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**FEATURE**

### **South Korean Adults' Perceptions on Causes of Difficulties with Spoken English: A Descriptive Study**

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***Abstract:** This study investigated the perceptions of South Korean adults on the causes of their difficulties in speaking English as a foreign language. The participants of this study were 87 adult students from two institutions of higher learning in the Philippines.*

*The results showed that Korean adults studying English perceived that "grammar differences between English and Korean" and "being self-conscious" were the most significant hindrances to their learning communicative English. Data showed that those who were highly self-conscious were less fluent in English.*

*Significant positive correlations were also found between the frequency of studying spoken English and English fluency, and self-assessed English fluency and fluency as recognized by others.*

People living in South Korea are investing time and finances in solving a problem—learning English. Every year much more than 10 trillion won (about US \$10.76 billion) are invested in private English education. According to statistical data from the Bank of Korea, fees for learning English spent in English-speaking countries was about 7.38 trillion won (about US \$7.94 billion) in 2004 (Go, Cho, Lee & Park, 2006). Additionally, 10% of the combined family budget of all Korean families in 2004 was expended on private English education for their children (Go, Cho, Lee, & Park, 2006).

From personal observation, a new family arrangement, which is hardly ever found in other countries, is emerging as a result of this strong demand for English education. In many cases, the father earns money in Korea to support his wife and children who are living abroad to master English.

Koreans make such desperate efforts to learn English because the era of internationalization has arrived, where learning English has become critical for

*October 2008, Vol. 11, No. 2*

survival both in Korea and outside of the country. According to one reporter (Jung, 2005), 80% of internet information is written in English and 85% of international organizations use English as a second language. English is used as a mother tongue or a second language in 51 countries, designated as an official language in 70 countries, and taught in some 100 countries. Jung further notes that a report even predicted that the number of those using English, at present 800 million to 1 billion, will be 3 billion in 10 years' time. In considering global circumstances, it is obvious that English is not optional, but an indispensable factor to survive in this world.

Competence in speaking English has already been established as a standard for success in Korean society. For job hunting, for entrance to college, or even for promotions, English proficiency has become the first requirement. One television program, Korean English Report, conducted a survey of the personnel managers from 72 companies. The results showed that 79.2% of those questioned answered that English has an effect on promotion and annual salary, and it was confirmed that English is a prerequisite for many jobs (Go, Cho, Lee, & Park, 2006). The result of the investigation of those who entered top-rated Seoul National University and majored in business administration was that the annual salary of fluent English speakers was more than 100 million won (about \$107,600), 30 million won (about \$32,268) more than the salary of those who could not speak English fluently, which is around 70 million won (or \$75,293) (Kang, 2006). This is a staggering contrast.

If you ask Korean adults why they study English, most answers will be to get better jobs (at a better salary) or to be promoted. Because English competency is directly connected to money and honor, Korean people cannot help devoting great efforts to learning English. However, despite the social climate emphasizing the importance of English, the investment of a huge sum of money, and zealous efforts to master English, the English level of Koreans, especially in speaking, is not all that satisfactory, as observed by this researcher who is a Korean and has a great deal of interest in this area.

Many people think the causes are deficient English education, a poor educational environment for spoken English, lack of teachers with proficiency in spoken English, or the differences between the English and Korean language structures. Those factors, however, are just a part of the cause. The problems are not as simple as one might think.

A study targeting college students in Korea shows that students identified six items as important in college English education. In order of the students' priorities, they were: speaking, listening, reading, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Lee & Im, 2005). This shows that communicative skills are considered to be the most important issue in English education. At the same

time, students are not satisfied with their English speaking and listening skills. Grammar, however, rates as the least of their concerns.

Hyun (as cited in Kim, 2002) reported that the English class time was 45 minutes and 30 seconds, on average, in elementary, middle, and high schools in Korea. The time used for listening, however, was only about 2.17 minutes or 5.8% of the total English class time. Because of this limited listening time in the school English education, students may feel the need of more study in English listening.

Many people simply believe that their poor English communicative skills are caused by the differences in grammatical structures between Korean and English. Perhaps there are factors that are much stronger than the superficial obstacles which hinder Koreans from learning communicative English skills.

The difficulties Koreans have in learning English are not due to a lack of intelligence. According to a study by Irish and Finnish professors in 2002 (as cited in No, 2006), the Korean average IQ is 106, which makes it the world's highest level except Hong Kong (107). It is much higher than the European countries, where many of the people speak English fluently, such as Sweden (101) or Norway (98). The problem lies elsewhere.

