

# What do Japanese Student Teachers Need to Improve to Teach English to Japanese Elementary School Children?

## — An Investigation of Student Teachers' English Proficiency from a Linguistics Perspective —

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### Abstract

This research focused on linguistic errors found in university student teachers' teaching plans and during lessons team-taught with an ALT. The results revealed errors in word choice, grammar, and pronunciation that affected the quality of the English education they provided to elementary school children. Many errors showed the influence of L1. The findings indicated that students with CEFR A2 do not have the proficiency necessary to teach English, and are susceptible to communication breakdowns with ALTs.

キーワード : vocabulary / grammar / pronunciation

### 1. Introduction: Research Background and Objectives

In 2013, the Japanese Government announced a reform plan to enhance English proficiency from 2020 (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), 2013). Homeroom teachers at elementary schools are being encouraged to team-teach English with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs); however, there are no distinct regulations regarding English proficiency and pre-service teacher education of the related field at elementary school level. Under the current Course of Study, which started in 2008, "Foreign Language Activities" (FLA) to promote English skills of Japanese is compulsory in fifth and sixth grades, but homeroom teachers without any English language proficiency requirements or training in this field are expected to teach these classes.

To assist homeroom teachers, MEXT promotes utilizing external staff like ALTs or local people who have good English skills (MEXT, 2008: 19). This policy raises problems mainly in two regards: English

ability and teaching skills. According to a survey conducted in 2012 (MEXT, 2014a), 70% of FLA are taught primarily by homeroom teachers, but 57% of the teachers surveyed reported that they are 'unconfident' when doing so. A lack of English proficiency was found to be a barrier for communication between the homeroom teachers and ALTs. A teaching exercise conducted between Japanese student teachers and American university students assuming the roles of ALTs showed the same problems: low language proficiency was one of the biggest obstacles in team-teaching (Yoneda, 2015).

Needless to say, teachers must have adequate English proficiency, which is claimed to be 550-600 in TOEIC (J-SHINE, 2014), in order to teach it. Two credit hours of English are mandatory to obtain a teacher's certificate under current regulations, but two credit hours' study is too little to have the English proficiency necessary to reach a TOEIC score of 550-600. To guarantee quality education, there is demand for the Government to stipulate that universities implement courses on teaching English to Japanese children in pre-service elementary school teacher education (Sakai, et al, 2014). However, not only have clear achievement goals of English proficiency not

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been announced, but neither have plans of implementation to enhance homeroom teachers' English.

According to MEXT's reform plan (MEXT, 2013), in addition to requiring FLA in third and fourth grades, "English Language" will be newly established as a "subject" in fifth and sixth grades. While the aim of FLA is to nurture communication skills, the new course - English Language as a subject - is aimed at nurturing basic English language skills. Yet, the instructors will be "class teachers with good English teaching skills, actively utiliz[ing] specialized course teachers (MEXT, 2014b)." MEXT's plan is still suggesting the utilization of external staff like ALTs or community members in the classroom in a team-teaching context.

A brief description of ALTs should be given here since team-teaching succeeds by good cooperation between the two teachers. The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), which organizes the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, has announced a goal of 6,000 ALTs, Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs) to be employed in Japan by the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (CLAIR, 2015a). Concerning ALTs, including those who will proceed to teach at elementary schools, a selection of the eligibility requirements for JET Programme participation are: a Bachelor's degree or an elementary and/or secondary teaching certificate from a three-year course; not having lived in Japan for 6 years or more in total during the 10 years preceding their intended start date; and an interest in teaching foreign languages and working with children. Teaching experience and/or qualification, and/or Japanese proficiency are looked upon favorably, but are not necessarily required for selection (CLAIR, 2015b). As this shows, JET participants are recruited from all educational backgrounds and with all levels of Japanese language ability, and are not long-time residents of Japan. In fact, the JET Programme advertises itself to potential applicants by saying, "A one-year appointment on the JET Programme could be just what you are looking for

to broaden your horizons and take a different step in life" (CLAIR, 2015c)<sup>1</sup>. These facts indicate that Japanese homeroom teachers must have adequate communicative skills and English ability to team-teach with ALTs who may be motivated to teach English in Japan but do not have formal training.

