

*Until we are taught otherwise,
We hear with the ears of our first
language,
Speak with our first language tongue,
And communicate with
our first language 'code' of sounds.*

--Peggy Tharpe

WHY I WROTE THIS GUIDE

Teachers ask me why I didn't write just one pronunciation guide...why I felt the need for separate guides addressing different learner languages. And if I had always taught groups of students, and always had mixed groups from different first languages, I'm 100% sure I wouldn't be writing these guides today. For mixed groups, I did then what all classroom teachers must do, I taught to the middle; I addressed the need that they all shared. And while teaching-to-the-middle is a rational strategy that ensures nearly everyone in the class will get something out of the experience, it didn't move me forward in my own understanding of how to teach pronunciation better.

When I was hired to teach pronunciation to executives, managers, and diplomats in one-to-one, face-to-face, customized programs, I realized I didn't know nearly enough about teaching and learning pronunciation. These clients expected a significant improvement in their sound; they expected a measurable product from my service, and they paid a lot for it. Everyday I studied and experimented, trying to understand why change was so difficult. I could teach it all to my clients and they could understand everything I taught them and still not make any appreciable, permanent changes in their sound in English. It took me 7 years to get to the heart of this study; to understand the science of it, and develop the art of it.

I wrote this series to share what I've learning about teaching vowels and consonants, and how foundational they are to all the rest of the English sound. This doesn't mean that I only teach vowels and consonants. But it *does* mean that I teach, or reteach them intensely, before building up syllables, rhythm, melody and intonation.

Native speakers of English often don't understand the sounds of English very well; after all, why would we...we were born into it. It's like our skin; we're only aware of it when something is wrong. By six months in utero, we already hear the intonation and rhythm of our mother's speech. And when we study to become teachers of ESL or EFL or ESOL at university or in certification programs, there's so much to cover that not much time can be spent on pronunciation and intonation.

My goal is to give you a new perspective on English pronunciation so you can teach it more effectively, efficiently, more expertly. I want you to feel the relief I felt when all the pieces fell into place for me, when I finally understood how to **teach the sound of English as a system** using sensory-based instruction that will help your students make noticeable changes in their pronunciation.

WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS GUIDE

If you are looking for shortcuts, this isn't the book for you. If you need a worksheet to do tomorrow, look on further; they're not here. But if you are trying to understand more about how English and Japanese differ, and the effect this has on pronunciation, this guide is for you. It comes in 2 parts, and this first part is dedicated totally to vowels and consonants because if Japanese speakers don't learn the difference in the core building blocks of our two languages, they will be struggling with their sound forever.

There are two things you have to do differently if you want Japanese students to make significant and permanent improvements in their pronunciation of English:

- 1) You have to **change the way you think** about the sound of English, which will then
- 2) **Change the way you teach** the sound of English.

Do you like puzzles? When you're putting together a puzzle, at first you look at each piece and examine its shape, seeing it as a distinctive form, with no relationship to the other pieces on the table. That's what my early pronunciation teaching was like. I worked on liaisons one day. I worked on schwa one week. I worked on intonation another time. My students understood what I was telling them but their sound didn't change.

Then comes the moment when you finally realize what the finished puzzle picture will be, where the colors are concentrated, and what the lines and shadows represent. From then on, when you pick up a new piece, you know with increasing certainty where it belongs. You're now seeing this small piece in the context of the bigger picture. And the bigger picture can't exist without the small pieces.

When I started teaching pronunciation, I had only puzzle pieces; my traveling-teacher file box was full of any kind of pronunciation exercise I could possibly need. When my clients had a problem, I would whip out an exercise sheet and teach it diligently. I taught rules for liaisons, drilled the schwa, and rules for syllable stress. Tick, tick, tick, checking each one off the list. Although I taught them clearly and my students understood what we were working on, permanent change eluded them. They would be great in class, and the next day, they would be back in their old habits of pronunciation again.

Finally, I began to see that English pronunciation is a unique combination of patterns and dynamics that can't be anchored to or added to the unconscious mental, physical and neural systems that exist already for our first language. I realized that a whole new mind map must be created; a new system in students' minds where English can live and grow. You can build this system by teaching how all the features are interrelated and fit together—the vowels, the

consonants, the rhythm, the schwa, pitch change—how all of it fits together to form a bigger picture—a picture that is different from Japanese in many ways.

IF YOU ARE AN ESL/EFL TEACHER—this guide presumes you know a bit about English language teaching and a bit about pronunciation already. Everything I say here is for you to consider and incorporate, if it's appropriate, but not everything teachers know should be shared with students. A good teacher should know everything, but teach only what's helpful and necessary. If you are new to teaching and you need ready-made materials laid out for you so you can face each day, I've listed resources toward the end of this guide. If you're a new teacher, use a textbook or publisher's materials until you develop your own techniques and strategies.

