

Phonetic and Syntactical Difficulties in Korean Learners of English

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Abstract: English education in Korea is a multimillion dollar industry that attracts the expertise of various individuals from English speaking lands around the globe. However, even with the massive impetus given to the study of this language, many instructors are still inadequately prepared to cope with and/or address many of the phonetic and syntax related frustrations that learners incur. Furthermore many of these difficulties are exacerbated through a lack of understanding of cultural limitations and manner in which Koreans process language as effected by their native language. Focusing on Korean learners this paper will address:

Inability to reproduce proper phonetic patterns or structures

Application of native language syntax in when using English

Incompatible cultural concepts

The reintroduction of borrowed words using incorrect modified Korean phonetic structure

Cultural aspects that inhibit language acquisition

Keywords: Phonetics, syntax, learning difficulties, cultural differences, save face, learning difficulties

1. Introduction

The English language and the Korean language are on the opposing poles of the linguistic globe. In general the patterns that exist in Korean have no directly corresponding pattern in English when considering the syntax or the logic behind the grammatical concept. As an ancient language that has seen the rapid increase of technology from the level of a feudal kingdom to a modern robotics and innovation leader, it has faced pressures for the conceptualization of new expressions in order to synchronize with the ever changing modern world. However, due to the depth of English language development throughout the cultural revolutions of the renaissance period much of the reasoning and logic factors of English are not clearly discernable to the Korean learner. General perceptions and processing of linguistic concepts and the approach taken to the formation of expressions, idioms and other grammatical structures are worlds apart. This critical lack of cultural understanding is a common thread throughout various countries especially those with geographic isolation from others. Korea falls directly under this classification. The Korean language has “enjoyed” a high level of linguistic isolation when compared to other regions. This is with the

exception of the various waves of Chinese culture and language influences brought forth by the conditions of vassalage, trade or conquest that existed in the early, middle and late medieval periods. The largest influencing factor can be said to be Hanja (한자/漢字) which is the Korean vocalization of the Chinese “Hanzi” or “Writing of the Han People”. The Hanja system was however merely a useful method of introducing a greater variety of vocabulary into the Korean language and many “pure Korean” words (that is of native origin that do not use Hanja) exist in unison with their Hanja counterparts. The general grammar structures of Korean did not significantly change and the use of Hanja quickly became associated with the educated elitist caste known as the Yang-Ban (양반/兩班).

This therefore produces a degree of cultural understanding between Chinese and Koreans (or at least toleration) and comprehension linguistic concepts or patterns between Korean, Chinese and even Japanese individuals. This does not however provide and assistance for the understanding of speech patterns or concepts in English. This paper will address some of the linguistic problems associated with the high degree of cultural, linguistic and ideological alienation that exists between Korean and English. It will also attempt

to give practical solutions to these issues for the purpose and aim of improving instructor understanding and to modify the existing pedagogy.

There are various areas for consideration. These areas will be broken down and discussed in their relative areas of importance and relevance.

Major areas for consideration include:

- Inability to reproduce proper phonetic patterns or structures.
- Application of native language syntax in when using English.
- Incompatible cultural concepts
- The reintroduction of borrowed words using incorrect modified Korean phonetic structure. (Known as Kong-lish.)
- Cultural aspects that inhibit language acquisition (i.e. saving face, retaining social hierarchy etc.).

The identification and clarification of these issues will prove invaluable in the approach taken to pedagogy and its effects on students. Furthermore this may facilitate the rectification of certain issues within the education systems approach to pedagogy thereby improving student's ability to retain information and creative output.

Please note: For the purposes of this article those of mixed decent but born in Korea and being native speakers of Korean are included in the definition of Korean learners of English.

2. Phonetic and Syntactical Difficulties in Korean Learners of English

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2.1 Phonetic Difficulties

There are numerous phonetic difficulties pertaining to the way Korean students express English. Various factors contribute to this however there are four factors that merit the focus of attention.

- ① The lack of equivalent English-Korean or Korean-English sounds.
- ② The limited ability of Korean consonant combination.
- ③ Inability to differentiate stressed/ unstressed syllabic combinations
- ④ The application of Korean homophones for non-homophone English sounds.

These underlying causes are the root of difficulties in both the interpretation of auditory stimulus and oral output of learners.

