Common ESL pronunciation issues among Koreans

The following are the main difficulties that Korean (and other Asian) speakers have in pronouncing English as a second language. These include vowels, consonants, stress, and rhythm issues.

1. Vowels

1.1. Long vowels
Asian learners tend to make long vowels sound just like the short vowels, leading to potential confusion. English has long vowels, which are not only longer, but more tense (/i:/), or have off-glides, that is, they are really a blend of two vowels.

1. short /ɪ/ as in *bit* versus long /iː/ or /iː/ as in *beet*
2. short /ɛ/ as in *red* versus long /ei/ as in *raid*
3. short /ɔ/ as in *taught* versus long /ɔʊ/ or /ou/ as in *tote*
4. short /ʊ/ as in *look* versus long /uː/ or /uw/ as in *Luke*

Confusingly, dictionaries published in Korea may not use the correct phonetic symbols for these vowels. Many of them use /i/ and /i:/ for the *bit-beet* pair, respectively. However, these vowels are pronounced differently. For /i:/ the tongue muscle is relaxed (“lax” vowel), while it is tensed for /i:/; the same holds true for the lax /ʊ/ cf. tense /uː/. In stressed syllables, the tense /iː/ and /uː:/ are slightly longer than their Korean counterparts 이 and 우, respectively; e.g., *key* is slightly longer than *키*.

Many Korean dictionaries incorrectly use the symbols /e/ and /e:/ for the *red-raid* pair, respectively. However, these vowels are also pronounced differently, with the *raid* vowel being a double vowel (diphthong), starting as /e/ and blending or gliding into an /i/, rather like Korean 에이. The *taught-tote* vowels are also different; the /ɔ/ is short, like 오, while /ou/ is a long glided vowel that starts as /ɔ/ and glides into /ʊ/, like 우오.

1.2. Other vowels
The vowel /æ/ is pronounced with the jaw and front of the tongue extra-low; Asians tend to confuse it with /ɛ/. The schwa vowel /ə/ is very similar to /ʌ/, which is fairly similar to Korean 어; but /ɔ/ occurs only in unstressed syllables and is extra-short, while /ʌ/ occurs only in stressed syllables and is normal length.

1. low /æ/ as in ‘bad’ versus /ɛ/ as in ‘bed’
2. Schwa /ə/ should be extra-short compared to normal vowels like /ʌ/; [\_] = minor stress, 
[ˌ] = main word stress (final -le is so short that one often does not hear the schwa -- 
the /l/ itself comprises this light, unstressed syllable).

\textit{\textbf{ùnfor\textemdash get\textemdash able}} /\textipa{\textemdash an\textemdash for\textemdash get\textemdash ab\textipa{}/

2. Consonants

The <th> sounds are made with the tongue tip behind the front teeth. More often, the /\theta/ 
occurs in function words (\textit{the, this, that...}) and words with Old English endings (-e, -er, 
-est, -en, etc., as in \textit{bathe, lather, farthest, heathen}); the /\theta/ occurs in other words, 
especially in academic or technical words from Latin and Greek.

The sounds /s/ and /z/ use the same tongue 
position; they are exactly the same, except that the 
vocal cords vibrate for /z/. The /z/ should never 
sound like the Korean $\text{ㅈ}$.

For the <th> sounds /\theta/ and /\theta/, the tongue tip 
lightly touches behind the upper teeth; one 
should not put too much force or energy into these 
sounds.

The /z/ is made just like /s/ - the tongue position is exactly the same, but with the vocal 
cords vibrating; it should not sound like $\text{ㅈ}$. The sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are made with the 
tongue tip pointing to, but not touching, the roof of the mouth, and /ʃ/ involves vocal 
vibration. The sounds /\theta/ and /\theta/ are made with the tongue tip touching the roof of the 
mouth; they should not sound like $\text{ㅈ}$, which is made with a flat tongue. The 
sounds /ʃ/, /ʃ/, /\theta/ and /\theta/ are made with the tongue curled up, with the tongue tip 
pointing toward or touching the palate (the roof of the mouth), while $\text{ㅈ}$ and $\text{ㅅ}$ are made 
with a flat tongue.

---

Flat tongue position for Korean $\text{ㅅ}$; position is 
similar for $\text{ㅈ}$, with the front surface of the tongue 
touching the palatal area ("roof of the mouth") 
above.