IF YOU'RE AN ACCENT REDUCTION COACH

You are going to appreciate this conversation because you'll be able to use everything without having to adjust or compromise for multiple students or multiple first languages. You'll be able to incorporate whatever makes sense into your own style of coaching.

ARE YOU STUDYING ENGLISH?

Are you a student looking for ways to improve your sound in English? The information here may give you a new way of thinking about English and some new strategies and resources to try. If you can read and understand this page, then there's no reason to think you can't!

Table of Contents

[Why I Wrote This Guide](#)

[Why You Should Read This Guide](#)

[Chapter 1. Comparing English and Japanese Systems](#)

[Chapter 2. Phonological “Deafness”](#)

[Chapter 3. Priorities](#)

[Chapter 4. Comparing Vowels Systems](#)

[Chapter 5. Teach a System, Raise Awareness](#)

[Chapter 6. Resources for Teaching Pronunciation](#)

[Chapter 7. Teach to the Body—Using Gestures with Sounds](#)

[Chapter 8. Even More About Teaching Vowels...Really!](#)

[Chapter 9. Consonants](#)

[Chapter 10. R and L](#)

[Chapter 11. Blending Sounds](#)

[Chapter 12. The Importance of Giving Feedback to Your Students](#)

[Chapter 13. Sources Mentioned in this Guide](#)

[Chapter 14. What’s in Part 2 of this Guide](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Publications](#)

1

COMPARING ENGLISH AND JAPANESE SYSTEMS

In a guide I wrote about teaching English to Arabic speakers, I said that in Arabic, *consonants* rule the sound of the language, while in English, *vowels* rule.

I'm going to make another sweeping generalization, this time comparing Japanese and English. Here goes: In the Japanese pronunciation system, FORM rules supreme, while in the English pronunciation system, FUNCTION rules supreme. The Japanese sound system, to my American ear at least, is precise and formulaic. The English sound system is flexible and mutable, changing its sound according to the content and purpose of the message.

There are some distinct and measurable ways, though, that Japanese and English sound systems differ, and they impact heavily on a Japanese speaker's sound in English. First I'll talk about them generally by language, and then separately, by feature, so we can compare them more closely.

JAPANESE

The overall pitch range for speaking is narrow and straight. Pitch jump and fall is applied only to words/moras in just one place, for just one purpose. There are only 5 vowels, which can be short or long; long vowels, however, are defined as a sequence of two single vowels, rather than as a long duration. Vowels and consonants are uniform in length. Japanese uses a lower final pitch and a higher starting pitch, as most languages do. As far as I can tell, acoustic breaks between words (pauses/no sound) don't exist in speaking or writing and when I listen to Japanese speakers, I can't tell where one word ends and the next one begins (although I think that's true for anyone listening to a language they don't know).

AMERICAN ENGLISH

The pitch range is wide and we use the whole range. English uses pitch on a larger scale to organize a statement, and simultaneously, on a small scale to highlight stressed words and syllables. It has many more vowels (I teach 12) and they can be stretched and shortened to any length desired, and can even be changed to other vowels if it will help form an acoustic contrast that is more noticeable for the listener...without changing the meaning of the word. Duration is a key feature of English. This flexibility with vowel duration may make it seem as if vowels are

not important in English; in fact, it's quite the opposite...the most important feature for Japanese speakers to work on is gaining an understanding and control of vowel durations. In English, pauses or breaks are used strategically to bracket phrases or accentuate important information; they can't happen just anywhere.

FEATURES

PROMINENCE AND STRESS

English is often called a "stress-timed" language, while Japanese is often referred to as a "syllable-timed" language. I hear the term "prominence" tossed around in these conversations, also.

In essence, each language does something to draw attention to important parts of the message, to make them more prominent for the listener. English and Japanese use different strategies to do this.

Japanese reminds me of Spanish—both are fast, evenly paced, uniformly measured sounds within narrow pitch bands. When this kind of system is used for English, it sounds staccato...the picket fence effect...and is hard to follow.

I think of prominence (or stress) in English IS created by 5 dynamics that define the character of sounds and move one's message forward. They are: **voicing, energy, clarity, duration, and pitch**.

Learning about, thinking about, and teaching about **voicing** has definitely helped me teach almost everything else. All vowels are voiced. Many English consonants are voiced but in American English, speakers may decide to change voiceless consonants (T, K, P, F, S) into voiced versions of themselves, if they occur in unstressed syllables. I talk more about this again later. Voicing plays a big role in the nature of English vowels and consonants.

English speakers change **pitch** and adjust **energy** on stressed syllables to bring prominence to the word. Japanese speakers use pitch change in a much more uniform and structured way, for one purpose and in one location. English pitch, however, changes constantly at the syllable level, and is also used to signal the organization of a message for one's listeners.

English speakers adjust the **duration** of sounds, lengthening or shortening the time spent on vowels especially, depending on whether the syllable is prominent or not.

English speakers adjust the **clarity** of sounds (softening unstressed sounds and clarifying the stressed sounds/syllables in important words).