Common ESL pronunciation issues among Koreans

The following are the main difficulties that Korean (and other Asian) speakers have in pronouncing English as a second language. These include vowels, consonants, stress, and rhythm issues.

1. Vowels

1.1. Long vowels
Asian learners tend to make long vowels sound just like the short vowels, leading to potential confusion. English has long vowels, which are not only longer, but more tense (/i:/), or have off-glides, that is, they are really a blend of two vowels.

1. short /ɪ/ as in *bit* versus long /i:/ or /iy/ as in *beet*
2. short /ɛ/ as in *red* versus long /ei/ as in *raid*
3. short /ɔ/ as in *taught* versus long /ɔʊ/ or /ou/ as in *tote*
4. short /ʊ/ as in *look* versus long /u:/ or /uw/ as in *Luke*

Confusingly, dictionaries published in Korea may not use the correct phonetic symbols for these vowels. Many of them use /i/ and /i:/ for the *bit-beet* pair, respectively. However, these vowels are pronounced differently. For /i:/ the tongue muscle is relaxed (i.e., a lax vowel), while it is tensed for /i:/; the same holds true for the lax /ʊ/ cf. tense /u:/.

In stressed syllables, the tense /i:/ and /u:/ are slightly longer than their Korean counterparts 이 and 우, respectively; e.g., English *key* is slightly longer than Korean *키*.

Many Korean dictionaries incorrectly use the symbols /e/ and /e:/ for the *red-raid* pair, respectively. However, these vowels are also pronounced differently, with the *raid* vowel being a double vowel (diphthong), starting as /e/ and blending or gliding into an /i/, rather like Korean 에이. The *taught-tote* vowels are also different; the /ɔ/ is short, like 오, while /ou/ is a long glided vowel that starts as /ɔ/ and glides into /u/, like 우오.

1.2. Other vowels
The vowel /æ/ is pronounced with the jaw and front of the tongue extra-low; Asians tend to confuse it with /ɛ/. The schwa vowel /a/ is very similar to /ʌ/, which is fairly similar to Korean 오; but /a/ occurs only in unstressed syllables and is extra-short, while /ʌ/ occurs only in stressed syllables and is normal length.

1. low /æ/ as in ‘bad’ versus /ɛ/ as in ‘bed’
2. Schwa /ə/ should be extra-short compared to normal vowels like /ʌ/; [] = minor stress, [ ] = main word stress (final -le is so short that one often does not hear the schwa – the /l/ itself comprises this light, unstressed syllable).

unforgettable /ˌʌnfərˈɡɛtəbl/ 

2. Consonants

The <th> sounds are made with the tongue tip behind the front teeth. More often, the /ð/ occurs in function words (the, this, that...) and words with Old English endings (-e, -er, -est, -en, etc., as in bathe, lather, farthest, heathen); the /θ/ occurs in other words, especially in academic or technical words, which usually come from Greek.

The sounds /s/ and /z/ use the same tongue position; they are exactly the same, except that the vocal cords vibrate for /z/. The /z/ should never sound like the Korean ㅈ.

The /z/ is made just like /s/ - the tongue position is exactly the same, but with the vocal cords vibrating; it should not sound like ㄗ. The sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are made with the tongue tip pointing to, but not touching, the roof of the mouth, and /ʒ/ involves vocal vibration. The sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are made with the tongue tip touching the roof of the mouth; they should not sound like ㄗ, which is made with a flat tongue. The sounds /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʃt/ and /ʒt/ are made with the tongue curled up, with the tongue tip pointing toward or touching the palate (the roof of the mouth), while ㄗ and ㄕ are made with a flat tongue.

Flat tongue position for Korean ㅐ; position is similar for ㄗ, with the front surface of the tongue touching the palatal area ("roof of the mouth") above.

Retroflex (curled up) tongue position for /ʃ/ and /ʒ/; position is similar for /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, but touching the palatal area with the tongue tip.
The /l/ is produced with the tongue tip touching the gum ridge behind the teeth; for the /r/ the tongue does not touch, but points toward the gum ridge or the roof of the mouth, and lets air vibrate as it flows around the tongue (compare rare, lair, rail).