The lack of equivalence between English and Korean in regard to the scope of sounds in the languages causes serious problems in pronunciation. The degree to which English pairs vowels and consonant and more versatile and fluid in the expression of a variety of sounds and single letters in English may denote more than one possible sound depending on its location in a word or its relation to

surrounding letters. This is a function that with very few exceptions do not occur in the Korean language.

Korean consonant and vowel pairings follow a general pattern of:

Consonant + vowel + Consonant/ Double Consonant / No letter

E.g. 반 (ban) / 밥 (balb)/ 바 (ba)

Soundless Letter + vowel + Consonant/ Double Consonant / “ng” ending / No letter

(The letter ㅇ in Korean signifies no sound in the beginning of a word or the English equivalent to “ng” at the end of a word.)

E.g. 약 (Yak)/ 알 (yalb)/ 양 (Yang)/ 야 (Ya)

When a double consonant is followed by a vowel the last consonant sound is often transferred to the place of the “Soundless letter” when pronounced. This pattern is often carried over to English while raising inflection on the preceding letter.

Native Speaker: I am good and you?

Korean speaker tendency: I'm good eh-nyoo?

In the case of three consonants appearing in unison the general process is to eliminate the pronunciation of the second letter in the series. This is especially the case in “ㄴㅎ” and “ㄹㅇ” combinations. If followed by a “d-ㅈ” the strength of the double consonant transfers and creates a sound more akin to “t-ㅈ”.

The pronunciation for “안다” (anhda) becomes “an-ta” and

“불나무” (bulnamu) becomes “bul-namu”.

This phonetic habit creates difficulties when pronouncing English words that have more than two consonants within a sequence. In this case letters are ignored, modified, replaced with other sounds or be linked with an added vowel. The result range from being unintelligible to merely incorrect. This also means that introducing or expressing new sounds using the Korean alphabet is not possible. The instructor should be aware of these tendencies and correct them at the earliest opportunity. Once these incorrect patterns have been naturalized in speech they are exceedingly difficult to eradicate. The Korean sound “으” is represented as “eu” when Romanized or /u/ in the international phonetic alphabet.

Table 1: Common Errors in Pronunciation by Korean Speakers of English.

Word	Error	Result
Compromise	Vowel addition	Compurimaiseu
Congress	Vowel addition	Con-gu-re-shi/ Con-gu-re-seu
Wanted	Vowel addition	Wantideu
Display	Replacement of s with sh	Dishipeulei/ diseupeulei
Theater	Replacement of th /θ/ with d or t	Dita, tita
Church	Replacement of vowel and addition of vowels	Chochi

Standard Korean dialects avoid using stress in syllables and learners may be oblivious to the function of stress in both meaning and pronunciation. On the other extreme some learners have the notion that every syllable must be stressed when speaking, needless the result is tiring to the ear. This perpetuated belief that English should be as is said in Korean, “oily”, has not improved the quality of teaching nor has the pre-conceptualized *idea* of what English *should* sound like.

Complications arise in the combination of vowels to form “double vowels” which have a longer allophonic length. The Korean learner may find some distinguishing the vowel length problematic as

Korean vowels are for the most part rounded. Prof. Sang-Cheol Ahn explains this concept. [1]

*“The basic vowel system in colloquial Korean today is symmetric. In addition to one low Vowel (central unrounded /a/), there are three mid and three high monophthongs: two front unrounded (/i/, /e/), two central unrounded (/ɨ/, /ə/), two back rounded (/u/, /o/). An additional low vowel, front unrounded /ɛ/, still prevails in the formal standard (phonemically as well as orthographically), but this is being merged with /e/ in the speech of most Koreans throughout the country now, resulting in an evenly balanced 7-vowel inventory. This symmetric system of monophthongs is complemented by a skewed set of nine on-glide diphthongs consisting of /wi/, /we/, /w ə /, /wa/ with a labial onset (but no */w i /, */wu/, */wo/) and /yu/, /yo/, /ye/, /y ə /, /ya/ with a palatal onset (but no */y i /, */yü).”*

This means the length and combination of vowels in Korean are highly limited. Learners may carry this form of standard vowel length into English causing a homophone-emulation. Words that are characterized by audible vowel stress cannot be identified from one another.

- Sit
- Seat

The preceding words then become homophones. And the intended meaning is severely compromised.

- The boy sits on a sit.
- The boy seats on a seat.

Learners need to be helped to listen for and voice the different length vowels as the current trend is to overlook this in the early stage and therefore to ensure its continuation.

