

## **A Survey of the Korean Learner's Problems in Learning English Pronunciation**

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It is a great honour for me to speak to you today on the Korean's problems in learning English pronunciation. First of all I would like to thank Prof. H. B. Lee, President of the Phonetic Society of Korea for calling upon me to make a keynote speech at this International Conference on Phonetic Sciences.

The year before last when the 1st Joint Summit on English Phonetics was held at Aichi Gakuin University in Japan, the warm hospitality given to me and my colleagues by the English Phonetic Society of Japan was so great that I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the members of the English Phonetic Society of Japan and especially to Prof. Masaki Tsuzuki, President of the Society.

Korean learners of English have a lot of problems in learning 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 will not be included here because of limited time.

### **Vowels and Diphthongs**

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 **ɔː** are often replaced by half-close back rounded vowel [ɔ]. So *boxing* 'bɒksɪŋ is pronounced as 'bɒksɪŋ or ['bɒkɔɪŋ] and *online* ,ɒn'laɪn as ,ɒn'laɪn or ['ɒnnain], while *dawn* dɔːn / *don* dɒn or *Sean* ʃɔːn / *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.

iː / ɪ	<i>police</i>	pə'liːs	<i>political</i>	pə'liːtɪkl
	<i>pizza</i>	'piːtsə	<i>fizzy</i>	'fɪzɪ
	<i>kilo</i>	'kiːləʊ	<i>kilogram</i>	'kɪləgræm
uː / ʊ	<i>food</i>	fuːd	<i>hood</i>	hʊd
	<i>cool</i>	kuːl	<i>wool</i>	wʊl
	<i>goose</i>	guːs	<i>gooseberry</i>	'gʊzbrɪ (RP)
ɔː / ɒ	<i>cause</i>	kɔːz	<i>because</i>	bɪ'kɔz
	<i>author</i>	ɔːθə	<i>cauliflower</i>	'kɒlɪflaʊə
	<i>waltz</i>	wɔːls (RP)	<i>wallet</i>	'wɒlɪt
ɔː / əʊ	<i>thought</i>	θɔːt	<i>though</i>	ðəʊ
	<i>broad</i>	brɔːd	<i>road</i>	rəʊd
	<i>floor</i>	floː	<i>brooch</i>	brəʊʃ

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.

ʌ / ɒ

<i>monkey</i>	'mʌŋki	<i>donkey</i>	'dɒŋki
<i>ton</i>	tʌn	<i>don</i>	dɒn
<i>done</i>	dʌn	<i>gone</i>	ɡɒn
<i>none</i>	nʌn	<i>non-</i>	nɒn
<i>sponge</i>	spʌŋʒ	<i>sponsor</i>	'spɒnsə

Words like *front*, *monkey*, *sponge*, *ton* are often mispronounced by Koreans as [frontʰɯ, 'moŋki, sponʒi, ton].

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] and then Americanize it. The result is the deformed word ['dat'kʌm] or ['datkəm] (닷킴) as seen in Korean newspapers these days.

e / æ

The English vowel æ which is 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* 'æni:mæl/mæn. Or even those who know their difference in phonetic symbols often fail in pronouncing them distinctively. The half-close e and half-open ɛ 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 ɛ 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 **ɛ**. **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* /'θæt 'bɑd '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)

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

### Schwa (ə)

The English weak central vowel ə is not easy at all for Koreans to pronounce correctly, because there is no half-close/half-open or inbetween central vowel in modern Korean. Besides, there are over 40 different spellings which are supposed to denote ə in English. For instance:

- |                           |                       |                         |                      |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. <u>opera</u>           | 2. <u>Isaac</u>       | 3. <u>ma'am*</u>        | 4. <u>mountain</u>   |
| 5. <u>Caernarvonshire</u> | 6. <u>Branagh</u>     | 7. <u>Hannah</u>        | 8. <u>Alastair</u>   |
| 9. <u>leopard</u>         | 10. <u>Islay</u>      | 11. <u>moment</u>       | 12. <u>concert</u>   |
| 13. <u>were*</u>          | 14. <u>Syzergh</u>    | 15. <u>amateur</u>      | 16. <u>Edinburgh</u> |
| 17. <u>horrible</u>       | 18. <u>parliament</u> | 19. <u>confirmation</u> | 20. <u>Berkshire</u> |
| 21. <u>method</u>         | 22. <u>cupboard</u>   | 23. <u>does*</u>        | 24. <u>tortoise</u>  |
| 25. <u>Belvoir</u>        | 26. <u>effort</u>     | 27. <u>famous</u>       | 28. <u>borough</u>   |
| 29. <u>Melbourne</u>      | 30. <u>labo(u)red</u> | 31. <u>fellow**</u>     | 32. <u>focus</u>     |
| 33. <u>Hepburn</u>        | 34. <u>pleasure</u>   | 35. <u>by*</u>          | 36. <u>martyr</u>    |
| 37. <u>martyred</u>       | 38. <u>massacre</u>   | 39. <u>bureaucratic</u> | 40. <u>luncheon</u>  |
| 41. <u>Durham</u>         | 42. <u>Lincoln</u>    | 43. <u>Wigtownshire</u> |                      |

\*a weak form

\*\*substandard

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' lə' kʌm, *Kennedy* ke' n' lə' dɪ and *Rockefeller* ' rɒk' lə' felə.

