

Pronunciation Difficulties of Korean Students Learning English as a Second Language

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Before we raise any of the questions of how to teach a foreign language and what to teach our students, there should be much more important preliminary work of finding out the special problems of students learning a new set of language habits against the background of their different native language habits. A teacher very often will be faced with the need to diagnose quickly and accurately the problems troubling his students. A well trained teacher not only knows the particular pattern which troubles the student but also what substitution he can make which might lead to another solution to a baffling situation.

When a speaker of a second language gets to be a certain age he can not easily pronounce sounds of another language even though he has no definite speech impediment. What is even more surprising to the language teachers is that he cannot easily hear language sounds other than those of his native language even though he suffers no hearing defects. This shows that in the process of learning a foreign language one tends to transfer one's entire native language system. He tends to transfer to the language he is learning, his phonemes, his stress and rhythm patterns, his intonation patterns and their interaction with other phonemes.

Thus one finds it simpler to learn the sound system of a foreign language that is physically similar to those of the native language. On the other hand, one finds it extremely difficult to learn the sounds that are not similar to those of his own language, that set differently or that are differently distributed. It is important for the English teacher to seek to isolate these problems and to provide some systematic solutions to them.

When a student finds no phoneme in his native language which can be transferred to English he will not be able to produce the phoneme readily. Very often he will substitute some other phoneme from his native stock. In addition, he will have trouble hearing as well as producing the new phoneme.

In comparing the sound system of English with that of Korean, we find that Korean does not have phonemes that may replace English /l, r, θ, ð, f, v, z/ as in *lilac, road, ether, either, flower, vase, zoo* respectively. A Korean speaker, therefore, will have difficulty pronouncing and hearing these phonemes. We may consider these phonemes as pronunciation problems of Korean students learning English.

In order to have his students overcome these problems a language teacher should first attempt to give comparative exercises. A well trained teacher will be aware of what kind of substitutions his students are going to make from their own native language. If /ð/ is the problem phoneme, most likely a Korean student will substitute /d/ in its place. We found they usually substitute /s/ for /θ/, /r/ for /l/, /h/ for /f/, /b/ for /v/, /j/ or /s/ for /z/ and so on. Difficulty in hearing the English contrasts between /l/ and /r/ is, by actual computation of test data, one of the most stubborn hearing and production difficulties for Korean speakers. In this case the contrast of two different sounds (the sound they have to learn and the possible substitution) should be thoroughly practiced in minimal pairs as in the following examples.

Contrast between /l/ and /r/

| | |
|-------|--------|
| light | right |
| lord | roared |
| lied | ride |
| lead | read |
| low | row |

Contrast between /hw/ and /f/

| | |
|-------|-------|
| wheel | feel |
| wheat | feet |
| white | fight |
| whine | fine |
| while | file |

Contrast between /f/ and /p/

| | |
|--------|--------|
| file | pile |
| feel | peel |
| fine | pine |
| fan | pan |
| fickle | pickle |

Contrast between /b/ and /v/

| | |
|------|------|
| base | vase |
| bail | veil |
| beer | veer |
| bent | vent |
| best | vest |

Contrast between /z/ and /s/ (or /j/)

| | |
|-----|-----|
| zoo | Sue |
|-----|-----|

| | |
|--------|---------|
| zeal | seal |
| zipper | slipper |
| zone | Sampson |
| czar | jar |

Contrast of /f/ /v/ /b/

| | | |
|------|------|------|
| face | vase | base |
| fail | vale | bale |
| fat | vat | bat |
| fend | vend | bend |
| fox | vox | box |

Contrast between /l/ and /r/ as final sound

| | |
|------|------|
| pill | peer |
| tell | tear |
| fill | fear |
| ill | ear |
| bell | bear |

Contrast between /l/ and /r/ as in consonant cluster

| | |
|-------|-------|
| bleed | breed |
| clown | crown |
| glass | grass |
| glean | green |
| play | pray |

In Korean language the following vowel contrasts are not distinguishing features and are thus difficult for the students to differentiate. Here again we can give the minimal pair exercise.

