

Attitudes of Korean University Students towards English Pronunciation

Jeremy Bissett*
Jee Hyun Ma**
(Chonnam National University)

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The goal of this study is to better understand the attitudes of students towards pronunciation in order to better evaluate the current university curriculum, as well as to make recommendations on how to improve the quality of education for students of English in South Korea. A total of fifty-five students were given both a questionnaire and a short interview which were utilized for the present study. The results demonstrate that the students agree pronunciation is important in English, and they wish to sound like a native speaker. It was also found that students are slightly worried about their own English accent, however they have not had much instruction on pronunciation. In addition, the participants of the study appeared to be more concerned with their accents, rather than comprehensibility or intelligibility. The most widely preferred accent by the participants was American accent followed by British accent. Although the participants acknowledged the importance of pronunciation or accent in English, they were reluctant to receive a class focusing on pronunciation. Based on the findings we suggest that there should be more collaboration between native and non-native speakers of English in Korea. Furthermore, we recommend that Korean students be exposed to more varieties of World Englishes through the integration of students from other countries into the classroom as well as conducted a class on World Englishes.

Key Words: pronunciation, accent, Korean university students, attitudes

I . INTRODUCTION

English is the language used for international communication, with much of it being done between non-native speakers of English. The acceptance of English as an international language (EIL) has produced the need for global intelligibility, as opposed to acquiring a particular native-like accent. Researchers generally agree on this point and have expressed the need for teacher training in pronunciation, more research on the best

* First author

**Corresponding author

ways to teach it, and how to encourage learners to focus on intelligibility, not native-like accent.

Despite the increasing importance of intelligibility and understanding a variety of Englishes, Korean learners of English still seem to prefer a couple of styles of English, which are mostly American English and then British English (Choi, 2007; Jung, 2005; Oh, 2011; Park, 2009; Park, 2012). This may be from several reasons. Since the 1900s, the curriculum of English education has been influenced by the curriculum of the U. S. to some extent (Choi, 2006; McArthur, 2002). Many Koreans have limited opportunities of exposure to a wide variety of English and it can lead to communication breakdowns when they converse with non-native speakers of English with different types of English. Thus, in this paper we hope to examine the current position pronunciation holds in the attitudes, opinions, and practices of university students in South Korea through a questionnaire and interview. Specifically, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How important is English pronunciation to Korean students?
2. Has the goal of Korean students become mutual understandability when communicating in English?
3. Have students had pronunciation focused instruction in the past?
4. Do they desire more instruction on pronunciation?

II . Literature Review

Back in 2005, Derwing and Munro found that pronunciation was not considered to be of much importance in the field of linguistics. Therefore, teachers were not trained and hence did not feel comfortable teaching it. Since then, it seems that not much has changed in terms of pronunciation and pronunciation-focused language education. Lear, Carey, and Couper (2015) stated that “despite widespread agreement about the importance of pronunciation, pronunciation is the aspect of language that receives least attention” (p. 1). The current situation in Europe is similar. Henderson, et al. (2012) studied English teachers from seven countries in Europe. It was found that there was a disparity between the amount of pronunciation that was being taught and the importance of speaking in the major proficiency tests. Naidoo and Im (2014) reported a comparable situation in Korea where pronunciation, based on their own observations, was not apparent in the current curriculum of Korean universities.

As to the question whether direct instruction on pronunciation is helpful for language education, Krashen (2013) published a review of Saito’s (2012) synthesis of studies on pronunciation. He found that Saito’s synthesis did show that direct instruction on pronunciation was beneficial and he also called for more research on the effects of direct

instruction on pronunciation. Saito and Lyster's (2012) study investigated the effects of form focused instruction and corrective feedback specifically focusing on pronunciation. It was found that the form focused group with corrective feedback improved, at both the controlled and spontaneous level. While this study currently might be the best examination of explicit instruction and corrective feedback in terms of pronunciation, there are some limitations. For example, the relatively short length of instruction that was given, the nature of the test of spontaneous speech (picture description), and the difficulty of using consistent techniques in a classroom setting should be considered. However, the study does imply that corrective feedback in the form of recasts does improve pronunciation. Therefore, while more research needs to be done, explicit instruction on pronunciation using diverse techniques shows promise. Then, which leads us to the next questions could be whether university students in South Korea desire to be taught pronunciation or not.