Based on the background detailed above, this research was conducted to investigate common errors found in pre-service elementary education students' teaching plans, which were anticipated to show weaknesses responsible for causing communication problems with ALTs as well as problems conducting classes in English. It is expected that knowing these weaknesses will be useful in finding effective ways to enhance Japanese teachers' English proficiency.

During a practicum of teaching English to children at a private elementary school conducted in June 2015, two kinds of problems were identified: communication problems with the ALT and lost respect from the children due to pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary errors. These problems are the same as those pointed out in previous studies (MEXT, 2014a; Yoneda, 2015). Based on these findings, and in light of the upcoming MEXT reforms, this paper will give data highlighting what needs to be done in order to meet the urgent need of an effective way to produce elementary school homeroom teachers who are proficient in English.

## 2. Outline of Teaching Practicum

The practicum was an academic component of an elective course titled "Methods of Teaching English to Children" taken during the fourth year at a private university. From 2011, elementary education students at the university have been encouraged to take two courses related to English education for children for elementary school teacher certification. Therefore, all the participants had studied topics related to English teaching, including general methods for teaching English prior to the practicum. The overall objective of the practicum was for these university students to realize the gap between their current English proficiency and teaching skills and those required for

elementary school teachers through the process of planning and conducting team-taught English classes with an ALT.

The practicum was conducted in a private elementary school over one week in June 2015. English Language as a subject was taught to Grades 1-6 at the school. Lessons were held three times during the week for Grades 5 and 6, twice for Grades 3 and 4, and once for Grades 1 and 2, totaling 12 hours of university student participation in the classroom. The textbooks used were *Magic Time 1*, *English Time 1*, and *English Time 2* published by Oxford University Press (Kampa & Vilina, 2002; Rivers & Toyama, 2002a, 2002b). The private elementary school where the practicum took place is small, with one class of children per grade only.

The university students from the pre-service education course were divided into five groups. Groups were assigned to each grade at the elementary school, with one group assigned to both Grades 1 and 2. Groups created plans in English for each lesson and sent these plans to the ALT by email in advance. Before conducting each lesson, the students had a brief face-to-face meeting with the ALT.

### 3. Method

**3.1. Participants:** 13 fourth-year university students on a teacher certification course. The students were required to have English proficiency equivalent to CEFR A2 to take this course. This was determined by the results of either an official or practice Pre-2 level of Eiken, Test in Practical English Proficiency (Eiken, 2015).

**3.2. Time of data collection:** June 2015.

**3.3. Material:** The following materials were used to collect data: the university students' teaching plans, which were submitted to the Japanese teacher of the course as well as the ALT; a customized questionnaire given to the university students asking about the practicum; and an open-ended survey completed by each of the 14 Grade 6 students at the participating elementary school.

The plans used for this study include all versions

submitted to the course teacher and the ALT, including versions that had been edited based upon on the course teacher's and/or ALT's feedback. To assess pronunciation and communication issues, children's surveys, teaching plans and the notes of Japanese teachers of English and the ALT from class conduct were used.

**3.4. Procedure:** University students worked in pairs or groups of three to make plans. In April 2015, each student received a set comprised of the textbook, workbook and teacher's manual for their assigned classes. Prior to making their own lesson plans, the students were shown a plan made for an actual English class at the elementary school as a model. Additionally, one group demonstrated in front of the others how to communicate with the ALT by using a lesson plan. As they explained their lesson to the ALT, the ALT asked for clarification on activities, offered advice on better expressing ideas, and provided English language corrections. Each group submitted a first draft of their lesson plan, received feedback from the course teacher and/or the ALT, and re-submitted an edited version. Feedback from the course teacher and/or the ALT concerned not only teaching methods but also linguistic advice and/or corrections. The total number of revised drafts submitted depended upon the individual groups.

To investigate grammar and vocabulary errors, all versions of the submitted plans were scrutinized, and the most common mistakes were identified and categorized by the ALT, who is a native speaker of English. To evaluate pronunciation, the course teacher's notes taken during lesson observation and the results of the 6th grade survey were used.

This study was exploratory in nature and was focused upon discovering the types of errors made by pre-service elementary school teachers. While calculating the frequency of particular error occurrences may be of value to this field of research, it was not within the scope of this study.

