An Analysis of English Sound Recognition in Secondary Schools based on Korean High School Students’ Vowel Pronunciation

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〈ABSTRACT〉

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the problems of discriminating and writing down English vowels in a secondary English education.

The first-year high school students were selected at random and tested on their listening, discriminating pronunciation and writing down the phonetic transcriptions. The results showed that more than half the students have good listening abilities. In the discriminating pronunciation test, most students correctly discriminated the following vowels: /ɑ, æ, ʌ, e, ɔ, ou/. However, they incorrectly discriminated the following vowels: /u, ʋ, i, ɪ/. In writing down the pronunciation test, most of them were good at writing down the vowels of /u, ʋ, i, ɪ/, but they were not good at writing down the vowels of /ɑ, æ, ou/.

The thesis makes three proposals for more efficient teaching of English pronunciations. First, teachers need to teach students more of the lax vowels than the tense vowels. Second, the education of phonetic transcription is needed. Third, students need to practice on the dictation.

Key words: listening, discriminating pronunciation, phonetic transcriptions, lax vowels, dictation
I. Introduction

Learning a foreign language means to study its phonemic system. A learner of a language cannot understand what a native speaker is saying unless he or she can discriminate its sound. By the same token, when a Korean is speaking English and the native speaker cannot understand it, no communication is taking place. As a result, in learning a foreign language, speaking and listening education should come first followed by the phonemic system based on that.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to observe and analyze errors which Korean students make when pronouncing or discriminating English segments, through listening test and pronunciation test. This study is especially focused in the ability of discriminating English vowel pronunciation, and to find out the discrimination ability through dictation.

II. A comparison between Korean and English vowels

The marking of English vowel differs from a scholar to scholar. According to D. Jones (1960), it’s possible to suggest the basic vowel system and to indicate English vowel marking which is related to this. By doing this, one can compare it with the vowel of another language, and thus solve the various pronunciation problems on English vowel. A. C. Gimson (1980), however, places the purpose of the phoneme mark on orthography, language education and many kinds of English pronunciation remarks; emphasizing phonetics more than Jones.

Since this study focuses on American English, the phonemic system is based on Kenyon & Knott. The following shows the comparison between Korean and English vowels.
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As shown above, when comparing Korean and English vowels elaborately, there is almost no resemblance between the two. First of all, the biggest difference is that there is no corresponding English sound for /으/. Another difference is that Korean /이/ is lower than English /i/, and pronounced little above /ɪ/. In addition, /ʊ/ is pronounced between /u/ and /u/. Lastly, when pronouncing /a/, the tongue is further back than pronouncing /o/.

One can find many differences in the phonemic system of two languages. These differences cause language transition problems, when studying both languages.
III. Dictation

In general, dictation is used in language education, to check out the pronunciation and spelling rules. The following is to find out the role of dictation in learning English.

1. The definition of dictation

In general, dictation means: students constructing an idea through auditory image and draw mental image in the head and then write, by listening to the recorded materials or utterances which teachers provide. Riley (1975) asserted that dictation is one closely controlled use of language ... one that aims at improving aural comprehension and achieving accurate written representation of the words and phrases used.

2. The usefulness of dictation

According to Valette (1977), beginner level dictation provides opportunities to students to practice relating the sounds of a new language with its letters. Moreover, it plays the role of connecting the four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Also, dictation can be an evaluation tool in measuring intermediate and post-intermediate students’ overall language abilities.

Dictation activities help students understand the structure of a language. For teachers, they help them to teach students clearly of the difficult vocabularies, so that they can get a good grasp of details on those.

3. The advantages and disadvantages of dictation

Dictation has following advantages. First, dictation can be done anytime and anywhere, without reference to the learning abilities and grades of the students. Also, it
is easy to grade and make corrections. In addition, it helps in writing training which students can know immediately what they have written wrong or confused.

However, dictation has disadvantages as well. First, it’s easy to make test questions, but it’s hard to grade them. Moreover, it requires teachers’ enough preparations and interests, to test the specific parts which they want to know, such as easily misunderstood or confused parts. Furthermore, it can only be simple and meaningless spelling test, if the procedures are not taken care of.

4. The types of dictation

There are many types of dictation. Phoneme dictation, spelling dictation, word dictation, phrase dictation, sentence dictation and etc. Among these, two different dictations were used which are word and sentence dictations. For former, students are to write two words with different vowels by listening to each sentence, and for latter, they were to listen to words which native speakers spoke and write them down.

IV. A study of Methods

The purpose of this study is to find out how secondary school students’ abilities of discriminating vowels affect on dictation abilities.