When planning the curriculum, one of the most important factors that should always be considered is the desires or the needs of students who will take the course. This is also true when discussing pronunciation. Kang (2014) conducted a study of learners' attitudes towards pronunciation instruction. Only 25 percent of the participants were Korean, and they were studying English in America in an ESL setting as opposed to an EFL setting. There were many differences in the responses depending on which country the participants were from. Kang (2014) found that while intelligibility is currently emphasized in the field of English learning, learners do not always share this view in regards to their own pronunciation. She also discovered that students prefer an accent from an inner circle country, specifically, America. Kachru (1992) categorized countries into three circles: the inner circle for countries where English is the native language, the outer circle where English is spoken as a second language, and the expanding circle where English is spoken as a foreign language. This may be related to the fact that the research was carried out in the U. S. and the participants made a choice to study English in the U. S. among many countries where English is the first language. In Coskun's (2011) study, Turkish university students prefer an accent from an inner circle country. The American accent was preferred most, followed by the British accent. He also stated that 72.3 percent of the learners said they preferred to be taught by a native English speaker, as opposed to a qualified teacher from their own country.

Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) compared students from Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea. They discovered a few differences. They found South Korean university students have a negative view of their own accents although not as much as Japanese learners, while Malaysians did not. They stated this might be due to South Korea's push to learn English with the goal of being able to better explain Korean culture to foreigners, and therefore desire to have a native-like accent. Regardless of if this broad statement is

completely accurate, it needs to be considered to bring more positive attitudes towards their own accents. In a very recent symposium specifically dealing with pronunciation, it was agreed upon that teachers need to be more explicit with learners concerning pronunciation (Lear, Carey, & Couper, 2015). There was some disagreement about which should come first, perception or production, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

There have been studies in this area conducted specifically in South Korea. Choi (2007) found that, similar to other countries, Korean university students strongly preferred the American or British accents. She came to the conclusion that a class on World Englishes would help learners be more confident and proud of their Korean accent. In terms of who should teach pronunciation, she found that lower level students preferred to learn English from a Korean instructor, while higher level students preferred to be taught by a native speaker of English. A few years later, Park (2009) found that students are still preferential to the American or British accents. To counteract this, he suggested that the English materials used by native Korean teachers in their classrooms contain different varieties of English, not just the preferred North American type. Moreover, he recommended there be more teacher training in this area. Again, in 2011, Oh found that Korean students continue to prefer the American accent, and goes on to state that students need to be exposed to more varieties of World Englishes. It was also suggested that a class on World Englishes would be beneficial.

Previous research in this area has suggested a number of things. First, it is generally accepted that intelligibility should be the goal of English education and not to attain a specific accent. Second, even though understandability should be the goal, students are not instructed on this topic, and their teachers are unprepared to do so. Third, students stubbornly retain their desire to obtain either an American or British accent. Finally, there is still disagreement on how pronunciation should be taught. Prior research still has left unanswered questions on this topic.

III. Method

1. Participants

The participants were 55 students of a Korean university, who enrolled an English conversation class taught by one of the researchers, an English-L1 speaker from the U. S. The students were 15 male and 40 female. However gender differences were not considered in the present study. Their ages ranged from 21 to 36, with a mean age of 23.6. All the participants actively participated in the class and displayed a diligent attitude throughout the semester. Although the number of participants was rather small to provide a whole picture of Korean university students' attitudes toward English pronunciation, it

would be possible to give an impression of the attitudes and beliefs of current students as to English pronunciation in Korea.

2. Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire and a short interview were utilized. The questionnaire was adapted from Kang's (2014) study. Kang (2014) investigated the attitudes toward English pronunciation including accents with non-native speakers of English studying in the U.S, that is, in ESL context. Since the participants in the current study were all Korean learners, we excluded nationality from the original questionnaire. However, during the interview, we discovered that two of the participants had lived in an African country. Their responses will be discussed a bit more detail in the following "Results and Discussion" section. First, all the participants provided their biological gender and age and they were asked to answer six questions using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree, and 3=neutral). They were informed that their responses would be used only for the research purpose and asked to provide honest answers. The following were the six questions that they participants were expected to answer:

1. I think English pronunciation is important;
2. I am concerned about my English pronunciation;
3. I really want to sound like a native speaker of English;
4. I do not mind having an accent as long as people understand my English;
5. I have been taught how to improve my pronunciation;
6. I wish I had more instruction on pronunciation.