The /f/ and /v/ sounds are pronounced with the lower lips creating friction against the upper teeth. The /v/ is voiced, i.e., produced by vibrating the vocal cords. These sounds should not sound like /p/ or /b/.

3. Rhythm: Stress

Stressed syllables are pronounced with greater volume, they are noticeably longer than unstressed syllables, and they are marked by a rising and/or falling intonation with the stress. Asians tend to make the following errors: (1) not hearing short, unstressed syllables; (2) pronouncing all syllables equally strong – no stress or unstressed rhythm; (3) putting stress on the wrong syllables; (4) omitting unstressed syllables in speaking; or (5) putting in extra vowels, especially after difficult-to-pronounce consonants, which alter the rhythm of the word. Hence, a Korean speaker might mispronounce the medical term somatoform as smartphone (스마트포럼).

Longer words can have a main (primary) stress and a secondary (minor) stress. In words like these, there should be a clear difference between stressed and unstressed syllables.

about /əbˈaut/  unaccéptable /ˌʌnækˈsɛptəbəl/

**Compound stress:** Compound words most often have the main stress on the first component.

ôníón chôpper  gréenhouse  bád-mòuth
White Hòuse  báck enginèer  úpgràde

Abbreviations usually show an opposite pattern. Each letter has equal stress except the last letter, which has the main stress (one exception is abbreviated personal nicknames like Ð.J., with the main stress on the first letter).

NHŚ  FBí  CPŘ  ETÁ  ROḰ

**Sentence stress:** Within sentences, the major words, called content words (nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs) are more strongly stressed than the other minor words, or function words. On top of that, clauses and sentences have intonation patterns, which are connected with the sentence stress pattern: the most important word of a clause is more strongly stressed than the other words – often the last major word of a clause that is most important. The stressed words (in bold) below would coincide with rising and/or falling intonation, and these nouns would be more strongly stressed than other major word in these clauses.

The mechanic cheated the unsuspecting customer, so the customer then sued the mechanic.
4. Rhythm: Other issues

For Korean speakers of English, it may not be necessary to speak English with the following natural speech phenomena (especially if the audience consists of Koreans), but the following are important because [1] Koreans need to know these in order to comprehend English as spoken by native English speakers, who usually use such features in speaking, and [2] to avoid speaking English with incorrect Korean-style blendings.

4.1. Linking (liaison)

To pronounce more easily, we often link words together – especially minor or shorter words. This happens most often if a word begins with a vowel. Similar sounds can also be joined across words (like ‘all–live’ below).

We all–live in a yellow submarine.

4.2. Reduction

In casual and fast speech, many minor words are reduced, with unstressed vowel sounds or sounds omitted, e.g.,

- you → ya /ˈya/  
- to → /tə/  
- can → /kən/  
- could have → /kʊdəv/

4.3. Blending

Some sounds are blended together, leading to informal contractions, especially pronouns and auxiliary verbs, such as minor words with /y/ sounds; e.g.,

- could you → couldja  
- don’t you → doncha  
- give me → gimme

It is not necessary to use English reductions and blending patterns as native speakers do. More importantly, Korean speakers transfer their Korean-style blendings into English, which will render words unintelligible. So Koreans should take care to avoid transferring the following blending patterns in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Korean pattern</th>
<th>incorrect English blendings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n+l → l</td>
<td>download → dowlload, downnoad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l+n → l</td>
<td>all night → all light, alright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k+m → η+n+m</td>
<td>book maker → boon-maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d+n → n+n</td>
<td>hard night → harn night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p+l → m+n</td>
<td>upload → ubnoad, upnoad, umnoad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>η+l → η+n</td>
<td>hang loose → hang noose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t+l → n-n</td>
<td>outline → oudnine, oun-nine, oul-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s+l → d+l, l</td>
<td>outline → oudnine, oun-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>η-l → η-n</td>
<td>song list → song nist</td>
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</tbody>
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