### 4. Results and Discussion

In this section, linguistic problems observed in the

teaching plans and class conduct will be discussed to address vocabulary and grammar issues, and the results of the questionnaire and survey will be discussed to address pronunciation (phonetics/phonology) issues. Since the word ‘students’ is ambiguous and could mean either elementary school children or university students, to avoid misunderstanding, ‘children’ is used to refer to elementary school students and ‘university students’ is used to refer to the pre-service teachers participating in the teaching practicum. In their lesson plans, university students used ‘ET’ to refer to the native speaker teacher, the ALT, and ‘JT’ to refer to a Japanese homeroom teacher, the role that the university students assumed.

As mentioned before, the errors found in the plans are shown in this section. For ease of understanding, each error is numbered in the following tables; this does not indicate the frequency of error occurrence. Also, repeated and/or similar errors were omitted from the tables. In each table, corrected forms are listed to highlight the difference and intended meaning.

#### 4.1. Vocabulary and Grammar

Proper vocabulary and grammar are important factors in effective communication. They play an important role in written exchanges, for example, such as teaching plans sent by email. During lessons, writing words and phrases on the blackboard helps children’s understanding. Concerning the latter, seemingly small mistakes could result in serious

problems in English class. In the children’s survey responses, 10 out of 14 children wrote negative comments regarding vocabulary and grammar: “The student teachers said different things from the textbook”; “My answer was correct, but they said it was wrong”; “They paused a lot so it was difficult to understand them”; and “They didn’t look confident.” The children’s comments were found to be consistent with those noted by the observing teachers.

Unfortunately, many misspelled words were observed in the teaching plans. Table 1 shows some sample errors and their corrections. Errors due to language transfer<sup>ii</sup> from Japanese, carelessness, lack of mastery, overgeneralization, typo, and lack of grammar knowledge were observed.

Spelling mistakes indicate that the student teachers have yet to gain mastery of classroom and/or elementary school-level vocabulary. The misspellings are also indicative of common pronunciation errors.

Table 2 shows errors regarding singular/plural, articles, and word choice, all of which indicate language transfer: Japanese does not have distinction between singular and plural. Furthermore, many students were not aware that the usage of a particular article or the usage of the singular instead of the plural and vice versa greatly impacts the communicated meaning. For example, “a tomato” means a round fruit, but “tomato” refers to an ingredient; and “I like dogs.” means the speaker likes canines, but “I like

Table 1 Examples of Misspelled Words

	Error	Correction		Error	Correction
1	Hallo.	Hello.	9	Thursday	Tuesday (Thursday?)
2	wards	words	10	home work	homework
3	fast name	first name	11	text book	textbook
4	rise	raise	12	23th	23rd
5	sheat	seat	13	indentify	identify
6	Leady	Ready	14	excellnt	excellent
7	portofolio	portfolio	15	Thank-you	Thank you
8	Year!!	Yeah!!	16	student' s	student's (students)

Table 2 Examples of Singular/Plural Errors

	Error	Correction
1	It's tomato.	It's a tomato.
2	It's fruit.	It's a fruit. (Hint in a guessing game)
3	Get new card.	Get a new card. / Get new cards.
4	Ms.shreves is lost people.	Ms. Shreves is a lost person.
5	one .... people? Two peoples?	One person? Two people?
6	Do you have any question?	Do you have any questions?
7	Say a word to the random.	Say words at random.
8	seven cloud!	Seven clouds!
9	How many (pencil, tree, cat, pen, caw, cloud, goat, books, boy, bird, flower, dog) in the picture?	How many (pencils, trees, etc) are there in the picture?
10	Please move the desk.	Please move the (your) desks.

dog.” means the speaker likes dog meat.

In terms of singular/plural and article errors, children learn through repeated exposure. Teachers must use fundamental features of the English language correctly. Students need to learn the concept correctly to be able to understand English grammar and gain fluency. This is even more important because plurals

are not commonly used in the Japanese language.

Table 3 shows grammatical errors concerning pronouns. Choosing and using the correct pronoun is essential, and pronoun errors can greatly affect listeners' comprehension. This is especially true when subject or direct object pronouns are omitted. Here, influences of the Japanese language can be seen.

