The perception of English onset glides produced by Korean speakers

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Seo, Misun & Kim, Eun-Sook. 2011. The perception of English onset glides produced by Korean speakers. The Journal of Studies in Language 26:4, 839-855. This study explores Korean learners' production of English onsets with the glide w or j by investigating native English speakers' perception of those onsets produced by Korean learners. In an experiment identifying Korean learners' production of English minimal pairs which differ in the presence or absence of the onset glide, it was found that native English speakers exhibited difficulties in perceiving Korean learners' pronunciation of the English 'w + round vowel' and 'j + high front vowel' sequences, which are not attested in Korean. In addition, native English speakers experienced problems perceiving Korean learners' pronunciation of the English /kw/ sequence although it occurs in Korean. It is conjectured that the combined effects of the shorter VOT with English /kw/ and w-deletion or the phonetic realization of /w/ as a secondary articulation of a preceding consonant in Korean triggered such results in our study. (Hannam University)

Key words: L2, perception, production, glides

1. Introduction

English glides cause much difficulty for Korean learners of English in both production and perception. Whether they are presented as a single onset or as a member of onset clusters, Koreans may mispronounce or misperceive them very often. Some previous studies have focused on this kind of challenge, and investigated the production or perception of

* This paper has been supported by the 2010 Hannam University Research Fund.
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In particular, there have been a number of studies focusing Korean speakers’ pronunciation of the English /kw/. According to Cho (2004), Korean learners tend to mispronounce English /kw/ either as [k] by completely deleting [w] or as [kʷ] by involving a partial lip rounding. In Cho, Park and Lee (2001), it was found that Korean learners had difficulties in acquiring the English /kw/ sequence even after the overt training, compared with the /tw/ and /sw/ sequences.

Seo, Kim and Stonham (2009) examined Korean speakers’ perception of the English /kw/, /tw/ and /sw/ sequences and found the pattern which is opposite to Cho, Park and Lee’s production result: /kw/ sequences were more easily perceived than /tw/ or /sw/ sequences.

In addition, according to Jang and Cho (2005), Korean speakers of English have difficulties in pronouncing an English glide /w/ or /j/ occurring as a single onset. They investigated Korean speakers’ pronunciation of English onglides occurring in the diphthongs such as [ji], [wu] and [wo] and found that non-proficient Korean speakers of English could not properly pronounce the English onglides of the diphthongs occurring in word initial position.

Previous studies on the acquisition of English glides by Koreans are all alike in that they examined only how and why Korean learners of English have difficulties regarding glides, either by acoustically comparing Korean learners’ production of English glides to native English speakers’ production or by investigating Korean learners’ perception of English glides produced by native English speakers.

Given that communication is reciprocal, and that the ultimate goal is mutual comprehension, it is very important to understand how native English speakers respond to Korean speakers’ pronunciation. From this insight, we investigated native English speakers’ perception of English glides produced by Korean learners. That is, we examined how native English speakers responded when they heard English words with /uw/, /jV/ and /wV/ sequences produced by Korean learners of English, which has been reported to give problems to Korean learners of English in previous studies. To examine the influence of a following vowel on the