

Exploring Students Perceptions of Katakana English

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Introduction

Due in a large part to the passive nature in which Japanese students have learned English at the secondary level, there are a number of obstacles hindering them from effective oral communication. One area of particular interest is the frequent use of borrowed vocabulary in what has become the adopted Japanese pronunciation of these words. This type of pronunciation can be referred to as “katakana pronunciation,” as katakana is the Japanese writing system that allows foreign or borrowed words to be converted into written and spoken Japanese. This use of katakana pronunciation causes many Japanese speakers to produce English that is littered with too many vowels and extra sounds, and often makes their English sound hyper-pronounced or halting, resulting in a constant lack of understanding by native English speakers. The way words have been transformed from their original English form into Japanese often makes them unrecognizable and difficult if not impossible to understand by native speakers, especially those having no experience with Japanese students. A common example in this case is the transformation of foreign brand names into Japanese English. MacDonald’s, for example, which would be easily understood by native English speakers, becomes almost unrecognizable in its Japanese English form: *Makudonarudo*. In this case, the number of syllables, spelling and pronunciation have all changed.

These pronunciation problems seem to persist even after attempts in the classroom have been made to change the students speaking patterns or correct them away from their katakana pronunciation, which led us to consider deeper questions regarding the students own perceptions of their pronunciation and the effect it has on being understood. Were the students aware of their inaccuracies in pronouncing English words and the differences between their pronunciation and that of native speakers? If they were aware of the differences in pronunciation, why did they still continue to use heavy katakana pronunciation?

The Study

The study, separated into three parts, was conducted with over a hundred and fifty students from classes of varying levels of mid to high intermediate ability at Asia University. The students were first given a questionnaire that asked basic questions about Katakana English. The questions were written in English with Japanese translation provided. All incidents of written answers were taken in Japanese and translated afterwards for review. The questionnaire attempted to gauge their comprehension of Katakana English, as well as discover their ideas of what, to them, were the most difficult aspects of English, and also what areas of language, they believed, were most affected by pronunciation. The students were also exposed to the English and katakana version of the same words and asked if they could recognize any difference between the words.

After the students completed the questionnaire they were led through an activity to help increase their awareness of Katakana English and demonstrate the sometimes profound difference between the words spoken by native English speakers, and the katakana pronunciation, that was used by so many. The activity was administered in three parts, beginning with a pronunciation exercise between a series of English words and their katakana counterparts. This was followed by a syllable counting exercise between both sets of those words, and finally a dictation exercise to highlight the extended difference between understanding a large portion of information spoken in Katakana English.

At the end of the activity a final questionnaire was administered to determine the student's impressions after being exposed to Katakana English. Certain questions from the first questionnaire were repeated to measure how and if the student's perceptions had changed at all, and the questionnaire also tried to discover why the students continued to use Katakana English, even if they knew their pronunciation was inaccurate.

Results

Before conducting the research there was some expectation that a large part of the struggle with the students use of Katakana English was that they lacked awareness or understanding about how their spoken English differed from those of native speakers, but after analyzing the data the opposite became very clear. Even before the Katakana English activity, the vast majority of students recognized the difference between Katakana English and Standard English. In addition in the pre-activity questionnaire, 61% of the students indicated that Katakana English has a *negative effect on communication*. As expected, after being exposed to a the formal Katakana Exercise, this number went up to 92% believing that Katakana English has a *negative effect on communication*, but that a significant majority recognized the fact during the pre-questionnaire was surprising. In addition 93% of the students also said that Katakana English is *not easily understood by native speakers* and only 1% said Katakana English *sounds like native English*.

Table 1a

Before and After Comparisons

Q. Do you think Katakana English can be understood easily by native speakers?	
BEFORE ACTIVITY	AFTER ACTIVITY
YES: 7%	YES: 0%
NO: 93%	NO: 100%
Q. Do you think using Katakana English has a negative effect on communication?	
BEFORE ACTIVITY	AFTER ACTIVITY
YES: 62%	YES: 92%
NO: 38%	NO: 8%
Q. Does Katakana English Sound Like the English spoken by native speakers?	
BEFORE ACTIVITY	AFTER ACTIVITY
YES: 1%	YES: 2%
NO: 70%	NO: 82%
A Little: 29%	A Little: 16%

Afterwards the overwhelming question became: if students recognize the dangers in using Katakana English, why do they continue to speak it? The answer may lie in other data that was collected where 90% of the students said that Katakana English *could be easily understood by Japanese speakers*. Thought not entirely unexpected, ultimately it seems that our student's practical ideas of speaking English exist only in the classroom, conversing with each other, and the importance of being understood by their peers is placed above being understood by native English speakers. In that respect Katakana English has almost become a sub-dialect of English. Within the region in which it is spoken there is almost perfect understanding of what is said, but outside of the region, the pronounced language bears little resemblance to its language of origin. After having been bombarded for years with all of those borrowed English words filtered through Japanese phonetic pronunciation, students reproduce what is most natural to them when speaking to each other in English, and inside the classroom where the teacher and class materials are the only other source of language (and can't possibly compete with all of those outside influences), students resort to what is most comfortable to them, in essence what is most natural to them, and since understanding isn't challenged by their peers who are also speaking similarly, the bad habits take hold and the sub-dialect is born.

Table 1b

Students Perceptions of Katakana English and of the English Learning Process

Q. Do you know what Katakana English is?			
YES		NO	
67%		33%	
Q. How is Katakana English different from Standard English			
Pronunciation	Spelling	World Length	All of these
49%	9%	1%	41%%
Q. How important do you think pronunciation is?			
Very Important	A Little Important	Not Very Important	Not Important
42%	54%	4%	0%
Q. What is the most difficult aspect of English for you?			
Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
26%	59%	1%	14%
Q. How Important is speaking English naturally to you?			
Very Important	A Little Important	Not Very Important	
42%	54%	4%	

The final question asked of the students was to explain some of their reasons for speaking Katakana English. Though the answers varied from it being something they had *learned in junior high school and high school*, to they are *embarrassed to speak differently from their friends*, the majority of the students indicated it was because Standard English is *difficult to pronounce*. Even if there is some truth to that, it seems reasonable to also conclude that their comfort level in speaking Katakana English, which more closely resembles their own language, heightens their unwillingness to adapt their pronunciation.

If they had started without katakana all together perhaps their perceptions would be different.

Conclusion

It is easy to demonize the presence of Katakana English in the classroom, but with a system so institutionalized in the learning process, we need to bring a deeper level of cultural understanding to our classrooms. Certainly all teachers' focus and curriculum goals will influence their level of strict enforcement of natural pronunciation. When speaking candidly with the students who were part of the study, the idea that they wouldn't be understood by native speakers seemed to gain some traction, but the effects soon faded after the students went back to communicating with each other. Of course there is no better teacher than experience, and unless the students find themselves in real life situations where the consequences of not being understood are more severe or frustrating, students will be reluctant to shift their pronunciation away from what is most natural to them. Until that time, our growing awareness of student perspectives regarding this particular learning barrier can only help us to design materials and lessons best suited to effectively convince our classes away from katakana pronunciation.

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