

A Survey of the Korean Learner's Problems in Mastering English Pronunciation

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<Abstract>

한국인의 영어 발음 학습상 문제점 개관

유만근

이 글은 제2회 서울 국제 음성학 학술대회(SICOPS 2000) 기조강연 내용을 조금 손질한 것인데, 한국인 영어 학습자가 저지르기 쉬운 발음상 잘못을 모음, 자음별로 관찰하고 그 대책을 논의한다. 모음에서는 주로 i:-ɪ, u:-ʊ, ɔ:-ɒ, ɔ:-əʊ, e-æ 혼동이 문제이며, 또한 90종이 넘는 여러 철자로 나타나는 쪼정모음(schwa) ə 식별과 정확한 발음도 큰 문제다. 자음에서는 음소 연결방식에서 생기는 자음집변 등 한 국어 특유 현상을 영어에까지 연장하는 바람에 많은 오류가 생긴다는 것과 영어 sp-, st-, sk-에서 /p t k/는 연한소리(lenis)로 [p̠ d̠ ɡ̠]인데, 된소리로 잘못알고 있는 수가 많다는 것도 지적된다. 무릇 영어학습자는 철자만 보고 발음을 속단하지 말고 단어마다 반드시 발음을 사전에서 확인할 것과 아울러 거기에 음성학적 훈련이 수반되어야 함을 역설하며, 정확한 발음을 아는 것은 실제 영어 청취/구사에 뿐 아니라 또한 언어연구 기초확립에 필수적이라는 말로 글을 맺는다.

I. Introduction

Korean learners of English have a lot of problems in mastering English pronunciation. Some vowel problems seem to be shared by Japanese learners but other problems, especially in consonants, are peculiar to Koreans owing to the nature of phonological rules peculiar to the Korean language. Of course, there are other important problems like speech rhythm and intonation besides vowels and consonants. But they are not included here because of limited space.

II. Vowels and Diphthong

Korean learners have a tendency to confuse English *i:* / *ɪ*, *u:* / *ʊ*, *ɔ:* / *ɒ* and *ɔ:* / *əʊ* no less than Japanese learners of English have. Besides, *e* / *æ* confusion is very common among Koreans and *ə* is often replaced by other vowels according to the spelling of a word.

The English high lax vowels *ɪ* and *ʊ* are usually pronounced somewhat tenser and higher by Koreans. So *eat/it* and *pool/pull* are often confused.

Both English *ɒ* and *ɔ:* are often replaced by half-close back rounded vowel [ɔ]. So *boxing* 'bɒksɪŋ is pronounced as 'bɒksɪŋ or ['bɒkɔ:ŋ] and *online* ,ɒn'laɪn as ,ɒn'laɪn or [ˈɒnnain], while *dawn* dɔ:n / *don* dɒn or *Sean* ʃɔ:n / *shone* ʃɒn (RP) are confused.

To make matters worse, the spelling of words does not always tell the distinction of each pair of vowels as seen in the following examples.

1. <i>i:</i> / <i>ɪ</i>	<i>police</i>	pə'li:s	<i>pizza</i>	'pi:tʃə
	<i>political</i>	pə'li:tɪkl	<i>fizzy</i>	'fɪzɪ
	<i>kilo</i>	'ki:lə		
	<i>kilogram</i>	'ki:lɒgrəm		
2. <i>u:</i> / <i>ʊ</i>	<i>food</i>	fʊ:d	<i>cool</i>	ku:l
	<i>hood</i>	hʊd	<i>wool</i>	wʊl
	<i>goose</i>	gu:s		
	<i>gooseberry</i>	'gʊzbrɪ (RP)		

3. ɔ: / ɒ	<i>cause</i>	kɔ:z	<i>author</i>	ɔ:θə
	<i>because</i>	bɪ'kɔ:z	<i>cauliflower</i>	'kɔ:lflaʊə
	<i>waltz</i>	wɔ:ls (RP)		
	<i>wallet</i>	'wɒlɪt		

4. ɔ: / əʊ	<i>thought</i>	θɔ:t	<i>broad</i>	bɾɔ:d
	<i>though</i>	ðəʊ	<i>road</i>	rəʊd
	<i>floor</i>	flɔ:		
	<i>brooch</i>	bɾəʊtʃ		

For Koreans to distinguish between the two sound values of [ʌ] and [ɒ] is not a serious problem but they often confuse the two vowels because their spelling does not tell which is which.

