

How to practice the u vowel in uchinaaguchi

を is without glottal stop and う with glottal stop. To discover the glottal stop, compare を (not having it) with お (having it).

Tokyo Japanese う is pronounced with little lip rounding, the lips being slightly compressed ([ɯ]), whereas Okinawan う／を is a rounded vowel with the lips protruded ([u]). The difference can be heard in both singing and speaking: The protruded lip rounding gives the Okinawan vowel a fuller, more resonant quality than the Tokyo Japanese pronunciation. Similar rounded pronunciations of う are also found in some Japanese dialects.

Okinawan children nowadays have acquired the Tokyo Japanese [ɯ] as their default う at school, so they need to learn a protruded [u] to sing and speak Okinawan naturally. It's one of the tasks of the revitalization of Okinawan.

These are exercises which might help the children to hear and feel the fuller, more resonant quality of a true [u]:

1. Blow through a straw, then remove the straw without changing the lips, then sing or say う.
2. Imitate an owl. Make an exaggerated owl face by pushing the lips well forward into a small round tube, then say or sing を. Once this feels comfortable, add the glottal onset to produce う.
3. Use a mirror. Compare the lip position of Tokyo Japanese う with that of Okinawan う／を. For Tokyo Japanese, the lips move little. For Okinawan, they protrude clearly, forming a small round tube.