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THE IMPACT OF MISINTERPRETED PHONICS CONCEPTS ON THE
FORMATION OF KOREAN PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS: AN ANALYSIS
OF BEGINNER KOREAN LEARNERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This study examines how the misinterpretation of phonics concepts influences the formation of phonological awareness among beginner learners of Korean in Uzbekistan. While phonics is originally designed as a grapheme–phoneme correspondence strategy to support word recognition in alphabetic languages such as English, it has increasingly been adapted to Korean pronunciation instruction. However, Korean is a syllable-based language in terms of perceptual organization, and consonants are not independently realized outside syllabic structures. Through qualitative case analysis of classroom instruction and learner speech data, this study identifies structural mismatches between phonics-based instructional explanations and the phonological system of Korean. Findings reveal that consonant syllabification, unnecessary vowel insertion, instability in syllable perception, and failure to distinguish minimal pairs are not merely articulatory errors but reflect deeper misalignment in phonological unit setting. The study argues that phonics itself is not problematic; rather, its reinterpretation as a pronunciation production rule—detached from its original word-recognition purpose—leads to distortions in phonological awareness formation. The paper concludes by emphasizing the necessity of a syllable-centered approach in early-stage Korean pronunciation instruction.

Keywords: phonological awareness, phonics misinterpretation, Korean syllable structure, beginner learners, cross-linguistic transfer

1. Introduction

In teaching Korean as a foreign language, pronunciation is not merely a matter of articulatory accuracy but a crucial indicator of how learners perceive and organize the phonological system of the target language. Particularly at the beginner level, the formation of phonological awareness significantly influences later pronunciation accuracy, lexical recognition, and sentence processing.

Recently, phonics—originally developed within English literacy education— has increasingly been adopted in Korean pronunciation instruction. Phonics refers to a grapheme–phoneme correspondence strategy that facilitates word recognition in alphabetic languages. However, Korean differs fundamentally from English in its phonological organization. Whereas English operates within a phoneme-centered system that allows



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consonant clusters and independent consonantal perception, Korean functions perceptually as a syllable-centered language, where consonants are realized only within syllabic units.

When phonics concepts are transferred to Korean without adequate consideration of these structural differences, mismatches in phonological unit setting may arise. This study investigates how such conceptual transfer affects the formation of phonological awareness among beginner Korean learners in Uzbekistan.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Phonics and Word Recognition

Phonics is designed to support word recognition through systematic grapheme–phoneme correspondences. Its primary goal is not articulatory precision at the phoneme level but the decoding of written language into meaningful lexical units. The approach presupposes a phoneme-based structure in which individual consonants can be independently perceived and manipulated.

2.2 Phoneme and Syllable Distinction

A phoneme is an abstract unit that serves a contrastive function within a linguistic system, whereas a syllable functions as a perceptual and articulatory unit in speech production. Confusion between these levels—especially when phonemes are presented as directly pronounceable units—can distort learners’ understanding of phonological structure.

2.3 The Syllable-Centered Nature of Korean

In Korean, syllables function as primary perceptual units. Consonants are not independently realized outside syllabic structures. Consequently, pronunciation instruction that emphasizes phoneme-level segmentation prior to stable syllable recognition may interfere with appropriate phonological organization.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs qualitative case analysis. The research focuses on beginner Korean learners at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. The aim is not to evaluate teaching effectiveness quantitatively but to examine structural relationships between instructional explanations and learner speech patterns.

3.2 Data Collection & Analytical Procedure

The data consisted of (1) pronunciation class observation records, (2) transcriptions of learner utterances, and (3) instructional materials and board notes used during the lessons.

The analysis proceeded as follows.

First, the types of pronunciation instruction explanations were classified.

Second, patterns of learner utterances associated with each explanation type were identified.

Third, these patterns were interpreted from the perspective of Korean phonology. The focus of the analysis was not on the accuracy of the utterances themselves, but rather



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on the phonological units assumed in the learners' phonological awareness as reflected in their utterances.

4. Phonics-Based Instructional Patterns

4.1 Consonant Syllabification

In several observed lessons, consonants were introduced in syllabified forms, such as “ㄱ, geu)” for ㄱ or “ㄷ, deu” for ㄷ. For example:

“This letter is ㄱ. Its sound is ‘geu.’”

“‘가, ga’ is produced by saying ‘geu’ and ‘a’ quickly.”

Such explanations risk positioning consonants as independent syllabic units rather than abstract phonemes.

4.2 Segment-Blend Explanations

Syllables were also described as outcomes of blending segmented sounds: “‘개’ is produced by combining ‘kkeu’ and ‘ae’ quickly.”

This framing presents the syllable not as a perceptual starting point but as a derived product of segmentation.