Contrast between /i:/ and /ɪ/

| | |
|-------|------|
| sheep | ship |
| heat | hit |
| beat | bit |
| leap | lip |
| heed | hid |

Contrast between /u:/ and /ʊ/

| | |
|--------|--------|
| pool | pull |
| shooed | should |
| Luke | look |

| | | |
|----------------------|--------|-----|
| suit | soot | |
| wooed | would | |
| Contrast between /a/ | and | /ɔ/ |
| cot | caught | |
| pa | paw | |
| sot | sought | |
| not | nought | |
| cock | caulk | |

This determining of the distinctive sounds that differ is only the first step (although an important one) and can be achieved quickly. And we also found that the first stage of comparison of full phonemes and the contrastive exercise do not give us the complete picture of the pronunciation difficulties the students are involved in. Many of us at this point may ask if the phonemes we do not have in our language are the only problem areas. What if the phonemes which we have tentatively accepted as 'similar' have phonetically different variants? In most cases the problem does not only lie in the total absence of a phoneme in Korean but also in the problem involving variants of phonemes. For example in comparing Korean with English, when first checking English /d/ we tentatively say that Korean has a similar phoneme /d/ and thus we do not consider this as a problem. But on closer examination we find Korean /d/ has two different variants as in the case of *dari* 'bridge' and *dod da* 'rise'. Therefore Korean students have a tendency to use the stop variants of Korean /d/ (in the case of *dod da*) when they produce English /d/ in *had done*. In the problem just discussed we have to come to the same conclusion that English /d/ and the stop variant of Korean /d/ are different, but their structural interpretation would be the same, that is, they would both be interpreted as the phoneme /d/.

This leads to another important question. Are the phonemes and their variants similarly distributed in both languages? An experienced teacher knows very well that even when the native language has a similar phoneme and the variants are similar, if it does not occur in the same position as in the native language, the student will have trouble producing and hearing it in the position in which it does occur in English. By following through on this matter of the distribution of each phoneme we could eventually come up with all the sequence of phonemes that might cause difficulty. At first glance the simplest way to analyze sequence problems in pronunciation would seem to be listening to a sequence in English and checking to see if it occurs in Korean. If it occurs in Korean, it will presumably not be a problem as sequence; if it does not occur in Korean, it will constitute a problem for Korean speakers learning English. From this fact arises the importance of finding the 'position' in which the distinctive phoneme can occur, and the clusters which they may form. As a sequence problem we observe that English has a

large number of consonant clusters preceding final pause or internal open juncture. It is obvious that we must consider the distribution positions of sound clusters in order to analyze the pronunciation problems. Final consonant clusters in English are troublesome to many non-English speakers. Words with the final cluster /__rd/ are frequent in English but nonexistent in Korean. However, for Korean students initial consonant clusters are sometimes more troublesome than the final ones. In Korean, consonant clusters never occur initially in any word as they frequently do in English. It is hard for Korean speakers to produce them in that position. They frequently say /sətÁdi/ instead of saying /stÁdi/ 'study'. (In any word in Korean, the initial consonant is always followed by a vowel sound.) In analysing the sequence problems and testing them I found Dr. Charles Fries' list of clusters most helpful. In his book, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* he made 39 initial or pre-vocal clusters.

Consonant Clusters in Initial Position

| | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| /pr/ pray, press, prop, pry | /fl/ flow, flay, flee, fly |
| /tr/ tray, tree, true, try | /gl/ glow, glue, glide, glass |
| /fr/ fray, free, fruit, fry | /dw/ dwell, dwarf, dwindle |
| /gr/ gray, grass, grew, greet | /kw/ quick, quack, quake, quell |
| /dr/ dray, drew, drip, dry | /tw/ twine, twig, tweed, twelve |
| /kr/ crew, crow, creed, cry | /sw/ swine, swear, swell, swim |
| /θr/ through, throw, thread | /hw/ whine, where, why which |
| /br/ brew, broad, bread, brown | /θw/ thwart, thwack |
| /ʃr/ shred, shrink, shriek, shrewd | /fy/ feud, few, fury, fuse |
| /st/ stay, stem, stone, still | /ky/ cute, cube, cure, cue |
| /sp/ span, spend, spin, spoil | /my/ mute, music, mule, mural |
| /sm/ small, smoke, smack, smear | /by/ beauty, bugle, bureau, butte |
| /sk/ skin, scare score, sky | /py/ pure, putrid, pupil, punny |
| /sn/ snow, snare, sneeze, snail | /vy/ view |
| /sf/ sphere, sphinx, sphenoid, sphincter | /hy/ hue, huge, human, humus |
| /bl/ blow, blue, bleed, black | /str/ stray, string, straw, strap |
| /pl/ play, plow, plea, ply | /skr/ screw, scroll, scratch |
| /kl/ clay, claw, clue, close | /spr/ spray, spread, sprawl |
| /sl/ slay, slow, sleep, sly | /spl/ splash, spleen, split |
| /skw/ square, squirt, squat | |