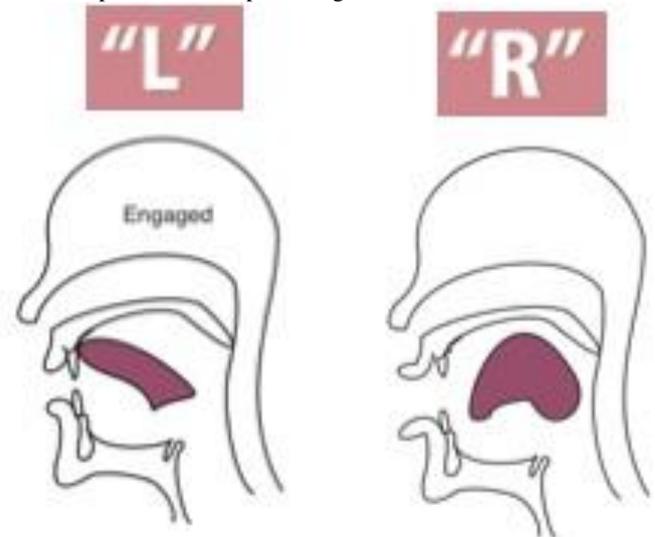
Koreans persistent stiff voice produces speakers that use a narrower glottal opening with stiffer vocal chords than in the generally used Modal voice in English. This use of speech organs affects the ability to produce accurate vocalizations. [2]. To combat this learners should be encourage to slacken the jaw, tongue and lips when using English. Overly clenched jaws and stiff lips are commonly the cause of mispronounced or replaced syllables.

Pronunciation charts are a fine asset is teaching the physiological procedure taken by the speech organs to produce sounds. Once again, learners should be reminded that the image is to assist, overcompensation in the aim of recreating the exact image leads directly to using stiffer muscles and stiff voice.

Korean uses a single letter to represent r/l namely “ㄹ” thus creating a homophone effect when used in English. An untrained Korean ear cannot distinguish between:

- Light
- Right
- Lane
- Rain
- Lake
- Rake
- Row
- Low

With such basic and foundation words of English being indistinguishable the Korean learner of English must be help to differentiate and produce the difference in sound. Tongue position is of vital importance when producing r/l.



(Figure 1: The difference between the anatomical use of speech organs to produce “l” and “r” sounds. Image by A.I.S.M) [3]

Failure to remedy the expression of r/l in the English context will ensure problems.

More confusion arises from “ㄹ-s” and “ㄹ-ss” which have changeable pronunciation in relation to vowel pairings. “ㄹ” is equivalent to the English “S” however the “ㄹ” is an aspirated form often transcribes as a double “s”. the short sharp burst of air required to pronounce “ㄹ” has no genuine English equivalent and can most closely be compared to the “s” spoken by an irate English speaker. For general vowels the “s” or “ss” remain constant however when “ㄹ” or “ㄹ” join with “O|” as in “ㄹ|” or “ㄹ|” the “s” changes to “sh” and the “ss” to “ssh”. Being perpetually paired with an “I” vowel (transcribed as shi but reminiscent of the English word she) the “ㄹ|” and “ㄹ|” become stand-alone syllables. When this pattern makes its way into English words gain an involuntary “I” suffix.

Hence the well-known pronunciation of:

- ◇ Englishi
- ◇ Spanishi
- ◇ Washi
- ◇ Freshi

The same involuntary additional vowel is placed on words ending in “ch” in the manner of “ㄹ” and “O|” in “ㄹ|”.

- ◇ Watchi
- ◇ Spinachi
- ◇ Dutchi
- ◇ Torchi

There is no tooth to lip contact in any Korean pronunciation, therefore various sounds in English do not exist in Korean. When these sounds exist in borrowed words from Chinese they are replaced with their closest interpreted match.

The sound as represented by “V” is non-existent in Korean and is replaced by “ㅍ-b”. Learners need special training in fully

understanding the physiology of this sound. Meanings become radically altered. [4]

- ◇ Vet- bet
- ◇ Voice-boys
- ◇ Vain – bane
- ◇ Vile – bile
- ◇ Victory – Bictory
- ◇ Vent –bent

And the list goes on.

The sound as represented by “f” is non-existent in Korean and is replaced by “ㅍ-p” or a consonant-vowel pairing “ㅏ- hwa” or “ㅑ-hwi”.

- ◇ Fighting – Hwaiting, Pai-ting
- ◇ Fishing – Hwishing, Pishing
- ◇ Forest – Poresteu

The sound as represented by “w” exists in Korean but is unvoiced after “U” (우- /u/).

