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On Teaching English Pronunciation in Korea

With Special Reference to Some Problematic Segmentals

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The aim of this paper is to present some of the major phonetic difficulties encountered by Koreans in speaking English and to give suggestions for overcoming them. The type of English pronunciation taken as the target in my presentation is that commonly referred to as "Received Pronunciation (RP for short)" and by Korean is meant the Korean standard language spoken in and around Seoul. The speech difficulties, by which I mean the difficulties in speaking English, experienced by Koreans are diverse and of different kinds including segmentals and suprasegmentals and mistakes caused by the wrong transfer of the Korean articulatory rules into English, but I shall confine myself only to those relating to segmentals (consonants and vowels).¹⁾

In general, the English consonants labio-dental /v/, /f/, dental fricatives /ð/, /θ/, liquids /l/ and /r/ which do not occur in Korean as separate phonemes tend to give Koreans persistent difficulties, and the same is true of voiced plosives /b/, /d/, and /g/. In the case of vowels, English /i/ and /u/, central vowel /ə/, and its long counterpart /ɛ:/, and /ɔ/ are found to emerge as very difficult sounds for Koreans to pronounce. My teaching

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1) For contrastive studies involving Korean and English sound systems conducted with more or less descriptive rigor, See, among others, Lukoff (1963), Shin (1964), Song (1967), and Lee (1983). Chung (1962) heads the list of scores of master's theses covering the same topic.

experience reinforces the view that a systematic phonetic approach based on a comparative study of the host and target languages is essential for efficient teaching and learning of pronunciation.

Now I will begin with the difficulties regarding consonants.²⁾

Firstly about plosives. A very significant characteristics of Korean plosives is that in Korean plosives the difference in voicing is non-distinctive unlike in English, where the voiced-voiceless difference makes a distinctive contrast. Instead, Korean plosives make a three-way distinction by their being aspirated, tense or glottalized, and unaspirated or slightly aspirated. For example, /p^hul/ in Korean means "grass," /p^ˀul/ "a horn," and /pul/ "a fire." In short, aspiration or non-aspiration makes a distinctive difference in Korean plosives. From this comes the following problem.

Koreans tend to pronounce the English voiced /b/, /d/, and /g/ as voiceless plosives [p], [d̥] and [g̥] in the word-initial position, no doubt due to their phonological habit which does not allow the word-initial occurrence of voiced plosives and affricates as well in Korean. I understand it is a general trend today even among native English speakers that voiced plosives are normally devoiced when they appear initially or finally in a phrase. The problem for Koreans, however, lies in initial voiced plosives being not only devoiced but going further tensed. For example, "boy" is pronounced as [p^ˀɔi], "dam" as [t^ˀæm] and "gum" as [k^ˀʌm].

A useful way of teaching the word-initial voiced plosives is to draw the student's attention to the fact that Korean also uses the voiced plosives in the intervocalic position as in Korean words /nabi/ meaning "butterfly," /boda/ meaning "to see," and /sagwa/ meaning "apple." When the teacher is satisfied that students can identify the difference between the voiced and voiceless plosives he can then ask them to try and pronounce first, a word like /adada/ having a vowel before the target sound /d/, and then the same word with the initial vowel cut off. This would give them a good articulatory control of "voicing."

Secondly about fricatives. English fricatives /v/ and /f/ do not exist in Korean. Usually bi-labial sounds /b/ and /p/ are used for these labio-dental

2) See Appendix I for an articulatory chart of Korean consonants.

sounds /v/ and /f/, respectively. For example, [biktəri] for /viktəri/ and [pa:ðə] for /fa:ðə/. In addition to these articulatory and voicing difficulties, Koreans have another problem. They show a strong tendency to velarize the fricatives, thus adding "w"-like element to /v/ and /f/. For example, "veal" is pronounced as [v*i:l], and "face" as [f*eis]. Such a velarized fricative sound is not only awkward to listen to but detrimental to the rhythmic pattern of English since it takes more time to pronounce. Ask students to relax and ease the muscular tension in the organs of speech, especially around the tongue and lips while concentrating on the soft touch of the lower lip against the upper teeth. This would help a great deal.