In addition to the sequence problems, there is the problem of spelling pronunciation. For instance, in Korean phoneme followed by a certain phoneme changes entirely in reading and becomes a different phoneme. For instance, Korean phonemes /g/, /d/, /p/ followed by /n/, /l/, /m/, have a tendency to become similar to the phoneme followed by, and so /g/ becomes /ŋ/, /d/ to /n/, /p/ to /m/ like in the following examples.

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 국 물 /kuk mul/-/kuŋ mul/ | 부엌문 /bu ək mun/-/bu əŋ mun/ |
| 웃는다 /ut nwn da/-/un nwn da/ | 밥 물 /bap mul/-/bam mul/ |
| 꺾는다 /kək nwn da/-/kəŋ nwn da/ | 닫는다 /dat nwn da/-/dan nwn da/ |
| 붓는다 /but nwn da/-/bun nwn da/ | |

Common Mispronunciation

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| cook meal | /kuk mi:l/-/kuŋ mi:l/ |
| quick money | /kwik mani/-/kwɪŋ mani/ |
| quick nap | /kwik næp/-/kwɪŋ næp/ |
| check number | /tʃek nəmbə-/tʃeŋ nəmbə/ |
| back mirror | /bæk mirə/-/bæŋ mirə/ |
| back low | /bæk lou/-/bæŋ lou/ |

Many Korean students have difficulty producing combinations such as:

| | |
|--------------|----------------|
| right night | straight means |
| light night | cut mirror |
| good night | cut me loose |
| bright night | put Mike |
| right near | met me |
| right next | up right |
| let me | mop near |
| lot more | cup list |
| map nail | tramp line |
| lamp light | |

The above observation is not limited to pronunciation matters, but applies to vocabulary and grammatical matters as well. Sometimes the above irregularities of Korean pronunciation help Korean students to understand easily the problems of spelling pronunciation. An English teacher at this point will be able to give a word-pair recognition practice and try to eliminate the students' difficulty. Here is a copy of the word-pair recognition test I use at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. Tell the students that in each question they are given a pair of phrases. Sometimes both phrases are exactly the same; sometimes they are different. If the two phrases are the same, have them circle the letter *S*. If the two phrases are different, have them circle the letter *D*. The teacher should read the pair only twice. Each student should have a numbered piece of paper with *S*, *D* on them. The teacher should read the pairs as rapidly and as accurately as possible.

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| 1. hold tight | hold right |
| 2. want more | wants more |
| 3. wait more | wait longer |

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 4. empty pen | empty pan |
| 5. let me | led me |
| 6. lamp light | lamp light |
| 7. straight means | state means |
| 8. met me | let me |
| 9. right next | right next |
| 10. live alone | leave alone |
| 11. not yet | not wet |
| 12. quick trip | quick trip |
| 13. bus stop | bus stop |
| 14. fresh paint | fresh paint |
| 15. up right | up light |
| 16. full up | pull up |
| 17. walk out | watch out |
| 18. take mine | take time |
| 19. city streets | city streets |
| 20. hear them | fear them |
| 21. quick money | kick money |
| 22. lot more | none more |
| 23. right night | light night |
| 24. pat Mike | pat mine |
| 25. call later | call later |
| 26. quiet night | quite night |
| 27. fall down | call down |
| 28. thick fog | thick log |
| 29. good place | good plays |
| 30. cup list | come listen |
| 31. never ready | never ready |
| 32. gets mail | get small |
| 33. quick nap | king nap |
| 34. mop near | mom near |
| 35. talk softly | walk softly |
| 36. strong rope | strong rope |
| 37. fire laws | fire loss |
| 38. more shirts | wore shirts |
| 39. pretty soon | pretty moon |
| 40. loud noise | loud noise |
| 41. deaf man | dead man |
| 42. red rose | rose red |

| | |
|------------------|--------------|
| 43. so soon | go soon |
| 44. really nice | really nice |
| 45. check number | check number |
| 46. back low | back low |
| 47. too early | too early |
| 48. make up | may cut |
| 49. walk fast | walk past |
| 50. fast train | last train |

After giving this kind of word recognition test you might come up with a complete list of the most acute problems Korean students are up against. After the list is ready you may drill your students. In the second language, try to use these phrases in the sentence structures. Putting phrases into sentence structures helps the students to recognize their problems more easily because of the distribution.