Table 3 Examples of Pronoun Errors

	Error	Correction
1	What do I put in the book bag	What should I put in my book bag?
2	It shows to children	She (You) show(s) it (them) to the children.
3	Did you understand what are you talking about?	Did you understand what they were talking about?
4	Try to say faster than earlier.	Try to say it faster than before.
5	It will pronounce the card that is on the blackboard in order.	She (You) will pronounce the cards in the order on the blackboard.
6	Put away in a desk.	Put it away in your desk.
7	Raise them hands.	Raise their hands.
8	Move them desks.	Move their desks.
9	Put away talking sheet. *	Put away your talking sheet.

Note: The *talking sheet* is a conversation tool used at this elementary school.

Table 4 shows errors regarding subject-verb agreement. In many cases, overgeneralization or lack of mastery seem to be the reasons. This pattern is not in the students' native language: again, this is an example of language transfer.

Table 5 is a list of errors of verb tenses. Students did

not often use future tense, which would have been helpful to communicate to the students and/or the ALT what is going to happen 'next.' Elementary students are also beginning to learn various verb tenses, such as present progressive. It is beneficial to the students for students to hear such a tense used conversationally in

Table 4 Examples of Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

	Error	Correction
1	Ms. Shreves ask you.	Ms. Shreves asks you questions. (Ms. Shreves will ask you questions.)
2	Et say word and S repeat after ET.	ET says a word, and Ss repeat.
3	First student say the word to second student.	The first student says the word to the second student.
4	Last student choose a picture card that heard the word.	The last student chooses the picture card that goes with the word.
5	First student hear the word to ET and go to the shop.	The first student hears (listens to) the word from the ET and goes to the shop.
6	ET write the number on blackboard.	ET writes the number(s) on the blackboard.
7	JP have Bible phrase paper. *	JT has (holds) the Bible phrase paper.
8	The first person listen to words of the keyword from Ms. Shereves	The first person listens to Ms. Shreves to find out the keyword.
9	Next, word change to 'do a cartwheel.'	Next, the key phrase changes to 'do a cartwheel.'

Note: This is a Christian school; students learn one Bible verse per month

Table 5 Examples of Verb Tense Errors

	Error	Correction
1	X pointing cards are put on the blackboard.	X points to cards on the blackboard.
2	If a games ends, we count the pair cards.	When the game ends, we will count the pairs of cards.
3	Ms. shrives reads a story now.	Ms. Shreves will read a story now.
4	Ms. Shreves ask you.	Ms. Shreves will ask you questions.
5	(What's he doing?) Yes. swim.	Yes. Swimming/He is swimming.
6	Next, I pass you worksheet.	Next, I will pass you a worksheet.
7	What does ET say?	What did ET (she) say?
8	Please have a red pencil and drew a circle.	Please have (take out/use) a red pencil and draw a circle.
9	Do you check the correct box?	Did you check the correct box?

context. This would help them begin to understand when present progressive is necessary, or when simple present is preferable, for example.

In addition to the errors above, errors in interrogative sentence structure (Table 6) were frequently seen. Japanese teachers have many opportunities to use interrogatives in the classroom, so they should be able to form them properly. Children cannot be expected to respond to questions that are nonsensical. Being able to ask questions is also very important to Japanese teacher-ALT communication; it facilitates the lesson planning process, and allows for communication between the JTE and ALT during the lesson itself.

Also, 'Let's ...' (Table 7) was a phrase used more

often than in native English-speaking countries and sometimes very unnaturally. Not only overuse, but grammatically wrong sentences were observed.

While it is perhaps overused, it is a useful expression in the classroom. This sentence structure has the nuance of inclusivity; it implies that the speaker and listener(s) will be doing something together. As such, it is appropriate to use the structure when a teacher would like to encourage participation. It is also a simple sentence structure that is relatively easy to master. Nevertheless, Japanese teachers should know that this pattern also can be very vague.