5. ʌ / ɒ	<i>monkey</i>	'mʌŋki	<i>ton</i>	tʌn
	<i>donkey</i>	'dɒŋki	<i>don</i>	dɒn
	<i>done</i>	dʌm	<i>none</i>	nʌn
	<i>gone</i>	ɡɒm	<i>non-</i>	nɒn
	<i>sponge</i>	spʌndʒ		
	<i>sponsor</i>	'spɒnsə		

Words like *front*, *monkey*, *sponge*, *ton* are often mispronounced by Koreans as [frɒnt'ʊ, 'mɒŋki, spɒndʒi, tɒn].

Koreans' pronunciation of '-.com' ['dɒt'kɒm] (or 'dat'kam in AmE) is very interesting. They do not think the two vowels in the word are the same, and change the second one into [ʌ] or [ə]. The result is the deformed word ['dat'kʌm] or ['datkə m] (닷컴) as seen in Korean newspapers these days.

6. e / æ

The English vowel æ which is far lower than cardinal [ɛ] is often confused by Koreans with e. So *snack* snæk is usually pronounced by Koreans as snek and sometimes misunderstood as snake sneɪk.

Many Koreans think the vowel of the first syllable of *any/many* 'eni/'meni is the same as that of *animal/man* 'æniməl/mæn. Or even those who know their difference in phonetic symbols often fail in pronouncing them distinctively. The half-close e and half-open ε are phonemically different in central Korean where the Standard Seoul dialect belongs. But they are merged into one in southern dialects. So the three different English vowel qualities of e, æ and the first element of the diphthong eə [eə] are often confused by Korean learners of English.

D. Jones already said, "The correct sound of æ can generally be obtained by remembering that æ must have a sound intermediate in quality between ε and a. It is useful in practising the sound to keep the mouth very wide open."

"The sound may also be obtained by trying to imitate the baaing of a sheep, which resembles 'bæ:'bæ:. Those who are unable to obtain the exact quality by practising such exercises should note that it is better to err on the side of a rather than on the side of ε. a is actually used for æ in many parts of the North of England." (Jones 1960: 73).

In addition to that, J. C. Wells says, "Listening to old film clips or recordings we are often struck by the quality of the vowel /æ/ previously to be heard, as in *that bad man* /'dæt 'bad 'mæn/. It was not only considerably less open than is now customary, but was also tenser and had more pharyngeal constriction. Currently this vowel is more relaxed and may be quite similar to cardinal [a]." (Wells 1997: 17). At last, *the Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English* (Upton et al. 2001) adopted the symbol /a/ for this vowel(English vowel No. 4) in British English.

So the Japanese substitute [a] for /æ/is far more advantageous than the Korean's [ε] or [e] in intelligibility.

7. ə (schwa)

The English weak central vowel ə is not easy at all for Koreans to pronounce correctly, because there is no half-close/half-open central vowel in modern Korean. Besides, there are over 90 different spellings which are supposed to denote ə in English. About half of them are listed below for instance:

- | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------|------------|------------------|
| 1. opera | 2. Isaac | 3. ma'am * | 4. mountain |
| 5. Caernavonshire | 6. Branagh | 7. Hannah | 8. Alastair |
| 9. leopard | 10. Islay | 11. moment | 12. bureaucratic |
| 13. luncheon | 14. concert | 15. were * | 16. Syzergh |

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 17. <u>amateur</u> | 18. <u>Edinburgh</u> | 19. <u>Durham</u> | 20. <u>horrible</u> |
| 21. <u>parliament</u> | 22. <u>confirmation</u> | 23. <u>Berkshire</u> | 24. <u>method</u> |
| 25. <u>cupboard</u> | 26. <u>does *</u> | 27. <u>tortoise</u> | 28. <u>Belvoir</u> |
| 29. <u>Lincoln</u> | 30. <u>effort</u> | 31. <u>famous</u> | 32. <u>borough</u> |
| 33. <u>Melbourne</u> | 34. <u>labo(u)red</u> | 35. <u>Wigtownshire</u> | 36. <u>massacre</u> |
| 37. <u>focus</u> | 38. <u>guerilla</u> | 39. <u>Mauritius</u> | 40. <u>pleasure</u> |
| 41. <u>gunwale</u> | 42. <u>boatswain</u> | 43. <u>answer</u> | 44. <u>Mynachdy</u> |
| 45. <u>martyr</u> | 46. <u>martyred</u> | 47. <u>pennyworth</u> | |

* a weak form.

