplaces in Japan. However, since the language environment of Japan is different from those of English-speaking countries, a learning method or process does not have to be the same as the one that is normally used in English-speaking countries. In general, once people have passed a so-called critical period, they cannot acquire a language like small children acquiring their native tongue. For adult learners, who use logical thinking, a more analytical method should be utilised in teaching/learning spoken English.

Motivated learners can achieve high skills in written English relatively easily by learning English grammar and reading English texts on a regular basis. They can create such a learning environment even in a non-English-speaking country. On the other hand, learning spoken English is a different story. A poor chance of using spoken English makes it very hard to learn that skill. That is why such learners need to use a more logical method – focusing on important phonetic features that are used in spoken English. At first, they should focus on either BBC pronunciation or GA as they are the most widely used accents in

education all over the world, and then the standard accent of other native speakers of English. The knowledge of English phonetics is very useful for them as a logical method of learning. If they know these features, their level of understanding spoken English will certainly improve.

In this paper, the author listened to a small portion of the listening comprehension test of TOEIC. Even this small sample has provided him with useful and practical information as a preliminary study of phonetic features in this test in order to help foreign learners of English like Japanese improve their listening skill. The author discussed the TRAP vowel in GA, elision, epenthesis and segments. In the course of analysis, he has found some pronunciations which may not be regarded as standard. Careful checks must be conducted not to use them as they exceed the range of tests like TOEIC. The author would like to examine more detailed phonetic features with as much audio material as possible so that the result can be more effectively utilised by the test-taker.

TOEIC uses four standard accents of English spoken in the Inner Circle countries. This is a good attempt for aiming at international communication, but there are many other different accents of English in the world. As learning progresses, the learner should try to listen to English spoken in the Outer Circle countries (e.g. Indian English and Nigerian English) and the Expanding Circle countries (e.g. Chinese English and Brazilian English). The learner should also try to listen to various accents spoken in the Inner Circle countries. All these accents have their own unique characteristics and it may not be easy to understand them in the beginning, but if the learner's final goal is to use English on an international basis, this is an essential that cannot be avoided. Now thanks to the advance of technology, learners can have access to these accents in their own

country through web sites and applications.

In addition to knowledge of spoken English, the test-taker of TOEIC should learn business-related terms, such as 'blowout sale', 'product placement', 'work one's shift', 'turnaround', 'in-house document', 'web presence', 'time sheet', 'paycheck', 'loyalty card', 'payroll', 'portfolio', 'water main' and 'plumbing work'. Moreover, the test-taker should also listen carefully to each question as some questions may be made to intentionally lead him/her to distractors, for example, by using the word 'voice' in a distractor with the use of 'invoice' in the question.

It is known that 6,000 to 7,000 languages are spoken around the globe now. They are equally important, but people with different language backgrounds need a common language to understand each other. For many reasons, English is usually the first choice to achieve that purpose. Gaining the power of English as a lingua franca for global communication is an important step toward creating a better future. The author hopes that each test-taker of TOEIC keeps this view in mind.

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