

The English Connection

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The Three “P”s: How Pronunciation Teaching Shapes Perception and Production

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Have you ever taught a language learner who struggled to distinguish between the subtle sounds of *ship* and *sheep*, or who misplaced the stress in *record* as a noun versus a verb? Sometimes, no matter how many times you correct them, the errors persist, leaving both the teacher and the learner frustrated. Such challenges highlight the interconnected nature of two critical skills: speech perception and speech production, which are foundational for mastering pronunciation. By understanding how these skills interact, educators can enhance their teaching strategies, making the journey to fluency smoother and more effective.

As a bilingualism specialist, my research focuses on second language (L2) speech perception and production, particularly in learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds, such as Korean speakers learning English. For example, a Korean student once shared their confusion upon hearing the word *desert* in a sentence. Was it the barren landscape (*desert*) or the act of abandoning (*desert*)? This confusion, rooted in lexical stress, underlines the need for targeted instructional strategies. Similarly, English orthography often puzzles learners, as words like *rough* and *through* defy consistent pronunciation rules. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating perception and production in teaching, offering practical solutions for English educators, particularly in South Korea, where learners face the difficult challenge of mastering a language with a completely different script.



This article builds on these insights and the methodologies I will present at the 2025 KOTESOL International Conference. It outlines a comprehensive approach to pronunciation teaching, highlighting innovative strategies that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical applications, paving the way for more effective pronunciation instruction.

Speech Perception: Hearing and Understanding

Speech perception is the ability to recognize and interpret sounds in spoken language. It involves discerning phonemes – the smallest units of sound – and mapping them onto linguistic knowledge to comprehend meaning (Gass & Selinker, 2013). For language learners, this task is often complicated by differences in phonological systems between their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). For example, Korean speakers learning English may struggle to perceive stress differences because Korean, in most of its dialects, lacks lexical stress – a critical feature in English for distinguishing

meaning and grammatical categories (e.g., *record* as a noun versus a verb).

A memorable moment from my classroom involved a learner who was puzzled by why native English speakers laughed when they said, “I want to desert my job,” intending to mean “quit.” The misplaced stress on the first syllable of *desert* (instead of the second) inadvertently changed the word’s meaning from “abandon” to “a barren landscape.” This unintentional error not only confused the listener but also created an awkward and humorous situation for the speaker. Such experiences highlight the importance of teaching stress perception alongside vocabulary, enabling learners to communicate confidently and avoid unintended misunderstandings.

Another example comes from listening comprehension exercises, where many students struggle with distinguishing between the words *can* and *can’t* in phrases like “I can do it.” This misperception often arises from the reduced form of *can* in fast, natural speech, where it is pronounced with a weak, unstressed vowel (schwa), sounding like “k’n.” In contrast, *can’t* is typically stressed and pronounced more fully, making it easier to identify in slow, deliberate speech but harder in casual conversation.

For instance, during a classroom activity, a student confidently repeated the phrase “I can’t do it,” thinking they had accurately transcribed what they heard from a recording. When asked to reflect on their answer, they realized the context of the sentence (“I can do it if I try harder”) contradicted their transcription. Such moments underscore how context and subtle intonation differences can confuse learners, especially when they are not accustomed to reduced forms and stress patterns in conversational English.

Addressing this issue requires targeted listening practice that focuses on recognizing reduced forms, stress, and intonation. Activities such as minimal pair discrimination exercises (e.g., *can* vs. *can’t*), repetition drills with slowed-down and natural-speed recordings, and contextualized listening tasks can help learners tune into these distinctions. By teaching students to focus on both the sound and the context of speech, educators can significantly improve their students’ ability to decode spoken English effectively, reducing such misunderstandings in real-world interactions.

In my research, I have investigated how Korean speakers learning English process lexical stress and orthographic features, which are essential for accurate perception and pronunciation. These studies highlight that targeted perceptual training significantly enhances learners’ ability to identify these features, setting a strong foundation for accurate production. For instance, explicit training on stress patterns and their relationship to orthographic cues often improves learners’ comprehension of spoken English. These findings emphasize the necessity of perceptual training, particularly in contexts like South Korea, where learners may lack exposure to naturalistic input.

Speech Production: Speaking Clearly

Speech production is the process of generating spoken

language, encompassing everything from articulating individual sounds to forming coherent sentences. Like perception, production is influenced by the interplay between L1 and L2 systems. Learners may transfer phonetic and phonological features from their L1, leading to accented speech (Flege, 1995).