This makes certain English words almost unpronounceable.

- ◇ Would – Ood
- ◇ Wolf – oolpeu
- ◇ Wool – Ool

The sound as represented by “z” is non-existent in Korean and is replaced by “ㅈ-j”. This causes great confusion as to sentence context.

- ◇ Zoo- Jew
- ◇ Zone – John
- ◇ Zipper- Jipo

Passing over phonics in a haphazard way or through monotonous repetition are both unlikely to have significant benefits to learners. Initial phonics should be taught not only through word repetition as is the case in many private institutes but rather should be taught parallel to simple sentence structures that can be found in readily available Western children’s literature such as Dr. Seuss

Proper attention must be paid to the amount of verbal output learners undertake and the quality of output, the accuracy of output and the structure of the output. To accommodate short attention spans of young learners it would be advantageous to segment learning periods with other activities that are either free of language or incorporate linguistic patterns with movement.

In a note of caution, the author has noted that a fair proportion of Korean students have what would be classified as a lisp in English speakers whether by natural inclinations or because of dental structure. Due to the phonetic structure of Korean it is not noticeable or even important. This however calls for added effort in behalf of the learner of English and the second language instructor may need to call for the assistance of a speech therapist or fellow instructor that is experienced with speech impediments. [5]

2.2 Synchronized Syntax

The syntax of English poses severe obstacles for many speakers of East Asian languages. Korean is among the languages that have both radical syntax and lexical differences when compared to Indo-European languages. This strongly ingrained syntax is emphasized through the education system and already well-established in primary school age children. This creates complexities in trying to reproduce coherent English sentences.

The Korean system of expressing syntax is more fluid than English in that words can be classified on their own or through word markers which is essentially a bound morpheme. These bound morphemes include possessive, diminutive, subject, plural, object and intended object markers. Further particles can be introduced to denote the rank of the addresser or addressee, the level of subject importance, the social hierarchy of the person spoken about or the social context of the conversation as well as various honorifics. This makes word order significantly less important as the object markers can clarify most or all of the meaning. With this said the basic sentence formation still exists and it is this formation that interferes with English syntax.

Korean is a highly agglutinative language and as previously stated various parts can be affixed to other parts of language. Agglutinative is derived from the Latin verb *aggultinare* which literally means “to glue together”. [6] Segments or particles can combine in a plethora of ways. The somewhat more rigid qualities of English make it problematic for Koreans to discern the level of social hierarchy or insinuated subject especially in sentences that contain more complex or academic grammar.

The exact classification for the Korean language is still a matter of debate with certain proponents claiming its classification as belonging to the Altaic language family and others holding staunchly to the idea that it is a language isolate [7]. Supporting evidence against it Altaic classification is the example of gender agreement borrowed from Middle Mongolian or rather the lack of this borrowing which is typologically divergent. [8]

Perhaps the closest comparable language is Japanese. Comparing the syntax and grammar systems of Korean and Japanese various relationships, similarities and in some cases identical patterns can be observed. If these assertions are proven correct the linguistic relationship of the two languages would be of closer relation than that of other Altaic languages. Proponents of this theory include Samuel E. Martin [9] as well as Roy Andrew Miller however this research has been faced with somewhat of a dismissive attitude due to the ill feelings politically speaking between both lands. These attitudes hinder linguistic progress and understanding. This leads to attitudes that undermine the potential benefits of understanding the relationships between languages and how these effect learners on both sides.

The relationship especially the Old Western Japanese borrowings [10] from ancient Korean take a certain degree of willful blindness to ignore. A high degree of cognates found between the two languages as well as their historic interaction accompanied by their geography proximity further solidifies the probability that this theory is sound. Then why is this of relation to the learning of English? Educators who better understand the way in which these languages are processed by the brain and how they then attempt to articulate English will be able to more accurately apply the appropriate pedagogy or adjust methodologies.

Standard Korean grammar (when ignoring the ability of bound morphemes to adjust grammar) follows a subject + objective+ verb arrangement. The final verb order is akin to Japanese meaning affixes are mostly suffixes or preceding modifiers. The final verb acts to modify the rest of the preceding sentence and may denote the jussive mood especially in conversation [11].

SOV formations produce partially unintelligible sentences when brought into English. A simple sentence of “I am going to the shopping center” may become “I shopping center am go”. The SVO order of English is equally unintelligible when spoken in Korean.