To back-up the above six questions regarding the attitudes toward English pronunciation, we also created one open-ended question and one closed-ended question. The open-ended question was about whether, if possible, they would like to take a class focusing on English pronunciation in the future or not, and the reasons for their preference. The closed-ended question was about a specific English accent that the participants prefer to learn. The questionnaire was given in English after checking the readability and format of the questions with other colleagues prior to administrating the questionnaire, and the participants were allowed to ask questions if they had any while answering the questions. The results were inputted and analyzed using the Data Analysis feature of *Microsoft Excel 2010*.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Attitudes towards English Pronunciation

The participants' attitude or perception of the pronunciation of English was firstly investigated. Regarding the first question asking the importance of English pronunciation, the total of 44 students acknowledged the importance of it accounting for 80 percent of the total responses. No student remarked that pronunciation is not important in English and approximately 16 percent of the participants produced rather neutral responses as to the importance of pronunciation. The results show that students, in general, agree that pronunciation is important in English, evidencing the increasing demand of communicative use of English.

TABLE 1
Results of Question 1: I think English pronunciation is important

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
55	0 (0%)	2 (3.6%)	9 (16.4%)	25 (45.5%)	19 (34.5%)	4.1

More than half of the participants seemed to be concerned about their own English pronunciation (see Table 2). The total of 33 students expressed their concern of English pronunciation to some degree, marking "Agree" or "Strongly agree." Five students answered they were not concerned about their English pronunciation, winning around nine percent of the total. The follow-up interview revealed that the five students put more emphasis on comprehensibility or intelligibility than native-like pronunciation, and they had a positive experience to be understood with their own accents while communicating with English native speakers.

TABLE 2
Results of Question 2: I am concerned about my English pronunciation

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
55	0 (0%)	5 (9.1%)	17 (30.9%)	21 (38.2%)	12 (21.8%)	3.7

Unlike the other questions, one student did not provide the response of the third questionnaire item and the total of 54 students answered the third question. The results

demonstrated that Korean learners of English still prefer to have native-like accents deeply although the concept of “Englishes” acknowledging various accents or dialects in English has drawn strong support in this global era. These results were similar to those of Park (2012) remarking “native-speakerism is rooted in Korean society” (p. 335). It was interesting that even some students who were not much concerned their English pronunciation expressed their wish to sound like a native speaker of English, displaying the discrepancy between their current competence of English and their wishes as for English pronunciation.

TABLE 3

Results of Question 3: I really want to sound like a native speaker of English

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
54	2 (3.7%)	2 (3.7%)	7 (13.0%)	19 (35.2%)	24 (44.4%)	4.1

No response = 1

The fourth question asked whether or not they do not mind having an accent as long as people understand their English. It seemed that Korean college students did mind their English accent. Twenty five students answered “Agree” or “Strongly agree” while 14 students checked “Strongly disagree” or “Disagree.” That is, around 45 percent of the participants did not want to have their own English accent even though they could successfully deliver their intended meaning to their interlocutors while “comprehensibility,” “understandability,” or “intelligibility” were considered more importantly to 25 percent of the students. The results reflected that the status of “Englishes” had not been well established and soaked into Korean society, showing the necessity of letting Korean students exposure to a wide variety of Englishes.

TABLE 4

Results of Question 4: I do not mind having an accent as long as people understand my English

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
55	2 (3.6%)	12 (21.8%)	16 (29.1%)	23 (41.9%)	2 (3.6%)	3.2

Note. The Likert scale number was reversely coded for Question 4. Thus, a higher score means that they do mind having an accent even though people understand their English.

Next, the participants were asked to answer if they had an experience of receiving an instruction in order to enhance their English pronunciation. The total of 25 students stated that they had been taught English pronunciation instruction to some extent. Many of them

during the interview stated that the portion of English pronunciation instruction was relatively small compared to other major skill instruction even though they had an experience to learn English pronunciation in their secondary school days. Based on the wider range of responses compared to the other questions, it might be possible that the proportion of instruction focusing on English pronunciation could be largely different depending on individual school or teacher.

TABLE 5

Results of Question 5: I have been taught how to improve my pronunciation

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
55	4 (7.2%)	10 (18.2%)	16 (29.1%)	23 (41.9%)	2 (3.6%)	3.2

In connection with the fifth question, the last one asked whether they would like to have more instruction on pronunciation and the results were rather unexpected. No one strongly wanted to receive English pronunciation-related class and nine students agreed that they wish they had more instruction on pronunciation. The total of 21 students did not want to receive more pronunciation instruction with a rate of 40 percent approximately, and many of the participants did not provide clear position toward pronunciation instruction.