So both how and when to pronounce ə is a very challenging problem. Perhaps to know when to pronounce it is more difficult for Koreans than how to pronounce it. In April 2000, the writer gave a transcription test of some words containing [ə] to 68 Korean students attending his lecture on English Phonetics at Saunggyoun-Gwan University. More than half of them are majoring in English. Let me introduce a little bit of the result of the test.

dramatic drə'mætɪk

For the word '*dramatic*', nine students (13%) gave the correct answer. Eight other students transcribed the first syllable with ə, but made a mistake in the second syllable. The rest of the students (75%) did not use ə in the first syllable.

Elizabeth ɪ'lɪzəbəθ

For the name *Elizabeth*, only one student got marks by answering with three schwas like [ə'lɪzəbəθ], which can be an alternative pronunciation of ɪ'lɪzəbəθ. The alternative use of ɪ or ə in a weak syllable is very common in current English pronunciation as in *become* b'ɪkʌm, *Kennedy* ke'n'ɪdɪ and *Rockefeller* 'rɒk'ɪfələ.

Alastair 'æləstə

For the name *Alastair*, nobody gave the correct answer 'æləstə. Making mistakes in the first and second syllables, only two students transcribed the final vowel with ə like ə'læstə.

photographer fə'tɒgrəfə

As for the word *photographer*, only two students transcribed it with three schwas. But one of the two students was unable to gain marks by misusing ʌ instead of ɒ in the second syllable.

J. W. Lewis discussed “The 100 English words most difficult to pronounce” i.e. weakform words in the inaugural issue of The journal of the English Phonetic Society of Japan in 1997. But to the Korean learners of English, I think, any word containing a schwa or schwas always offers nearly the same difficulty as the weakform words.

By the way, the frequency of ə in colloquial English (RP) is the highest(10.74%) among all vowels and diphthongs. (The second is ɪ <8.33%> and the third is e <2.97%>. The frequency of total all vowels is 39%.) (Gimson & Cruttenden. 1994: 136)

So we cannot emphasize too much the importance of ə in the teaching of English pronunciation. The learners of English should know how to pronounce it and when to pronounce it. Otherwise, the stress-timed English rhythm cannot be maintained and speaking English will be very burdensome.

III. Consonants

Although there are some English consonant sounds difficult for the Koreans to pronounce one by one, more serious problems arise when particular two consonant phonemes are combined together. There are certain combinations of two consonant sounds which are normal in English but not pronounceable in Korean. So Korean learners are apt to apply the Korean assimilation rules to English consonant sounds and make their English pronunciation sound un-English. The following are some examples.

1. Replacing of the plosive consonant by its nasal counterpart when it comes before a nasal consonant (plosive →nasal / __nasal):

top marks 'tɒp mɑ:kz → 'tɒm—
submit səb'mɪt → 'səm—
not now 'nɒt 'nəʊ → 'nɒn—
good news 'gʊd 'nju:z → 'gʊn—
Macmillan mək'mɪlən → mæŋ— [mæŋ—]
dogma 'dɒgmə → 'dɒŋ—

Or, [-hʷ] is inserted after p, t, k, and [-w], after b, d, g.

'tɒp mɑ:kz → 'tɒp^{hʷ} mɑ:kz
 səb'mɪt → səbʷ'mɪt^{hʷ}

'dɒgmə → 'dɒɡʌmə

2. Replacing of l and r by /n/ when they come after a nasal consonant
(/l→n / nasal__)

Hamlet 'hæmlɪt → 'hæmnɪt ['hæmpɪt]
Henry 'henrɪ → 'hennɪ [heŋɪni]
online ,ɒn'laɪn → ,ɒn'nain [ɒn'nain]
home run 'həʊm rʌn → 'həʊmnʌn ['hə:mnʌn]
kingly 'kɪŋli → 'kɪŋni ['kɪŋni]
King Richard 'kɪŋ'rɪtʃəd → 'kɪŋ'rɪtʃəd ['kɪŋ'rɪtʃədʷ]

3. Replacing of n by l when n is preceded by l (n →l / l__):

all night 'ɔ:l'naɪt → 'ɔ:l'lait
coolness 'ku:lɪnis → 'ku:llɪs
vulnerable 'vʌlnərəbl → 'vʌllərəbl