Learners should be actively encouraged to flip their sentence structures when speaking English, this assists in the mental calculation of syntax structures for the target language namely English although the same line of thought could be of similar significance when applied to English learners of Korean.

The Korean language also lacks certain structures evident in English the ability to distinguish a plural and singular verbs, in the inability to distinguish between third and second person statements and also the inability to distinguish second person from first person when using questions. When given English texts or in English conversations that display such unknown patterns learners will not be able to naturally differentiate and it must be taught.

Korean tense to drop the nominative pronoun "I" as Koreans avoid referring to self in case it produces a feeling of poor etiquette to the listener because of perceived pride on the part of the speaker. Koreans therefore often replace "I" with "me" or "my" as is the case in sentences like:

My eat bread.

Me eat bread.

These of course being entirely incorrect although understandable to English speakers. Therefore instructors do well to fully explain and correct nominative pronouns, possessive pronouns, objective pronouns and plural nominatives.

Another area of extreme confusion to Koreans learners of English is the use of indefinite and definite articles. The most simple explanation to clarify this for many learners is to explain that "a(n)" is used as a means to display or denote one general thing, not a specific item. This arises from the fact that Korean for the most part neither implements nor needs the use of define or indefinite articles as the relationship of objects is derived through the spoken context.

A cat sits on a mat.

This is most often the case when first introducing a subject, hence the cat with no introductory information is just a random animal. One the item or object or even person in question has been introduced, discussed or mentioned, the word "the" can be used to denote the specific thing.

A cat sat on a mat. The cat belonged to the neighbor and the mat was red.

The added information about the definite subject/ objective now uses "the" to denote that it is of a specific nature. For the most part after doing activities about the use of the word definite and indefinite articles learners are much better able to both recognize and reproduce their appropriate use in syntax. Grammar drills would be a beneficial method of solidifying these patterns.

The verb "to be" is expressed in Korean as a singular form that can be adjusted via the use of morphemes the basic $O\lrcorner\lrcorner$ -ida is used

regardless of gender or whether it is an object. Is, am and are, are therefore relatively new concepts for Korean learners. With this said the patterns as found in various text and exercise books for the most part seem to have a moderate to high degree of efficiency in teaching this grammar, nonetheless the instructor would do well to continually correct mistakes of this nature so as to firmly cement the grammatical pattern in the learners mind.

Note some classic errors made by even an advanced third grade middle school student. *Name withheld* Errors are marked by being underlined. Comments or corrections are in italics. KSIE refers to "Korean sense of thinking used in English".

"The Korean education way is should stay here (Meaning: *methods should stay the same- KSIE*). Because there are many reasons (Meaning: *There are many reasons for this -KSIE*). Many people usually think that about money problems and (,) student's health problems and student's efficiency is will be low...etc. But I will show other reasons.

First, the digital class will losing student's communication and concentration with books. The computer class is good for teaching

but it can make the student who didn't communicate with other people.

Second, It is not a revolution of (*the*) education system. It (*is*) just following other countries. That means this system can change the education problems but it may not be like other countries. The Korean students have special tradition thinks (*have a traditional way of thinking- KSIE*). So It may not be good for them. It means that can be success (*successful*) but it is (*a*) very dangerous choice.

Third, the government of Korea pay(*S*) money for society, laws, economy, change (*to change/ changing*) systems .etc. If the government of Korea pay money in to build and making digital education system a lot ,then efficiency of money may high? (*Directly borrowed grammar and KSIE*) The digital system is now on a test (*being tested*). Then the government may support the money to the unfaithful thing? Meaning: *Spend money unnecessarily or waste funds*) I think "no." So the school get(*s*) money from students. If the student have no money, then he can't enter the school. Then the student who has a lot money only can enter the school. (*Incorrect syntax*)

So, I think digital and revolution system is not good yet in Korea. (*Incorrect syntax*) I think that money should (*be*) spend(t) for other useful things."

Indeed for the age of the student, the subject matter and exposure levels to English that the student had, this is a fine piece of writing. However the contained errors in students work usually follow patterns as seen previously. Short creative writing tasks can be encouraged on the part of the instructor to not only gauge individual progress but more imperatively to examine the effect of the syllabus as well as areas of required improvement among the student body. That is to say, a large frequency of "be verb" errors or misapplication of a phrase may be grounds for revision of the problem area or the creation of a new lesson in the syllabus that addresses the issue.