TABLE 6

Results of Question 6: I wish I had more instruction on pronunciation

<i>N</i>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
55	5 (9.1%)	16 (29.1%)	25 (45.4)	9 (16.4%)	0 (0%)	3.7

To put all the responses together, it appeared that the participants of the current study well recognized the importance of English pronunciation, wished to have native-like pronunciation, but had not had a lot of instruction on pronunciation. The combined results also indicated that the participants were more concerned with their accents rather than intelligibility. Moreover, they seemed not to want to put much time only for pronunciation instruction. However, when we refer to the open ended question in Table 9 it can be seen that 69.1% of the participants said they would like to take a pronunciation class. The inconsistency of these two responses will be explained more when we discuss the results of the open-ended questions.

TABLE 7
Rank Order of Question Responses

Questions	Mean	Rank
I think English pronunciation is important	4.1	1
I really want to sound like a native speaker of English	4.1	1
I am concerned about my English pronunciation	3.7	3
I wish I had more instruction on pronunciation	3.7	3
I have been taught how to improve my pronunciation	3.2	5
I do not mind having an accent as long as people understand my English	3.2	5

2. Preferred Pronunciation and Class Participation

Some of the responses to the open and closed questions were able to shed some light on the students' perception and attitude towards pronunciation. Because of previous research in this area, we may assume the participants will prefer the American or British accents. However, the purpose of this question was to see if the globalization of Korea over the last decade has had any effect on the students' desired accent. The hope is that the recent trend towards understandability over a native-like accent would produce a greater variety of preferred accents. The students were asked to answer their preferred pronunciation and write down whether they would attend pronunciation class in their future, and why. The American accent was most widely preferred winning around 73 percent, and British accent was the second widely preferred one with a rate of 16 percent. Only four students expressed that they did not care about their variety of English accent. Previous studies pointed out that students tended to prefer the accent that they were familiar with (Park, 2012; Yoon, 2012). We could assume that Korean learners of English have been exposed to either American or English accent most widely and they prefer to have the two accents they were familiar with. If we provide students more exposure opportunity to a variety of English accents, it might be possible that the students would like to have more diverse types of English accents. One of the students interestingly wrote, "I prefer American accent, but British accent sounds more sexy." The student elaborated her response during the follow-up interview by saying she preferred to have American accent since English users mostly speak with American accent. This may imply that Korean students' preferred pronunciation is closely related to practicality and their ideal English accent might not correspond with preferred one.

TABLE 8
Accent Preferences

Preferred Accent	Frequency	Percent (%)
American	40	72.7
British	9	16.4
Australian	1	1.8
Canadian	1	1.8
Do not care	4	7.3
Other accents	0	0

(*N*=55)

The participants were also asked to answer whether they would like to take the class focusing only on pronunciation. While this question was similar to question 6 in Part 1, the purpose of this question was to discover if the students were open to taking a class specifically on pronunciation as opposed to being a supplementary part of the curriculum. The second question asked, “If there was a class focusing only on pronunciation, would you like to take it, and why?” As Table 9 shows, most of the participants would like to take a pronunciation class, producing positive responses with a rate of around 70 percent. Some of the positive reactions to a pronunciation class were fairly strong: quite a few ‘definitely!’ or ‘absolutely!’ responses were found in the open-ended response section. One student stated a pronunciation class “could be fun and fix my bad pronunciation,” displaying his concern of English pronunciation and expectation of improving it at the same time through the pronunciation class.

Some of the negative responses implied a lack of understanding of all that pronunciation entails. For instance, one student stated, “I wouldn’t take a pronunciation class. I think speaking fluency is far more important than pronunciation.” This comment suggests that the student perceives pronunciation only in terms of a segmental level and not a concept that includes a suprasegmental level such as prominence, intonation, stress, rhythm. On the other hand, another student said she would like to take a pronunciation class because “English is a rhythmical language,” suggesting that a pronunciation class could include both segmental and suprasegmental aspects. One student who felt pronunciation was important and wanted an American accent said he thought that movies and dramas were the most interesting way to study pronunciation. It seemed that he had good experience of acquiring pronunciation using authentic materials using multi-media.

A couple of participants were not interested in a pronunciation class because they thought they could improve pronunciation by themselves. This might be possible but demanding for some students especially for low-level learners. Another participant stated

that there is no need for a class dedicated to pronunciation since his pronunciation could improve through his listening and speaking classes. These responses implied that some Korean learners of English have considered pronunciation as an additional language skill rather than major ones, which could be sharpened by taking other language classes such as listening and speaking ones. Further, the students who provided negative responses tended to think that pronunciation would not be the area that could be successfully acquired with the help of others including a pronunciation-focus class.