This researcher attempted to study this problem by asking, "What are the perceptions of South Korean adults about the causes of their difficulties in speaking English as a foreign language?" The main purpose of this study was to investigate the root causes that keep Koreans in an English immersion setting in the Philippines from communicating in English, in order to help them overcome difficulties in learning spoken English. Finding out the problems should be the first step toward solving these difficulties.

The main questions used to guide the study were: (1) What do Korean adults point to as the greatest hindrances to speaking English? (2) Which areas of English do Koreans consider the most difficult, most want to improve, and invest the most time in studying: speaking, pronunciation/intonation, grammar, listening, writing, or vocabulary? (3) Do Koreans think that their English speaking skills have improved in the Philippines? If so, what is the major reason? If not, what is the reason? (4) Are there significant relationships between studying a specific English area, such as speaking, pronunciation/intonation, grammar, listening, writing, and vocabulary, and English fluency? (5) Are there significant relationships between self-consciousness, confidence, and English fluency, and between each of these and the demographic variables?

### **Method**

Many Koreans go abroad to learn English. The Philippines is one of the countries many Koreans choose as a convenient place to learn English. They consider the economic benefits and relatively short distance between the countries.

The sample for this study consisted of 65 Korean adult college students and 22 Koreans studying in two English language centers ( $n = 87$ ) in the Philippines. All survey participants came to the Philippines to study English and were studying it at the time of the study. (Admittedly, some came for other purposes, but if they were studying English or studying in English, they qualified for this study). Demographic variables included students' age, gender, reasons for coming to the Philippines, years of residence in the Philippines, and years studying English.

A survey questionnaire with open, closed, and demographic questions, together with Likert scale items, developed by the researcher, was used to collect the data for this study. The survey instrument was translated into the Korean language and back-translated into English.

One-way ANOVA was used to find significant differences in specific areas of English study, self-consciousness; confidence in communicative English skills, and fluency of spoken English by demographic variables. Spearman's rho was used to identify significant relationships between the demographic variables/characteristics and variables of interest (English pronunciation education, specific English areas of study, self-consciousness, confidence in English skills, and fluency of spoken English).

Figure 1 shows the variables considered in this study, along with the factors that hinder Koreans from speaking communicative English. This study hypothesized that English intonation education, the study of a specific English area, the degree of self-consciousness, and the degree of confidence in communicative English skills might have a direct relationship with the fluency of spoken English.

### Data Analysis

Approximately equal numbers of males (n=42) and females (n=45) were included in the convenience sample. Similarly, the students were distributed almost equally across the three age ranges studied, with slightly more in the younger (18-21 years) group (see Table 1).

Koreans coming to study in the Philippines had widely varied experience in years of studying English, ranging from six to more than 12 years, spread quite evenly across the three groupings used for this study. The largest group of respondents had been in the Philippines 1 or 2 years (26, 29.9%). To the question, "Why did you come to the Philippines?" a majority (87.2%) of the respondents indicated that they came to study English (though 32 of these indicated a double purpose that included gaining a degree).

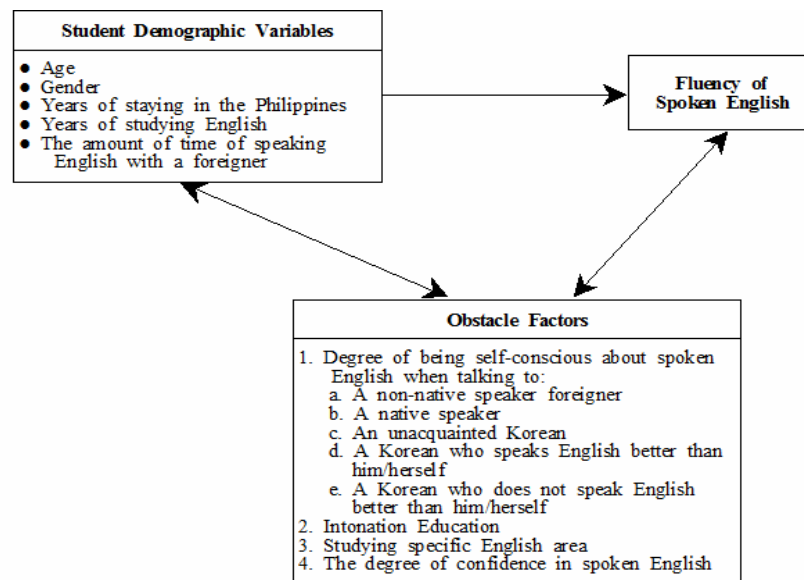


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Table 1  
*Description of the Participants by Demographic Variables (N=87)*