1. Study materials

The questions that were used in this study are made based on 10 different vowels as follows.

\[/i/-/i/, /u/-/u/, /e/-/æ/, /a/-/ʌ/, /ɔ/-/ou/\]
2. Study procedures

The students were to choose right answers after listening to a male and a female Americans reading the chosen words as study materials. First, I read the questions in Korean, and then those two Americans read the same words and sentences one time respectively and twice for the dictation questions. For example, when the words 'least' and 'list' were provided in item I, the students were to choose one of the words which they think is right, after the native speaker reads the word. There were 3 seconds intervals between a word and a word and 5 seconds intervals between a question and a question, to give students time to think. For the dictation questions 10 seconds of intervals were given to give them time to write.

3. Study objects

The study objects were 34 male and female 10th grade Korean students living in Gyeonggi province. These students were all in the same class and the study was to find out their abilities of discriminating vowels through three different types of questions which are listening, discriminating phonetic symbols by reading spellings, and writing down phonetic symbols.
V. An analysis of the test results

The following is the result of the analysis on 10 vowels.

1) /i/ - /ɪ/ : It can be said that students are better at discriminating tense vowel /i/, than lax vowel /ɪ/. Most of the discriminations were from dictation questions.

2) /u/ - /ʊ/ : These two pronunciations showed similar rate differences with the previous one. However, this happened not only in dictation questions, but also in listening questions as well.

3) /ɛ/ - /æ/ : The students made low discriminations on both of these pronunciations. It turned out that they are a little more good at discriminating low vowel /æ/, than mid vowel /ɛ/.

4) /ʌ/ - /ɑ/ : It can be said that students are a little more good at discriminating back vowel /ɑ/, than central vowel /ʌ/. Here, they were confused /ɑ/ with /ou/.

5) /ɔ/ - /ou/ : The percentage of discriminating diphthong was higher than monophthong. This was highest in dictation questions.
In general, it may be easily inferred that students need more practice on lax vowels than tense vowels. Also, they need practice on monophthong than diphthong. Moreover, they need teachers’ guidance on phonetic symbols as well as dictation. In phonetic symbols, they need guidance on /ʌ/ and /ɔ/ pronunciations. In dictation, they need discriminating guidance on /ʌ/ and /ɑ/ pronunciations.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the problems of discriminating and writing down English vowels in a secondary English education. The most difficult thing of recognition in the process of learning English is the pronunciation. So, in order for the students to acquire English pronunciation more easily, English teachers should first have a knowledge of a correct phonetic system.

The results showed that more than half the students have good listening abilities. Fifty three percent of them circled the correct response on the listening test. In the discriminating pronunciation test, most students correctly discriminated the following vowels:/a, ʌ, e, æ, ɔ, ou/. However, they incorrectly discriminated the following vowels:/u, ʊ, i, ɪ/. In writing down the pronunciation test, while most of them were good at writing down the vowels of /u/ and /ɪ/, they were not good at writing down the vowels of /ʌ, ɔ, ou/.

In conclusion, teachers need to teach students more of the lax vowels than the tense vowels. Second, the education of phonetic transcription is needed in order to practice, correct and improve their pronunciation on their own. Third, students need to practice on the dictation, so that they could learn phonological rules, the ability of discriminating continuing sounds, and spelling correctly by dividing the sound and the spelling which will be very effective in enhancing their listening abilities.
참 고 문 헌

요약

고등학교 영어학습자의 영어발음 문제분석:
모음 발음을 중심으로

김수정
구희산

본 논문은 영어발음 중에서도 모음 발음을 중심으로 하여 한국 고등학교 학생들의 청취 능력과 발음 능력을 알아보고 문제점을 발견하는데 그 목적이 있다.

본 논문에서 실시한 실험은 듣기 문항, 철자보고 발음기호 구별, 그리고 발음기호 쓰기로 나눌 수 있다.

듣기 문항 실험 결과는 반이 조금 넘는 학생들(53%)이 모음을 올바르게 식별해 내는 것으로 나타났다. 철자보고 발음기호 구별 실험에서는 학생들이 잘 식별하는 모음이 /a, ʌ, e, æ, ι, ou/이고, 발음을 잘 식별하지 못하는 모음이 /u, i, ɪ/라는 것을 알 수 있었다. 발음기호 쓰기 실험에서는 학생들이 잘 쓰는 모음이 /v/와 /v/였고 잘 쓰지 못하는 모음이 /ʌ, ɔ, οu/였다. 따라서 교사는 이와 모음을 더 지도할 필요가 있고 학습자들은 발음기호 교육과 받아쓰기 연습이 필요하다. 그리하여 교사는 영어발음 교육에 대한 지속적인 탐구 및 충분한 지식을 가지고 학생들을 지도해야만 한다. 또한 수업시간에 간단히 받아쓰기를 실시하는 등의 학습을 통하여 듣기의 이해 능력 향상을 도모해야 할 것이다.

주제어: 모음 발음, 청취 능력, 발음기호, 식별, 받아쓰기