5. Learner Speech Analysis

5.1 Vowel Insertion and Consonant Syllabification

Learners frequently inserted unnecessary vowels:

Target	Expected	Learner Production
가방	[kabang] [가방]	[kʌu-kabang] [그가방]
학교	[hak.kjo] [학교]	[suu-ha-kʌu-kjo] [스하그교]

These patterns suggest that consonants were perceived as independent syllabic units.

5.2 Instability in Syllable Perception

For tense consonant syllables:

Target	Expected	Learner Production
개	[kɛ] [개]	[kʌu-ɛ], [kʌu-e] [끄애, 끄에]
때	[tɛ] [때]	[tʌu-e] [뜨에]

The variability indicates unstable syllable recognition.

5.3 Failure to Distinguish Minimal Pairs

Learners failed to differentiate /불 bul/, /풀 pul/, and /뿔 ppul/, producing all as [bul]. This reflects insufficient phonological contrast at the lexical recognition level. Considering that the concept of phonics originated in English-speaking contexts and that its instructional methods have been introduced into Hangul reading instruction, the problems observed in the instructional case above can reasonably be attributed to a misinterpretation of phonics.



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First, the instruction fails to distinguish between phonemic awareness, which focuses on sounds, and phonics instruction, which teaches the correspondence between letters and sounds. Although the learner recognizes the phonetic value of the consonant letter ‘ㄱ’ and only inaccurately perceives the vowel letter ‘ㅣ’, most of the instructional time is devoted to explaining sound combinations at the phonetic level rather than addressing the letter–sound relationship.

Second, the distinction between phonemes and syllables is misunderstood or overlooked. The phoneme ‘ㄱ’ is treated as a syllable, and learners are taught that pronouncing “ㄱ” and “애” quickly produces “개.” This approach deviates from both first language acquisition principles and general principles of phonetics and phonology, and may reflect a misunderstanding of how isolated consonants in English are often perceived by Korean listeners as syllabic sounds.

Third, the linguistic principles underlying traditional Hangeul reading instruction appear not to be fully understood. The Hangeul reading chart reflects not only the principle of Hangeul letter formation but also the syllable-based structure of Korean, employing minimal pairs to effectively teach letter–sound correspondence. Therefore, when learners struggle to read Hangeul characters, traditional instructional methods should be considered first. However, in the case described above, no attempt is made to apply the principles of the Hangeul reading chart presented in the textbook.

Under a traditional approach, a learner’s misreading of a character would be addressed at the orthographic level using the minimal pair principle. Because word recognition is crucial, letters containing ‘ㅏ’ and ‘ㅑ’ would be presented with familiar words and compared, possibly with visual support.

For example:

가 (가위 scissors), 나 (나비 butterfly), 다 (다리 leg), 라 (라면 ramen), 마 (마술 magic), 바 (바다 sea), 사 (사슴 deer) ... 하 하마 (hippopotamus)

개 (개미 ant), 내 (내일 tomorrow), 대 대나무 (jujube), 래 (고래 whale), 매 (매미 cicada), 배 (배꼽 navel), 새 (새우 shrimp) ... 해 (해적 pirate)

Learners would then read minimal pairs such as 가–개, 나–내, 다–대, 마–매, 바–배, 사–새 ... 하–해, followed by 까–개. This approach would reduce learner confusion and enable them to generalize the ‘ㅏ–ㅑ’ contrast to other pairs such as 따–때 and 박–백.

Overall, traditional Hangeul reading instruction aligns more closely with Korean phonological acquisition patterns, facilitates a clearer understanding of letter–sound correspondence, and is more consistent with established principles of phonetics and phonology.

6. Discussion

The observed patterns cannot be reduced to articulatory incompetence. Rather, they indicate misalignment in phonological unit setting.



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Consonant syllabification elevates consonants to syllabic status, while segment-blend explanations demote syllables to derivative products. Both approaches conflict with the syllable-centered perceptual structure of Korean.

The issue lies not in phonics itself but in its reinterpretation as a pronunciation production rule divorced from its original function in word recognition. Such reinterpretation may lead learners to construct phonological awareness structures incompatible with Korean.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that uncritical transfer of phonics concepts into Korean pronunciation instruction can structurally influence phonological awareness formation among beginner learners.

Consonant syllabification leads to vowel insertion and syllable boundary instability, while segmentation-based explanations hinder stable syllable perception. Minimal pair neutralization further indicates impairment at the lexical recognition stage.

Pronunciation instruction in Korean should prioritize syllable-centered awareness before introducing phoneme-level contrasts. Future research should examine cross-linguistic comparisons and longitudinal effects of instructional models on phonological development.

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