Also concerning overuse, "OK" was frequently used by the university students in the phrase, "Are you OK?", which often seemed unnatural. However, it is

Table 6 Examples of Interrogative Errors

	Error	Correction
1	English was said?	What English words were said? (What words did you hear?)
2	What's in your bedroom is?	What's in your bedroom?
3	Is this where is?	Where is this?
4	ET said what?	What did ET (she) say?
5	Do you done your homework?	Did you do your homework?
6	Open to the page?	Have you opened to the page? (Are you on the right page?)
7	Who have a ball?	Who has the ball?
8	Do you finish?	Did you finish? (Have you finished?)

Table 7 Examples of "Let's ..." Errors

	Error	Correction
1	Let's activities!	Let's do an activity!
2	Let a little level up!	Let's go up a level!
3	Let gestures ○ or × that ET says from now.	Let's make gestures. *
4	Lets announced the homework from now.	Let's announce (talk about) the homework.
5	Let's talking sheet.	Let's do the talking sheet.
6	Let's Chain game.	Let's play the 'Chain Game.'

Note: This phrase should be followed by a description of the specific gestures.

appropriate to use this phrase when a child looks troubled. The issue here is that Japanese students may not use it in this context. Moreover, the fact that “OK?” can be used in the classroom to check that students have understood instructions like “First, you will do Part A, and then you will do Part B. OK?” may be confusing to Japanese speakers in general.

Forming imperative statements was another problem identified (Table 8). It is appropriate to use the imperative when writing instructions, such as on a lesson plan. It can also be used to explain rules for classroom activities to the students or for the purpose of classroom discipline. The university students in this study should have known how to form imperative statements at their level of English proficiency, CEFR A2. In this case, however, a theoretical knowledge of the grammar rules of imperatives was not applied in real communications. This fact may be applied to other mistakes previously discussed: Drilling and making students aware of this fact might be the first step to correct their mistakes.

In addition to the vocabulary and grammar problems listed above, the university students’ capitalization was sometimes incorrect. Elementary school children learn to distinguish between capital and lowercase letters. Mistakes in capitalization may make documents more difficult for ALTs to read as well. Misuses of *say*, *tell*,

*listen*, *hear*, and *ask* were also seen, which may indicate that the university students were not aware of the differences in their usage.

What is common among the errors above is that the university students’ English was influenced by the Japanese language. While this may be natural, it must be remembered that they will serve as English language role models to children at school. They should learn the patterns of their mistakes and try to overcome them. Most of the errors above risked communication breakdown with the ALT since the meaning was occasionally difficult to interpret or conveyed something different from the university students’ intentions. Mastering classroom language may be helpful for student teachers to conduct class smoothly and communicate with ALTs. Table 9 highlights how little the classroom language the student teachers learned.

These results were surprising to the authors because the university students performed better in an examination covering classroom English than in their English language teaching plans. It is important to note that some students did not correct their mistakes even though these mistakes were brought to their attention. This attitude may be closely connected with a limited motivation to teach English: because English is currently an “activity,” it may not be considered as

Table 8 Examples of Imperative Errors

	Error	Correction
1	Card stick of blackboard.	Stick cards on the blackboard.
2	Card put on the blackboard.	Put cards on the blackboard.
3	Drew a circle	Draw a circle.
4	But, you don't say number and raise your hand.	Don't say your number out loud. Instead, raise your hand.
5	Everyone listening and Pointing to the picture.	Everyone, listen and point to the picture.
6	Please tell Ms.Shreves words of keyword.	Ms. Shreves, please tell the students the keywords.
7	The first students come here.	First students, please come here.
8	It becomes two pairs.	Make pairs.



important as other subjects. At the same time, in the university student's questionnaires, 10 out of 13 students answered that this practicum made them aware of the necessity of improving classroom language and communication with the ALT. In the survey, one student confessed that she had

underestimated elementary school English. Others orally informed their university teacher that teaching children was much more difficult than they had expected. The results of the survey have given important insights for future training at the university.

