Insertion Preferred to Deletion in Learner Speech: A Study of Korean English

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I. Introduction

We examine whether insertion or deletion occurs when a learner is forced to produce the target speech that is not permissible in the phonological system of the native language (L1, henceforth). Adult language learners may have a strong force of adding speech elements when conveying the intended information to the listener, as their speech risks at all times the lack of intelligibility by non-native accents (Jenkins, 2000:69–98). Apparently, loanwords manifest insertion over deletion of the target segments (See Official Loanword Transcription Regulations, 1995), while learner speech of adults (L2, henceforth) has been unclear about the dominance of either insertion or deletion. Some L2 studies in Korean English have dealt with insertion (Kwon, 2005 for clusters; Park & Kim, 2008 for coda), or the comparable insertion and deletion (Cho & Lee, 2005:196 for clusters), but no one, to our knowledge, examined the relative dominance.

In addition, studies in L2 speech have disagreed on the insertion rates in learner speech: 85.1%–99.7% in Tak (2005:140) vs. 15%–29% in Park

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and Kim (2008:41). Park and Kim (2008) report a big difference between loanwords and learner speech in that learners rapidly depart from the loanword characteristics of insertion as the proficiency increases. The research method differed in these two studies that Park and Kim (2008) analyzed recorded speech of learners, while Tak (2005) did not.

One may also consider the possibility that the seemingly disparate results in literature may be resolved in the developmental aspect of learner speech. Learner speech is assumed to include less of the non-native accent, as the L2 proficiency of the learner increases over time. The assumption on developmental enhancement, however, is not always supported in literature, as Scovel (1988) claims that adult learners improve insignificantly in foreign pronunciation. We, therefore, are unsure whether learners may follow the pattern of insertion or deletion in some developmental transitions towards the target-like speech as native speakers.

In native speech, insertion does not often seem to occur, although deletion occurs frequently, depending on the emphatic contents and speech rates (Keyser & Stevens, 2006). The enhancement strategy used by native speakers is not the insertion of a vowel, but loudness, pitch, and lengthening of duration. Native speakers overlap the less important speech signal, what could be called deletion in the surface phonetic forms. Accordingly, the repair strategy of vowel insertion seems to be specific to non-native speech phenomena.

The following sections test if learner speech makes more insertion than deletion by means of a set of acoustic phonetic experiments. The paper investigates the acquisition order by using both cross-sectional and longitudinal methods.

II. Syllable structures of Korean and English

The reason that learners insert or delete a segment comes from the phonological differences in the native and the target speech. Learner

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1) The learner proficiency of both studies is considered to be in more or less in similar levels, as they were all college students, whose school ranks are comparable.

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