I recall one learner, a Korean professional preparing for an international conference, who struggled with pronouncing the word *development*. Their repeated articulation as “dee-bell-op-ment” was rooted in syllable-level interference from Korean. Through targeted exercises that paired auditory models with visual aids, they were able to correct their pronunciation and confidently present their ideas. This anecdote highlights the reciprocal relationship between perception and production – hearing the correct model helped refine their production, and producing the word accurately reinforced their listening skills. To address this, we used targeted exercises combining auditory models and visual feedback. The learner listened to native recordings and used waveform software to compare their pronunciation with the correct stress pattern. Tapping out the stress rhythm while repeating the word further reinforced the correct pronunciation. After consistent practice, they confidently pronounced *development* during a mock presentation, paving the way for better recognition and production of similar words.

Another learner expressed frustration with pronouncing consonant clusters like “str” in *street*. They would often simplify the cluster to “sreet” or add an extra semivowel, producing something like “sutureetu.” These adaptations are common among Korean learners due to differences in phonotactic constraints – rules governing how syllables are formed in a language. In Korean, consonant clusters are typically avoided or broken up with vowels (most syllables are formed by a consonant and a vowel-CV, while CVC are far less common), making English clusters particularly challenging. To tackle this, we broke the word into manageable chunks, first isolating the “str” sound and practicing it repeatedly with exaggerated articulation. Visual aids, such as phoneme charts, helped the learner understand the tongue and lip placement required for the correct sound. Once comfortable, they practiced the cluster in simple words before reintegrating it into sentences. For instance, after mastering *street*, they moved on to expressions like “The street is busy,” gradually improving their fluency in natural speech.

Research shows that speech production benefits from improved speech perception (Best & Tyler, 2007). When learners can accurately identify sounds and stress patterns in English, they are more likely to produce them correctly. For example, incorporating stress placement exercises into classroom activities not only improves learners’ articulation but also enhances their ability to identify stress patterns in others’ speech, a crucial skill for real-world communication.

This insight is particularly relevant in South Korea, where English education often prioritizes standardized testing over communicative competence. A student once expressed their frustration about acing grammar tests but still struggling to order coffee at an English-speaking café – a situation many of us have likely encountered when living in a foreign country. Incorporating activities that connect perception and production

into the classroom can help bridge this gap, enabling learners to achieve more natural and effective spoken communication. Furthermore, emphasizing orthographic patterns that guide pronunciation, such as syllable stress or vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, can further support learners in developing accurate and fluent speech.

Teaching Pronunciation: Connecting Perception and Production

Teaching pronunciation effectively requires integrating both perception and production activities. Traditional approaches often emphasize mechanical drills and repetition, focusing primarily on production. While these methods have their place, they can overlook the critical role of perception in guiding accurate pronunciation. Moreover, pronunciation teaching should aim to help learners achieve more accurate and intelligible speech rather than striving for native-like pronunciation, which is neither necessary nor realistic for most learners. Recognizing this goal can alleviate pressure on both teachers and students, fostering a more supportive learning environment.

Additionally, pronunciation instruction should be integrated into the teaching of other skills, such as speaking, listening, and even reading and writing. Given the constraints of already packed curricula, embedding pronunciation activities into broader language tasks ensures that learners develop their phonological skills alongside other competencies without requiring additional instructional time. For example, practicing stress patterns during speaking activities or addressing common mispronunciations during listening exercises can enhance learners’ overall communicative ability while making efficient use of classroom time.

Modern teaching methods, which will be discussed during my workshop at the upcoming KOTESOL International Conference, advocate for a balanced approach. Activities like minimal pair discrimination exercises – where learners distinguish between similar sounds (e.g., *ship* vs. *sheep*) – enhance perceptual skills. At the same time, guided production tasks, such as shadowing (imitating a model speaker), help learners refine their articulation.

One memorable success involved a shy learner who avoided speaking due to their perceived “bad pronunciation.” Using



shadowing exercises with their favorite TV series, they not only improved their production but also gained confidence by mimicking natural speech patterns. Tools like Praat, which allow learners to visualize their stress and intonation compared to native speakers, can further enhance this dual approach. For instructors in South Korea, these tools offer accessible ways to engage students in active pronunciation practice beyond rote memorization.

Additionally, integrating technology-driven solutions like AI-powered pronunciation apps can provide learners with immediate feedback on their speech production, allowing them to correct errors in real time. My observations from working with Korean university students suggest that incorporating such tools significantly enhances both perception and production metrics, even within a relatively short period. For example, learners using apps to practice minimal pairs often report “light bulb moments” when they realize they’ve been hearing and saying certain sounds incorrectly.