Table 9 Examples of Classroom Language Errors

	Error	Correction
1	In order Street	in order
2	Random	at random/randomly
3	2 repeats	Repeat twice.
4	Oh my god!!*	Wow! / Great!
5	Let's make the card of the pairs.	Let's make pairs of cards.
6	Did you listen?	Did you understand? / Did you hear what she (he) said?
7	Please say slowly this time.	Please speak more slowly this time.
8	One more, please? OK. Please say "One more, please."	One more time? OK. Please say, "One more time, please."
9	Look at the demonstration	Watch the demonstration
10	Time is 7 minutes.	You have 7 minutes.
11	We don't have time today. So, work book is homework.	We don't have enough time today, so the (your) workbook is your homework.
12	Please do your workbook to page 21 until Thursday.	Please do page 21 in your workbook by Thursday.
13	Please have a red pencil.	Please take out a red pencil.
14	Please, check your pairs.	Please check your partner's answer.
15	What's time do you want?	How much time do you want?
16	Please someone in front?	Can someone in front answer? / Do (can) I have a volunteer from the front?
17	Please seven draw a circle.	Please draw a circle around 'seven'.
18	Write the work book	Do the workbook exercises.
19	JP explains answers of workbook.	JT explains workbook answers.
20	So, write your name.	First, write your name. / Please write your name.

Note: This phrase would not be acceptable at all in classrooms in English-speaking countries.

#### 4.2. Pronunciation—Phonetics and Phonology

According to the current Course of Study (MEXT, 2008), oral skills are more focused upon than reading and writing. However, university students' pronunciation was found to be greatly influenced by Japanese. The university students inserted a vowel after every consonant and spoke without any word/sentence stress. This so called '*katakana* pronunciation', did not go unnoticed by the children; it was negatively commented upon by 50% (7 out of 14) children in their survey in statements such as, "The student teacher's way of saying 'This is for you.' was pronounced differently from our teachers." and "They need to improve their pronunciation." It appears that university students lost a certain level of respect from the children, and such lost respect is likely to make conducting English lessons difficult. At the age of 21 or 22, it may be difficult for university students to acquire native-like pronunciation due to biological restriction (Shouten, 2009)<sup>iii</sup>, but by using the correct stress and contour, their pronunciation weaknesses could be somewhat alleviated. Each language has its own melody, so university students should learn that of English, which will help them to alleviate their pronunciation weaknesses.

Unlike elementary education teachers, certified English teachers in secondary education study English phonetics and phonology. The university students in this study learned very little of these fields, which was not enough for mastery nor was it equivalent to training. In their questionnaire, 46% (6 out of 13) students answered that they were aware of the difficulty of correct pronunciation.

According to their survey, the children appreciated exposure to new kinds of classroom activities and methods of teaching grammatical points. Student teachers have the potential to be capable teachers but due to an unfortunate lack of class hours devoted to English study, the research findings presented above suggest that their level of English may not yet be considered good enough to teach English to children. Additional class hours of general English as well as linguistics such as phonetics, phonology and syntax,

etc. should be required for the teacher certification course.

#### 5. Conclusion

This research focused on student teachers' linguistic errors as observed in teaching plans as well as in the lessons they conducted with an ALT. The results revealed frequent errors in word choice, grammar, and pronunciation that were significant enough to affect the quality of the English education they provided to elementary school children. Also, the results showed many of these errors were influenced by their first language. The findings indicated that students with CEFR A2 are not adequately proficient in English to teach it as a subject, or by extension as FLA, and are likely to suffer from communication breakdowns with ALTs.

This investigation supports the findings of previous studies and surveys on the topic (Sakai, et al, 2014; MEXT, 2008; Yoneda, 2015) with detailed data, and is expected to be beneficial in enhancing pre-service elementary education students' English ability. It further emphasizes that students' English ability must be addressed through a change in teacher education in the near future.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> JET Program ALTs attend pre-departure and post-arrival orientations, which address ALT duties but also focus upon general issues regarding life in Japan (CLAIR, 2015d). ALTs

must attend the yearly ALT Skill Development Conference (SDC) held in their prefecture (CLAIR, 2015d). ALT SDCs last from 1 to 5 days depending upon the prefecture, and the content follows guidelines set by MEXT (CLAIR, 2015d). Additional training may be required at the discretion of the contracting organization and/or prefecture, but is not mandated by the JET Programme administration.

<sup>ii</sup> Language transfer is known as cross-linguistic influence and the issue of transfer is considered to be prominent in second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989).

<sup>iii</sup> Shouten (2009) cites previous studies and concluded that a critical period (around age 12) existing only in the realm of pronunciation. L2 speakers tend to be noticeably foreign in their second language phonological production if they had not started learning before the critical period.