TABLE 9
Future Pronunciation Class Participation

Pronunciation class participation	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	38	69.1
No	14	25.5
Maybe	3	5.4

(N=55)

There was some discrepancy between Table 6 and Table 9. Question 6 asked, “I wish I had more instruction on pronunciation.” The wording of this question may have been problematic. The students may have taken this to mean in relation to their past or current class. Only 16.4% responded positively to this question. In contrast, the question in Table 7 asked “If there was a class focusing only on pronunciation, would you like to take it?” The response to this was 69.1% affirmative. The differing results of these two questions imply that question 6 might have been poorly worded.

After the questionnaire was given, twelve of the participants volunteered to be interviewed. I talked with the students myself with their professor present, in the hope that they would speak more freely. As volunteers, it can be suggested that they would have a strong feeling one way or another towards pronunciation. In order to promote a relaxed atmosphere, the interview was quite informal. The participants were simply asked if there was anything they wanted to say about pronunciation and their own education.

During these discussions, a couple of points commonly arose. First, most of them agreed that the majority of English learners, upon graduation, were not prepared to have a conversation in English, especially with foreigners including international students. Second, they proposed that bringing in more opportunities to use English with native speakers of English would help with enhancing their communication skills. One of the participants said that Koreans, including her and her fellow classmates, in general have a problem communicating with foreigners. She felt quite strongly that Korean learners of English need to be able to hold a conversation in English through ample exposure,

opportunities, and diverse classes focusing on communication skills with pronunciation practices.

V. Conclusion

The presented study aimed to examine the attitudes towards English pronunciation with university students in South Korea through a questionnaire and interview in order to gain a better understanding of the current trends and attitudes of English pronunciation and reflect on future implications. Furthermore, whether Korean learners of English desire to be taught pronunciation was also probed into. This was done in order to better understand the ever-changing desires and needs of students, in order to better meet their curricular needs. While studies of this kind have been done before, this study is meaningful for the following reasons. First, the majority of the previous studies were not specific to Korea. Second, it is worth discovering whether or not language learners are willing to take a class solely devoted to pronunciation. Finally, there has been a push for intelligibility over having a native speaker like accent for over a decade. It is important to see how this push has had any effect on the current curriculum or the present-day attitudes of students.

Due to the small number of participants, implications of this study are obviously limited. However, a number of points should be made. First, the participants generally agreed that pronunciation is important, and they were concerned with their own accent. They also quite strongly preferred an American accent. The results are similar to other studies conducted with Korean participants over the previous years, demonstrating that they put more emphasis on native-like pronunciation than comprehensibility of intelligibility. Thus, it is necessary that second language learners, specifically in South Korea, need to be exposed to a variety of World Englishes in order to improve listening comprehension, intelligibility, and the attitude towards their own pronunciation. The findings also indicated that the participants had not had much instruction on pronunciation and they seemed not to want to receive pronunciation-focused instruction much compared to their wish to sound like native-likeness. The interview data demonstrated that some of the participants wrongly understood the content of pronunciation class, assuming that a pronunciation class only contains segmental aspects of English language. In addition, students tended to think that pronunciation would be the area that could be learned and improved by their own practice, not with the help of specific instruction on it.

Researchers and educators generally agree that instruction on pronunciation is beneficial, but what kind of instruction, and who should do the instructing, is still debatable. Moreover, while the goal of pronunciation should be intelligibility, learners of

English continue to desire a certain kind of accent. In terms of attitude, research shows that learners vary depending on where they are from. That being said, more research needs to be done in this area, especially in terms of how to expose students to more varieties of World Englishes which would increase comprehension, intelligibility, and hopefully attitude. Since there is some debate on who should teach pronunciation we think there should be more collaboration between the native speakers of English teaching in Korea, and their Korean counterparts. Furthermore, we believe that the integration of students from both the outer and expanding countries into Korean university classrooms might have positive effects on intelligibility and the perception of accents and this can be studied more in the future. While exposure to World Englishes has been shown to be beneficial, so have pronunciation classes, and therefore should be taught, in tandem with a World Englishes class.

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Jeremy Bissett (First author)

Department of English Education, Chonnam National University

77 Yongbong-ro, Buk-gu, Gwangju 500-757, Korea

Email: jerbissett@yahoo.com

Ma, Jee Hyun (Corresponding author)

Department of English Education, Chonnam National University

77 Yongbong-ro, Buk-gu, Gwangju 500-757, Korea

Tel: +82-(0)62-530-2445

Email: jeehyun@jnu.ac.kr

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