4. Replacing of l by r when it is followed by j, w, h or a vowel
(l→r / __-consonantal):

will you wɪl ju: → wɪrju:
Milwaukee mɪl'wɔ:ki → mɪr'wɔ:ki [mɪ'r'wɔ:ki]
wilful Hillary 'wɪfl 'hɪləri → 'wɪlfr'hɪləri
beautiful Ann 'bjʊ:tɪfl 'æn → 'bjʊ:trf'ræn

5. Inserting of n before j:

top Europeans 'tɒpjəərə'piənz → 'tɒpnjəərə— [tɒmpjəərə—]
what you say wɒtju:'seɪ → wɒtnju:'seɪ [wɒnpju:'seɪ]
back yard 'bæk'jɑ:d → 'bæk'njɑ:d [bæŋpjɑ:dʷ]

6. Devoicing of voiced obstruents

Koreans find it difficult to pronounce voiced obstruents i.e. plosives, affricates and fricatives unless between vowels. So **b**, **d**, **g** and **ʒ** as in *boy*, *doll*, *girl* and *joy* usually become devoiced (voiceless lenis). When two of these consonants are

combined together they are still more difficult to pronounce. They are usually changed into voiceless unaspirated sounds (unaspirated fortis).

Examples:

big dogs 'bɪg'dɒgz → 'bɪk'tɒgz [bɪk'tɒks] or ['bɪgʊ'dɒgz]
good boy 'gʊd'bɔɪ → 'gʊt'pɔɪ
Rugby 'rʌgbɪ → 'rʌkpɪ

And similarly,

football 'fʊtbɔ:l → 'fʊtpɔ:l
stop doing 'stɒp'du:ɪŋ → stɒptu:ɪŋ
take gowns 'teɪk'gaʊnz → 'teɪk'kaʊnz

7. Voicing of the voiceless plosive consonant

Voiceless plosives are usually changed by Koreans into voiced counterparts between vowels.

keep on 'ki:p'ɒn → 'ki:b'ɒn
up and down 'ʌp ənd 'daʊn → 'ʌb ənd—
Janet Eliot 'dʒænit'eɪlət → 'dʒænid'eɪ—
Robert Anderson 'rɒbət'ændəsn → 'rɒbəd'æsn—
MacArthur mə'kɑ:θə → mə'gɑ:θə ['megadə]

8. Inserting of ə/ɪ between consonants

Two combined consonants cannot be pronounced at the initial or final position of a word in Korean. So a vowel (usually ɪ) is inserted between two consonants by Koreans even when an English word is pronounced.

button 'bʌtn → 'bʌtən ['bʌtʰɪn]
hidden 'hɪdn → 'hɪdən ['hɪdɪn]
gentle 'dʒentl → 'dʒentəl ['dʒentʰɪl]
battle 'bætl → 'bætəl ['bætʰɪl]
film 'fɪlm → 'fɪləm ['fɪlɪm]

realm 'reɪm → 'reləɪm ['relluɪm]

9. Lenition of **s** in clusters

D. Jones said, "The English **s**-phoneme may be considered for practical language teaching as comprising only one sound." (Jones 1969:185). But Koreans use two allophones of **s**. They usually pronounce it properly as fortis before a vowel but change it into lenis in clusters **sp**—, **st**—, **sk**— as in *spill*, *still* and *skill*, while pronouncing the other elements **-p**-, **-t**-, **-k**- as fortis, either aspirated or not. Their pronunciation of these clusters is not correct. In correct English pronunciation, the /**p t k** / in *spill*, *still* and *skill* are voiceless, and yet they are lenis. English does not have the contrastive **sbill*, **sdill*, **sgill*." (PSJ. 1981: 312~313)

So Koreans need special attention to pronounce the following words correctly.

<i>speech</i>	<i>sports</i>	<i>spider</i>
<i>steam</i>	<i>student</i>	<i>stove</i>
<i>skate</i>	<i>scholar</i>	<i>sky</i>

The initial **s** should be pronounced as fortis, and the following plosives, as voiceless lenis, i.e. [p̥ t̥ k̥] respectively.

IV. Conclusion

Those problems I have touched upon are very difficult for Koreans to surmount. But there is a way to solve them. The learners of English as a foreign language had better know every word by its phonetic symbols. For this purpose a pronouncing dictionary is indispensable and training in phonetic transcription is really helpful. In addition to that, an expert phonetician's correction and guide must be accompanied.

So all teachers and learners of English are strongly recommended to love and study English phonetics to pronounce English better and also as an essential basic tool of all linguistic research.

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