Variable	f	%
<b>Student Gender</b>		
Male	42	48.3
Female	45	51.7
Total	87	100.0
<b>Age Group</b>		
18-21 years	34	39.1
22-25 years	26	29.9
26 years and over	27	31.0
Total	87	100.0
<b>Reasons for coming to the Philippines</b>		
To study English	43	50.0
To get a degree	6	7.0
Both	32	37.2
Other	5	5.8
Missing	1	-
Total	87	100.0
<b>Years in the Philippines</b>		
Less than 6 months	10	11.5
More than 6 months to less than 1 year	14	16.1
More than 1 year to less than 2 years	26	29.9
More than 2 years to less than 3 years	13	14.9
More than 3 years to less than 4 years	10	11.5
More than 4 years	14	16.1
Total	87	100.0
<b>Years studying English (including school years)</b>		
6-8 years	31	35.6
9-11 years	30	34.5
More than 12 years	26	29.9
Total	87	100.0

Note: f=frequency, %=percentage

### ***Most Significant Hindrances***

The results revealed that “grammar differences between English and Korean” were most frequently identified by 27 (31.8 %,  $M=3.32$ ) students as the greatest cause of difficulty in speaking English (see Table 2).

As the greatest hindrance among grammatical differences, nearly half (39, 49.4%) indicated “word order” (39, 49.4%). Other differences were preposition usage (14, 17.7%), ellipsis usage, and tense usage which showed the same frequency (9, 11.4%), article usage (5, 5.7%), and other differences (3, 3.8%) in order (see Table 3).

Although several scholars (Cho, 1997; Kim, 1991; Park, 2005; You, 2001) pointed to grammatical differences as one of the greatest hindrances to Koreans’ speaking English, they did not identify the greatest hindrance among grammatical differences—word order, ellipsis, articles, prepositions, and tense. The present study clearly shows that “word order” is the greatest difficulty among the grammatical differences.

This difficulty was closely followed in frequency by “being self-conscious” when speaking English by 25 (28.7%,  $M=3.26$ ) respondents. Other causes of difficulty were mentioned less frequently: 14 (16.5%,  $M=2.81$ ) students noted “the problem of English education in Korea”; 11 (12.6 %,  $M=3.06$ ) referred to the difference of intonation system; and 10 (11.5%,  $M=2.62$ ), the lowest, pointed to the socio-cultural impact of Korean cultural background on speaking English.

Table 2  
*The Frequency for Greatest Cause of Difficulty*

Variables	F	Valid %	N	Mean	SD	Ranking Change
Difference of grammar	27	31.8	85	3.32	1.47	0
Personal fear of making a mistake when speaks	25	29.1	86	3.26	1.51	0
The problem of English education in Korea	14	16.5	85	2.81	1.36	+1
Difference of intonation system	11	12.9	85	3.06	1.28	-1
Impact of Korean cultural background	10	11.8	85	2.62	1.37	0

Note: f=Frequency, %=Percentage

***Student Priorities in Language Learning***

Approximately equal amounts of time were spent in acquiring listening ( $M=2.80$ ) and writing skills ( $M=2.79$ ). Less time was allocated to pronunciation/intonation ( $M = 2.38$ ) and vocabulary ( $M = 2.33$ ) with the least time spent in studying grammar ( $M=2.24$ ). The areas least frequently given time by students were pronunciation and grammar (see Table 4). This could be because students feel no need to improve in these areas or because this aspect of the English language was not emphasized by the teachers.

Table 3  
*Grammatical Differences that Hinder Spoken English*

Variables	f	%	Valid %
Word order	39	44.8	49.4
Preposition usage	14	16.1	17.7
Ellipsis usage	9	10.3	11.4
Tense usage	9	10.3	11.4
Article usage	5	5.7	6.3
Others	3	3.4	3.8
Total	79	90.8	100.0
Missing	8	9.2	
Total	87	100.0	

Note: f=frequency, %=percentage

Table 4  
*The Frequency for the Investment of Students' Time in English Areas*

Section	Always		Frequently		Seldom		Never		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Speaking	26	29.9	31	35.6	26	29.9	4	4.6	2.91
Listening	24	27.6	30	34.5	25	28.7	8	9.2	2.80
Writing	20	23.0	32	36.8	32	36.8	3	3.4	2.79
Pronunciation/ Intonation	15	17.2	17	19.5	41	47.1	14	16.1	2.38
Vocabulary	7	8.0	22	25.3	51	58.6	7	8.0	2.33
Grammar	6	6.9	22	25.3	46	52.9	13	14.9	2.24



### ***Most Difficult English Area***

When asked which area of English learning was the most difficult, respondents indicated that grammar (29, 33.7%) was perceived as the most difficult. It also ranked lowest in frequency (5, 5.8%) for the least difficult area. The second and third most difficult areas in English were found to be speaking (20, 23.3%) and pronunciation/intonation (12, 14.0%) respectively. Other English areas such as writing (8, 9.3%), reading (7, 8.1%), vocabulary (6, 7.0%), and listening (4, 8.1%) were mentioned by a few individuals as high difficulty areas, but the differences in frequency between them was relatively small (see Table 5).