Implications for Foreign Language Instructors in South Korea

Understanding the relationship between speech perception and production highlights the need for an integrated approach to teaching pronunciation. For South Korean educators, where English and other foreign language instruction is heavily influenced by test preparation, there is a growing need to emphasize oral communication skills. Educators should:

- 1. Diagnose Learner Challenges:** Assess individual learners’ perceptual and production difficulties to tailor instruction. For instance, asking students to record themselves can reveal pronunciation issues they hadn’t noticed.
- 2. Incorporate Perceptual Training:** Use listening tasks to build learners’ auditory discrimination skills. One effective activity involves playing recordings of native and non-native speakers to help learners identify subtle differences.
- 3. Provide Corrective Feedback:** Offer targeted feedback to guide learners toward accurate production. A teacher recounts how praising a student’s improvement in “th” sounds boosted their confidence to tackle other challenging phonemes.
- 4. Leverage Technology:** Utilize apps and other software to supplement classroom activities and provide interactive practice opportunities. For example, one class used a gamified app to compete on pronouncing tricky words, turning practice into a fun and engaging challenge.

For learners, recognizing the connection between hearing and speaking can demystify pronunciation challenges, encouraging them to focus on both input and output. For instructors, embracing these methods can lead to more dynamic and effective lessons, fostering real-world communicative competence in their students.

Practical Applications: A Workshop Overview

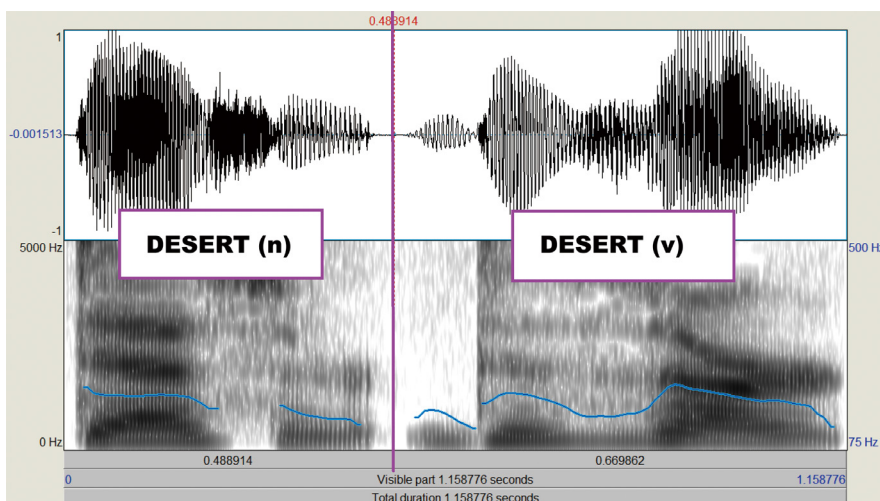
The methodologies and strategies discussed in this article will be explored further in my workshop at the 2025 KOTESOL International Conference. This session offers educators a chance to practice and evaluate four key pronunciation teaching methods:

- 1. The Articulatory Method:** This approach emphasizes understanding and mimicking articulatory movements,

helping learners grasp the physical aspects of sound production.

- 2. Audiolingual Techniques:** Through repetition and targeted feedback, this method builds learners’ accuracy in pronunciation.
- 3. The Communicative Approach:** Pronunciation is integrated with vocabulary and grammar in meaningful, real-life contexts to enhance fluency and naturalness.
- 4. The Verbo-Tonal Method:** By prioritizing perceptual training and prosodic elements, such as rhythm and intonation, this approach enhances learners’ phonological awareness.

During the workshop, participants will engage in hands-on activities that highlight the strengths and limitations of each method. We will also address common challenges in pronunciation instruction, such as sound discrimination, coarticulation, and integrating pronunciation into spontaneous speech. By the end of the session, attendees will leave with an adaptable toolkit of strategies to enhance their pronunciation instruction and create engaging learning environments, regardless of their students’ proficiency levels or target languages.



Waveform software can compare pronunciations.

Conclusion

Speech perception and production are two sides of the same coin, deeply interconnected in the process of mastering pronunciation. By addressing both, educators can create more effective and engaging pronunciation instruction, helping learners bridge the gap between understanding and speaking. This integrated approach not only fosters better language skills but also boosts learners’ confidence in their communicative abilities. For instructors in South Korea, adapting these strategies to the local context offers the potential to transform the way pronunciation is taught and learned. Incorporating research-based strategies, enriched with relatable examples and practical methodologies, such as those explored in the KOTESOL workshop, can provide a roadmap for creating a generation of learners who are not only fluent but also confident in their spoken interactions.

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