Thirdly about liquids /l/ and /r/. The /l/ and /r/ have the same position of articulation, and what is different between them is only the manner of articulation. In the Korean system, the /l/ never occurs in the initial position of a separate word. From this, Koreans are apt to substitute /r/ for /l/ in the initial position like [rips] for "lips," and [rait] for "light." Since the /l/ occurs in the final position and in the position following the preceding syllable ending with /l/ in the Korean phonological system, ask students to put /il/, for example, meaning "work" in Korean before the target sound /lips/. Together they will make [illips] and then have them cut off the initial /il/, leaving only [lips]. This would help them pronounce the /l/ sound correctly.

Now I will move on to vowel sounds.³⁾

Apart from the tendency to use the strong forms(containing full vowels) instead of the weak forms(containing weak vowels like /ə/), Koreans have phonetic problems with the following vowels.

Firstly, vowels /i/ and /u/. The short vowels /i/ and /u/ of English are perhaps the most difficult sounds for Koreans to learn. The trouble with Korean students is that they can neither hear nor pronounce these short vowels correctly. Even those who have reached the stage where they can distinguish phonetically between the long /i:/ and short /i/, and the long /u:/ and short /u/ respectively, they simply cannot make the articulatory adjustments to utter /i/ and /u/, right. What happens is that they replace

3) See Appendix 2 for an articulatory chart of Korean vowels.

the long /i:/ and /u:/ for the short /i/ and /u/, respectively. For example, [si:t] for /sit/ "sit," [hi:t] for /hit/ "hit," and [pi:ti] for /piti/ "pity." It is not enough to know that there is a quantity difference between the long and short vowels. It is much more important to realize that there is a quality difference. In other words, students should be told that /i/ and /u/ are pronounced not only shorter than the corresponding long vowels but with the tongue position much lower and slightly centralized. And the best way to help the students to get /i/ and /u/ right is to tell them to relax the articulatory organ while pronouncing the short vowels in question.

Secondly, vowels /ə:/ and /ə/. For Koreans the English central vowels /ə:/ and /ə/ are no less difficult than /i/ and /u/. Koreans usually use a half-open back vowel similar in quality to the Secondary Cardinal Vowel No. 6 [Λ] for the English central vowels, regardless of length, thus conveying an unnecessarily dark vowel color, if not leading to semantic ambiguity of a word in which such a vowel occurs. For example, [bɑ:d] for /bæ:d/ "bird," [hɑ:t] for /hæ:t/ "hurt," [ʌbaʊt] for /əbaut/ "about," and [ʌkɑ:] for /ækə:/ "occur." One can see how important the central vowels are in English when one considers their high frequency of occurrence. It is a good policy to tell students to start from the Korean back vowel /ʌ/ and push the tongue forward until they get the right quality. But it will be easier and quicker for those speaking the standard Korean language if they could modify their jong vowel /ʌ:/ [ə:] as in /bʌ:l/ meaning "bee" or /hʌ:n/ meaning "old" a little lower and forward. Once they have mastered the right quality of the central vowel, they would be able to control the vowel length without difficulty.

Finally about vowel insertion and resyllabication. Koreans find it extremely difficult to get rid of their almost unconscious habit of adding the Korean high back unrounded vowel / \bar{u} / or high front vowel /i/ to the English word-final consonants and consequently of resyllabifying the word. For instance, English words like "is," "yes," "third," "cut," "church," "if," and "dish" are pronounced as [iz \bar{u}], [jes \bar{u}], [θə:d \bar{u}], [kət \bar{u}], [tʃətʃi], [if \bar{u}], and [diʃi]. Such a mistake is more frequent with words ending with fricatives like /s/, /z/, /θ/, /ð/, and /tʃ/, which never occur syllable or word-

finally in Korean. Hence the vowel and resyllabication processes arise. This phenomenon is distinctly seen in a sentence such as "George and Madge have a college badge."