If new pronunciation habits are to function in the actual speech of students, practice can not be limited to isolated words and phrases. Another observation must be made at this time. To deal adequately with the sounds of English we have to understand the problems of producing the significant sound units in their normal contexts of pitch sequences and rhythmic stresses. The problems of stress and rhythm is of importance not only because stress is phonemic but also because stress and rhythm usually give considerable pressure on other matters of pronunciation.

Some linguists say that English has four significant degrees of stress or five while others seem not to use secondary stress at all but insist on a system of 3-stress system that includes weak, primary, and sentence stresses instead.

Every English word has at least one stressed syllable. A stressed syllable is pronounced in such a way that it is more prominent than an unstressed syllable. We stress a syllable by saying it louder, that is, we usually utter it with more volume and with a higher pitch than we do the surrounding syllables. Vowels in stressed syllables are usually longer than vowels in unstressed syllables. Sometimes a word has secondary stress. We pronounce the syllable that bears a secondary stress with a little less volume and lower pitch than the syllable with the primary stress. Syllables which are not stressed (weak stresses) are pronounced with relatively little breath. In Korean language we do have primary stress and weak stress, though not as prominent as in English. For instance, in *chákhada* 'good', *bángabda* 'glad', *músebda* 'afraid'. (the primary stressed syllable has been marked.) What's more important in Korean is not the levels of stress itself but the length of a phoneme. If we do not differentiate the length of a phoneme it is impossible to differentiate the meaning of a word. For example:

| | |
|-------------|------------|
| short vowel | long vowel |
| 글 'oyster' | 굴 'tunnel' |

| | |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 눈 'eye' | 눈 'snow' |
| 말 'horse' | 말 'language' |
| 발 'foot' | 발 'bamboo screen' |
| 밤 'night' | 밤 'chestnut' |

In pronouncing a long phoneme there is a tendency to slightly raise the pitch at the end of the word. There are also many words with a long phoneme at the beginning as in the case of 작다 'is small', 놀다 'playing', 덤다 'is warm', 심다 'plant', 웃다 'laugh' and 돋다 'help', etc..

With this kind of language background, a Korean student may have the tendency to use his Korean habits even in his English stress and rhythm. Since vowels in stressed syllables in English are usually longer than vowels in unstressed syllables, a student might stress or forcefully pronounce an unstressed syllable. Our concern should be about stressing the proper syllable and about not stressing the unstressed syllables. The following are some of the words in which Korean students often misplace the stress(in alphabetical order):

| | |
|-------------|--------------|
| admirable | instruction |
| afraid | integrate |
| apostrophe | machine |
| appetite | minority |
| Arabic | mistake |
| behold | misfortune |
| benevolent | obstacle |
| breathe | organ |
| bracelet | origin |
| catastrophe | optical |
| comfortable | obvious |
| constantly | periodic |
| contribute | politics |
| congress | preface |
| degree | probably |
| democracy | prosecute |
| develop | recognition |
| digest | realize |
| distribute | register |
| effect | resurrection |
| effort | shortage |
| enroll | success |
| ecstasy | sophomore |

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| electricity | stimulation |
| horizon | strategy |
| horizontal | telephone |
| humanity | terrible |
| image | theology |
| interrupt | total |
| italic | volcano |

In English there are also pairs of words spelled the same way, but the place of stress on them when they are used as verbs differs from the place when they are not used as verbs. The following pairs of words are difficult for the Korean students to differentiate.