### ***English Areas that Participants Most Want to Improve***

The data revealed that the English area that participants most wanted to improve was speaking (39, 44.8%). This was supported by its ranking lowest in frequency (6, 6.9%) as the area for which there was the least desire to improve. Around 45% of students wanted to improve their spoken English. The second English area most wanted to improve was grammar (19, 21.8%). It was followed in frequency (12, 12.8%) by pronunciation.

Lee and Im (2005) found that college students in Korea considered speaking to be their most urgent language learning need, with grammar being the least important. However, in this study, grammar was the second most common area the respondents wanted to improve. The reason for this difference may be because of the different amounts of time invested in studying grammar. Many students in the Philippines were spending most of their time in studying speaking, and little time studying grammar. Students in Korea were probably spending much more time in studying grammar. Also, many of the Korean students in the Philippines were planning to continue their education in English, which could explain their greater desire to improve their grammar.

Table 5  
*The Frequency for the Most and Least Difficult Area*

Variables	Most difficult		Least difficult	
	Frequency	Valid %	Frequency	Valid %
Grammar	29	33.7	5	5.8
Speaking	20	23.3	15	17.4
Pronunciation	12	14.0	13	15.1
Writing	8	9.3	4	4.7
Reading	7	8.1	25	29.1
Vocabulary	6	7.0	8	9.3
Listening	4	4.7	16	18.6

The Korean students showed relatively little interest in improving other English areas (see Table 6): listening (6.9%), writing (5.7%), and vocabulary (5.7%). Reading ranked lowest in frequency (2, 2.3%) for wanting to improve. This was supported by data indicating it was the area that respondents cared least about improving (22, 25.3%).

### ***The Perceptions of English Improvement in the Philippines***

Most (82.8%) of the participants felt that their English speaking skills had improved during their stay in the Philippines (See Table 7). The most frequent reason given for this improvement was “environmental factors requiring one to speak English” (42, 58.3%). Other common reasons given were “foreign teachers” (12, 16.7%), “foreign friends,” and “personal effort” (8, 11.1%). Besides this, “a long period of living in the Philippines” was mentioned.

Eleven respondents answered that their speaking skill had not improved (see Table 8), and pointed to “the lack of personal effort” (8, 72.7%) and “fear of making mistakes in grammar” (3, 27.3%) as reasons for the lack of improvement. Clearly, most of those who did not improve their English (11) felt their lack of achievement was limited by their poor application to the task. These findings were not predicted by the review of literature.

Table 6  
*The Frequency for English Areas That Participants Desire to Improve*

Variables	Most Desire		Least Desire	
	Frequency	Valid %	Frequency	Valid %
Speaking	39	44.8	6	6.9
Grammar	19	21.8	8	9.2
Pronunciation	12	12.8	20	23.0
Listening	6	6.9	10	11.5
Writing	5	5.7	8	9.2
Vocabulary	5	5.7	12	13.8
Reading	2	2.3	22	25.3

Table 7  
*The Greatest Reasons for Improvement*

Variables	f	%	Valid %
Environmental factors that cause students to speak English	42	48.3	58.3
Foreign teachers	12	13.8	16.7
Foreign friends	8	9.2	11.1
Personal effort	8	9.2	11.1
Others	2	2.2	2.8
Total	72	82.8	100.0

Table 8  
*The Greatest Reasons for No Improvement*

Variables	f	%	Valid %
The lack of personal effort	8	9.2	72.7
Fear of making mistakes in grammar	3	3.4	27.3
Total	11	12.6	100.0

#### ***Relationships Between Studying a Specific English Area and English Fluency***

A cross-tabs analysis showed there was no significant chi-square relationship between “English intonation/pronunciation education” and “fluency of spoken English.” Table 9, however, indicates that with increasing frequency of pronunciation practice, respondents reported a higher proportion of being judged to be fluent by an observer. The literature supports a relationship between pronunciation and fluency of spoken English, indicating that Americans often cannot understand what Koreans say, even when their English sentences are correct, due to the differences between the two international systems (Gwack, 1998; Kim, 2002). Kahng’s (1985) experimental study, however, indicated that those who practiced English pronunciation and intonation more, with an understanding of the differences between English and Korean, showed fewer errors in English intonation. Thus, it is assumed that there is a relationship

between pronunciation education (or at least pronunciation practice) and English fluency.