Now let me conclude by saying that after phonetic problems based on a comparative study of the native and target languages have been analyzed and a feasible way of dealing with the respective problem has been studied and experimented, all that the teacher should do in his class is to have his students practice the pronunciation of the target sounds paying attention to the differences of sounds between the two languages so that they can approximate the native speakers of the target language. I have here dealt with only the problems for Koreans who learn to speak English. But I presume the importance of the phonetic comparison for teaching a foreign language better applies to speakers of any native language since most mistakes of pronunciation that a learner of a foreign language makes comes from interference, i. e., carrying over to speaking the foreign language the fixed habit that accompanies speaking his native language.⁴⁾

References

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4) The phenomenal upsurge of interest today in rationalism and cognitive code learning notwithstanding, Lado (1957) remains unshakably cogent where praxis-oriented pedagogy is involved.

The Chart of Korean Consonants

Point Manner	Bi-labial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosives	(Frame 1) p ^h p=p			(Frame 4) t ^h t=t				(Frame 8) k ^h k=k	
Affricates						(Frame 15) tʃdʒ=dʒ			
Fricatives				(Frame 22) s=s					h
Nasals	m			n				ŋ	
Lateral				l (See Note)					
Frictionless Continuant or Glides (semi-vowels)						r (see Note)	j		

Note

- ① The [l] and [r], which occur in complementary distribution, constitute a single phoneme represented by the letter “ㄹ” in Korean orthography.
- ② The lexical examples showing a two or three-way distinction:
 - (Frame 1) /p^hul/“grass,” /p^hul/“horn,” /pul/“fire”
 - (Frame 4) /t^hal/“mask,” /t^hal/“daughter,” /tal/“moon”
 - (Frame 8) /k^hu/“large,” /k^hu/“put out,” /ku/“he”
 - (Frame 15) /tʃa/“cold,” /dʒa/“salty,” /dʒa/“sleep”
 - (Frame 22) /s^hal/“rice” /sal/“flesh”

Appendix 1.

<국문초록>

한국에서의 영어발음 교육

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외국어습득의 중요한 장벽은 목표언어 음운조직에 대한 모국어 음운조직의 방해이다. 외국어학습자가 저지르는 대부분의 발음 잘못이 그의 모국어 특수성에서 생긴 굳혀진 습관을 목표언어 발음에 옮기는데서 발생하므로, 목표언어 발음 습득의 지름길은 두 언어의 음운차이를 발견하여 그것을 극복하는데에 있다.

가령 한 한국인이 비 형제가 있어 그것을 영어로 표현하려 할 때, 그는 다 음과 같이 발음할 수 있어야 한다.

ai hæv fɔ: brʌðəz

그러나 초보 영어학습자는 아래와 같이 발음할 가능성이 많다.

ai hæbʊ po: brʌdʌj

(여기서 / \bar{u} / 는 한국어 모음 /으/ 를 나타내며, /j/ 는 한국어 자음 /스/ 을 나타낸다).

위에서 보는 바와 같은 오류는 영어의 소리가 한국어 말소리에 없는 경우에 생긴다. Central vowel /ə/ 에 해당하는 한국어 말소리가 없으므로 [ʌ] 나 [æ] 로 발음하고, 영어의 순치마찰음 /v/ 와 /f/ 는 한국어에 없으므로 /v/ 는 [b] 로 [f] 는 [p] 로 발음하는 경우를 많이 듣게 된다.

이러한 차이들의 비교분석을 통하여 한국 학생들에게 보다 나은 영어발음 지도를 할 수 있을 것이다. 잘못된 발음의 원인이 바로 두 언어 음운체계의 차이에 있기 때문이다. 이 차이의 과학적인 비교연구 없이 학생의 발음오류를 고쳐 주려고 하는 것은 정확한 진단 없이 환자를 치료하려고 하는 것과 같다.

본 논문에선 음조와 억양은 대상에서 제외하고 單音(자음 또는 모음)만을 대상으로 삼은 것을 밝혀 둔다.