| Non-Verb (stress 1st syllable) | Verb (stress 2nd syllable) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| addict | addict |
| assay | assay |
| concert | concert |
| conduct | conduct |
| conflict | conflict |
| convert | convert |
| decrease | decrease |
| digest | digest |
| escort | escort |
| exploit | exploit |
| extract | extract |
| frequent | frequent |
| import | import |
| incline | incline |
| increase | increase |
| insult | insult |
| object | object |
| perfect | perfect |
| permit | permit |
| present | present |
| produce | produce |
| progress | progress |
| protest | protest |
| rebel | rebel |
| record | record |
| refuse | refuse |

| | |
|----------|----------|
| subject | subject |
| suspect | suspect |
| transfer | transfer |

After you make a list of the stress problems of your own students, tapping is a useful device for teaching them to distinguish stress. Take a pencil, and knock the end of it lightly on a table for an unstressed syllable, and knock it more forcefully for a stressed syllable. For example, when you say *people*, strike once forcefully and once lightly. For *returning*, strike once lightly, once forcefully and once lightly. For *comfortable*, strike once forcefully and three times lightly. Try to give more time to the vowels in the stressed syllables.

Sentence stress which is readily recognized in the contrastive position of two phrases such as 'I said *now*, not next year.' in English creates no problem for the Korean students. In Korean we often use sentence stress which gives a difference to the context of a sentence also.

Intonation is the rising and falling of the pitch of our voice as we speak. There are two distinct ways the pitch of our voice is used. English like Korean uses voice pitch as part of the sentence and phrase while a tonal language uses it as part of the word. It is very important for us to realize that our listener responds to our intonation. If we use the wrong kind, our listener may misinterpret our intention. We know that English has four pitch phonemes: extra high, high, medium, low which are not four fixed points but four relative levels. The intervals may change from speaker to speaker. In Korean we do have at least three pitch phonemes and they are applied to sentence intonation slightly differently than in English. In the English sentence, 'He's a student', spoken with a normal mid-pitch at the beginning, a high pitch on student and dropping to a low pitch at the end, we hear three of the four pitches in operation. In saying the Korean sentence, 그는 학생이다. 'He is a student.', we hear an entirely different intonation pattern starting with a high mid-pitch at the beginning and dropping to a low at 는, a high pitch on 학생 rendering even to 0! and dropping again to mid-pitch.

The most difficult intonation problem concerns question sentences. In Korean question sentences we always raise our pitch at the end of the sentence, even the sentences with the question words as 'who', 'where', 'whom', and 'which' etc., whereas the intonation is dropped at the end of the sentence in English. For example:

No problem: 네가 그랬니? 'Did you do it?'

Problem: 왜 그랬니? 'Why did you do it?'

In this case also the problem is obvious. We should tell our students that their intonation, for example, can signify that they are making a statement or that they are asking a question or that they have not finished speaking. It is advisable to tell the students to follow three general rules in their intonation at first.

1. Let your voice fall to its lowest pitch at the end of statements and at the end of questions with words like *who*, *whose*, *whom*, *what*, *when*, *which*, *where*, *why* and *how*.

He's a student.

Where is my pen?

How did you make it?

2. Let your voice rise to a high pitch at the end of a question which does not begin with one of the question words.

Is he a student?

Did you lose your book?

It's blue?

Going home now? (This kind of intonation pattern doesn't exist in Korean.)

3. Let your voice stay on a middle pitch if you pause before you have finished a sentence.

We bought a book, a pen, and a lamp.

I didn't need them, but they looked nice.

After they have comprehended these three general rules we could give as many example sentences on the tape as possible and have them repeat them until the intonation pattern of English comes out of them as naturally as possible.

Every semester English teachers are confronted with the necessity of choosing a new textbook because the text they have chosen did not foresee the students' difficulties learning English as a second language in their own situation. Therefore a teacher very often will be faced with the need to diagnose the problems quickly troubling his students in order to prepare new teaching materials and also supplement inadequate materials for his students.

Nowhere is there a more need of diagnosing students' problems than in the case of the sound system for one has to learn to understand and produce the new language he is learning. After identifying the sounds which cause the most difficulty to his students, the teacher can use several techniques to teach them. A description of the speech organs as the sound is being produced could be made easily. A comparison with the nearest sound in the students' native language could be made as in the minimal pair practice (pp. 3-4). A modification of a known English sound and a diagram of the speech organs are other techniques. Let me conclude by saying that without knowing the students' learning problems our teaching will be only time consuming and not meaningful.

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(Received 30 November 1977)