The Spearman correlation between the ordered variables (See Table 10) indicated only one significant correlation ( $r=.230, p=.033$ )--frequency of being judged fluent in spoken English and studying the area of speaking English. The greatest correlation was observed between the frequency of studying spoken English and studying English pronunciation ( $r=.641, p=.000$ ).

#### ***Relationships Between Self-Consciousness, Confidence, and English Fluency***

A Spearman's correlation coefficient ( $\rho=.590, p<.001$ ) indicated that higher self-assessed English fluency was related to higher frequency of being identified as fluent in English, or alternatively, a fluent English speaker as assessed by others (see Table 11).

Table 9  
*Cross Tabulation of Fluency of Spoken English and Participation in Pronunciation Lessons*

Fluency of English		None	Once	More than twice	Several times	Total
Pronunciation Lessons	No	17	3	6	5	31
	Yes	25	2	9	15	51
Total		42	5	15	20	82

As shown in Table 12, a negative Spearman's correlation coefficient ( $-.308, p=.004$ ) indicated that higher self-consciousness about speaking English was related to lower frequency of being identified as fluent in English. Alternatively, fluent English speakers were less self-conscious. Lee (as cited in No, 2006) explained that in a social atmosphere where those fluent in English are treated as more competent persons, it is natural for Koreans to become self-conscious when they speak English. This could be due to fears of their English being judged as poor by others, which would impede conversational English.

Language students, according to this study, are fair judges of their own ability. Table 13 indicates a moderate correlation ( $\rho=.590, p<.001$ ) between self-assessed fluency in English and fluency as recognized by others.

Table 10  
*Spearman Correlation between Fluency of English and English Areas of Study*

Variables	N	Correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
P-S	87	.641(**)	.000
W-L	87	.582(**)	.000
W-P	87	.548(**)	.000
W-S	87	.534(**)	.000
L-S	87	.479(**)	.000
V-G	87	.471(**)	.000
V-P	87	.402(**)	.000
L-P	87	.393(**)	.000
V-W	87	.377(**)	.000
V-L	87	.331(**)	.002
W-G	87	.320(**)	.003
G-P	87	.318(**)	.003
L-G	87	.286(**)	.007
V-S	87	.242(*)	.024
F-S	86	.230(*)	.033
G-S	87	.221(*)	.039

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

(F=Fluency of English, P=Pronunciation, S=Speaking, W=Writing, L=Listening, G=Grammar)

Table 11  
*Correlation Between Self-assessed English Fluency and Fluency Judged by Others*

Variable	Spearman's rho	Self-Assessed English fluency
English fluency as Judged by others	Correlation Coefficient	.590(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**N=86**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 12  
*Correlation between Self-consciousness  
 and Fluency of Spoken English*

Variables	Spearman's rho	Fluency of English
Self-consciousness	Correlation Coefficient	-.308(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004

**N=86**      \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 13  
*Correlation between Self-assessed Fluency of English  
 and Fluency of English Recognized by Others*

Variables	Spearman's rho	Self-assessed fluency
Fluency of English	Correlation Coefficient	.590(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**N=86**      \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Conclusions

Since the English and Korean languages have very different form and structure, it is not easy for Koreans to learn English. Grammar was selected as the most difficult area to learn; learning word order was the most difficult aspect of the grammar study. The Korean respondents said they preferred learning English mainly by listening. Ironically, this was the very activity on which they spent the least time.

The results of this study support the idea that the investment of time and money in studying English is not wasted, especially when studying in a foreign country such as the Philippines. The respondents perceived that their English speaking skills had improved in the Philippines due to the conducive learning environment and personal effort. Related to this observation is the domino effect of increased fluency resulting from their improved confidence in spoken English. This study differs with some past research as to which areas of language students most desire to learn, but these differences have probable causes which relate to the immediate environment and goals of the students relative to the use they intend to make of the language they are studying.

Some ideas for future research are as follows:

1. To explore other factors that hinder Korean adults from obtaining communicative English skills. It was not possible to deal with an exhaustive list of factors that hinder the learning of English by Koreans in this study.
2. To explore strategies for learning grammar and speaking that could help to reduce the obstacles faced by adult Korean learners of spoken English. Such studies will provide research based evidence to improve English teaching practices for Korean language students in the Philippines.

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