Feedback given to learners should be constructive in nature and build confidence rather than merely being disciplinary in the case of mistakes. The learner can be complimented for their attempt at describing a complex situation with a lack of knowledge in the area of vocabulary or expressions. The learner can then be assisted to understand how to correct the errors found in the text or in speech which builds a viable platform on which continued positive reinforcement can help the learner become confident and articulate in spoken and written forms.

Wise instructors therefore do well to note and record both weak and strong sections of learner output, adjust accordingly, reevaluate and of course encourage.

3. Cultural and Social Limitations

Many East Asian cultures place a high value on social hierarchy, cultural norms and the concept of "saving face". The saving of face is a problematic situation that seriously affects the rate and efficiency of language acquisition. As the concept of "face" is part of the Korean etiquette system it may be difficult to undo its effects without at times challenging the value systems of certain inflexible or traditionally mindset orientated individuals.

Huang Shuanfan describes the concept of face as "*Face is a sense of worth that comes from knowing one's status and reflecting concern with the congruency between one's performance or appearance and one's real worth.*" [12] Therefore as "face" is linked to an individual's self-estimation of value or ability, a delicate balance must be draw between undoing the negative effects of face as well as promoting the healthy aspects of it.

Saving face literally refers to the aim of avoiding public dishonor or shame whilst maintaining ones sphere of social hierarchy or perceived reputation. For Korean learners this may cause a reluctance to speak and therefore betray a lack of ability in English. This goes further than merely being shy, it is to avoid criticism due to

failure or to show ones weak point. Hence some learners have a proverbially glued shut mouth when it comes to any form of public speaking or commenting even when they have the fully ability and understanding to do so.

Realistically the total eradication of face is neither necessary nor possible. As face has both powerful motivational and de-motivational properties it can be beneficially exploited for learner benefit.

One method in which to build face and encourage the positive aspects of face is through meaningful group work in which team members are encouraged to work in unison with others rather than to compete. Learners can also be encouraged to find areas to complement their team mates and to build up the atmosphere of the classroom/ learning environment. At times where this does not take place in a natural manner other forms of "stimulus" such as prizes for best team work can be used as incentives for young learners especially.

The aim is then for *healthy face* that is to say a healthy self-respect and confidence whilst not encumbering the rights or progress of others. Healthy face will lead to healthful competition where classmates/ learners compete for the sake of satisfying a well-balanced sense of pride and self-worth. Instead of trying to cut down the competition through exclusion because of socioeconomic background, ability, religious affiliation or gender, learners compete to excel over other learners in a light hearted and respectful manner. In themselves activities alone cannot cultivate the conditions required for health face. The instructor must therefore set a zero tolerance limitation on all discriminatory behaviors including racism, sexism and all other forms of harassment. Punishment and/or repercussions for these forms of undesirable and unethical behaviors must be meted out, however with flexibility according to the situation, relevant circumstances and age of those in question. In this regard it is crucial to show the proper code of ethics and avoid displays of favoritism. This encourages a learning environment in which healthy face is continually maintained and in which the learners will automatically begin to observe within a certain period of time.

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When language learners feel familiar with the teacher, safe in their surroundings, feel respected and do not feel a disproportionate amount of judgment by their peers they will be far more likely to fully participate in and engage with the subject being considered even if they have relatively low comprehension. An instructor can further assist by asking lower-level students questions that they can easily answer and which they know well. This will build their healthy face in the group regardless of an actual deficit of skill.

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

Lamentably the phonetic and syntax difficulties that obstruct the learning pathway of Korean students of English is a scourge that must be borne. Yet, its complexities and the anxieties that are paired with it will be greatly reduced by the instructor who understands the workings of the Korean mind and linguistic system. Students can then be further corrected and supported through their travels in the English language thereby fostering a stronger educational desire and a realization of healthy face.

By being a diligent student and scholar themselves the instructor can find avenues in which to refine their teaching techniques as well as customize lessons and review sessions for the overall benefit of the students and in order to refine their own professional development as English language instructors. In conjunction with this, the overall improvement of self, the educational institution for which one laboriously strives will in turn be refined and gain educational momentum.

English instructors should therefore aspire towards at least an elementary degree of proficiency in the Korean language, with this knowledge eradicate the common pitfalls of Korean learners and continue to support their pupils. Understanding the learners thought patterns and language will thus bolster the level of communication between learner and instructor leading to more successful tutorage. Educators should respect the language of the learner and through this gain respect for the English language and the art that is teaching.

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