*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.

### 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):

<i>top marks</i>	'tɒp mɑ:kz	→	'tɒm—
<i>submit</i>	səb'mɪt	→	'səm—
<i>not now</i>	'nɒt 'nəʊ	→	'nɒn—
<i>good news</i>	'gʊd 'nju:z	→	'gʊn—

*Macmillan* mək'mɪlən → məŋ'mɪlən [mɛŋ'mɪlən]

*dogma* 'dɒgmə → 'dɒŋ—

Or, [-hʊ] is inserted after **p, t, k**, and [-ŋ], after **b, d, g**.

'tɒp mə:ks → 'tɒp<sup>h</sup> mə:ks

səb'mɪt → səb<sup>h</sup>'mɪt

'dɒgmə → 'dɒŋmə

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

*Hamlet* 'hæmlɪt → 'hæmnɪt ['hɛmpɪt]

*Henry* 'henrɪ → 'hennɪ [hɛŋɪ]

*online* ,ɒn'laɪn → ,ɒn'nəɪn [,ɒn'nəɪn]

*home run* 'həʊm rʌn → 'həʊmnʌn ['hɔ:mʌn]

*kingly* 'kɪŋlɪ → 'kɪŋnɪ ['kɪŋɪ]

*King Richard* 'kɪŋ'rɪʃəd → 'kɪŋ'nɪʃəd ['kɪŋ'ɪʃəd]

3. Replacing of **n** by **l** when **n** is preceded by **l** (n → l/l\_\_):

*all night* 'ɔ:l'nəɪt → 'ɔ:l'ləɪt

*coolness* 'ku:lɪs → 'ku:llɪs

*vulnerable* 'vʌlnərəbl → 'vʌllərəbl

4. Replacing of **l** by **r** when it is followed by **j, w, h** or a vowel (l → r/\_\_\_-consonant!):

*will you* wɪl ju: → wɪrju:

*Milwaukee* mɪl'wɔ:kɪ → mɪ'rɔ:wɔ:kɪ [mɪ'rɔ:wɔ:kɪ]

*wilful Hilary* 'wɪfl 'hɪlərɪ → 'wɪlf'rɪlərɪ

*beautiful Ann* 'bju:tɪfl 'æn → 'bju:tɪf'ræn

5. Inserting of **n** before **j**:

*top Europeans* 'tɒpjʊərə'piənz → 'tɒnjʊərə'piən [tɒnjʊərə-]

*what you say* wɒtju:'seɪ → wɒtnju:'seɪ [wɒnju:'seɪ]

*back yard* 'bæk'jɑ:d → 'bæk'njɑ:d [bɛŋjɑ:d]

## 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 **dʒ** as in *boy*, *doll*, *girl* and *joy* usually become devoiced (lenis). When two of these consonants are combined together they are still more difficult to pronounce. They are usually changed into voiceless unaspirated sounds (fortis).

Examples:

*big dogs* 'bɪg'dɒgz → 'bɪk'tɒgz [ɸɪk'tɒks] or ['ɸɪgm'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'eliət → 'dʒænid'el—

*Robert Anderson* 'rɒbət'ændəsn → 'rɒbəd'æsn—

*MacArthur* mə'kɑ:θə → mə'gɑ:θə ['mɛgadə]



### 8. Inserting of ə between consonants

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

*button* 'bʌtn → 'bʌtən ['bʌtʰən]

*hidden* 'hɪdn → 'hɪdən ['hɪdən]

*gentle* 'dʒentl → 'dʒentəl ['dʒentʰəl]

*battle* 'bætl → 'bætəl ['bætʰəl]

*film* 'fɪlm → 'fɪləm ['fɪləm]

*realm* 'relm → 'reləm [reləm]

### 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  $\text{sp}$ —,  $\text{st}$ —,  $\text{sk}$ — 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*." (A Grand Dictionary of Phonetics PP. 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.

### Conclusion

Those problems discussed above are very difficult for the 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 essential and the training of phonetic transcription is really helpful. In addition to that, an expert phonetician's correction and guide must be accompanied.

So all the 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 researches.

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