Retroflex (curled up) tongue position for /ʃ/ 
and /ʒ/; position is similar for /θ/ and /θ/, but 
touching the palatal area with the tongue tip.
The /l/ is produced with the tongue tip touching the gum ridge behind the teeth; for the /r/ the tongue does not touch, but points toward the gum ridge or the roof of the mouth, and lets air vibrate as it flows around the tongue (compare rare, lair, rail).

The /l/ and /v/ sounds are pronounced with the lower lips creating friction against the upper teeth. The /v/ is voiced, i.e., produced by vibrating the vocal cords. These sounds should not sound like /p/ or /b/.

3. Rhythm: Stress

Stressed syllables are pronounced with greater volume, they are noticeably longer than unstressed syllables, and they are marked by a rising and/or falling intonation with the stress. Asians tend to make the following errors: (1) not hearing short, unstressed syllables; (2) pronouncing all syllables equally strong – no stress or unstressed rhythm; (3) putting stress on the wrong syllables; (4) omitting unstressed syllables in speaking; or (5) putting in extra vowels, especially after difficult-to-pronounce consonants, which alter the rhythm of the word. Hence, a Korean speaker might mispronounce somatoform as smartphone (스마트포므).

Longer words can have a main (primary) stress and a secondary (minor) stress. In words like these, there should be a clear difference between stressed and unstressed syllables.

about /əbˈaut/ unacceptable /ˌʌnəkˈsepətəl/ 

**Compound stress:** Compound words most often have the main stress on the first component.

ónion chősper greenhouse bíd-mòuth

Whité Hòuse báck enginèer úpgráde

Abbreviations usually show an opposite pattern. Each letter has equal stress except the last letter, which has the main stress (one exception is abbreviated personal nicknames like É.J., with the main stress falling on the first letter).

NHS FBÍ CPŘ ETÁ ROḰ

**Sentence stress:** Within sentences, the major words, called content words (nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs) are more strongly stressed than the other minor words, or function words. On top of that, clauses and sentences have intonation patterns, which are connected with the sentence stress pattern: the most important word of a clause is more strongly stressed than the other words – often the last major word of a clause that is most important. The stressed words (in bold) below would coincide with rising and/or falling intonation, and these nouns would be more strongly stressed than other major word in these clauses.

The mechanic cheated the unsuspecting customer, so the customer then sued the mechanic.
4. Rhythm: Other issues

For Korean speakers of English, it may not be necessary to speak English with all the following natural speech phenomena (especially if the audience consists of Koreans), but the following are important because [1] Koreans need to know these in order to comprehend English as spoken by native English speakers, who usually use such features in speaking, and [2] to avoid speaking English with incorrect Korean-style blendings.

**Linking (liaison):** To pronounce more easily, we often link words together – especially minor or shorter words. Similar sounds can be joined across words (e.g., ‘all–live’ below), and a final vowel or consonant of one word can link with a vowel at the beginning of the following word (e.g., We–all, in–a). Linking makes it easier to pronounce words together quickly and fluently.

We–all–live–in–a yellow submarine.


**Consonant air release.** Stop consonants [p, b, t, d, k, g] are formed by stopping and releasing the airflow. At the end of words, the airflow is not released, unless it links with a similar consonant in the following word. With a stop consonant is followed by a different consonant (within a word or between words), the first one is made with the tongue simply stopping the airflow and not releasing it [’], and thus, not a full consonant is produced.

The stop’gap measure didn’t help the–up’rooted vict’ims.

A stop’ consonant’ cannot be held’ continuously.

**Reduction:** In casual and fast speech, many minor words are reduced, with unstressed vowel sounds or sounds omitted, e.g.,

you → ya /ya/  
to → /tə/  
can → /kən/  
could have → /kədəv/

**Blending:** Some sounds are blended together, leading to informal contractions, especially minor words with /y/ sounds; e.g.,

could you → couldja  
don’t you → doncha  
give me → gimme

In speaking, you do not need to necessarily use reduction and blending as native speakers do, but you do need to be aware of these when you need to understand naturally spoken English.

More importantly, Korean speakers transfer their Korean-style blendings into English, which will render words unintelligible. So Koreans should take care to avoid transferring the following blending patterns in English.
4. Practicing pronunciation and general English skills

Improving pronunciation in a second language is difficult; it takes time, effort, and motivation, and you may be too busy to invest much time in this. Nonetheless, here are some things that might be helpful.

1. Watching videos with subtitles, or listening to audios with accompanying printed text (read-aloud books, songs with printed lyrics, etc.). Since many such media are freely available on the Internet, you can find whatever genre you like for practice.

2. Shadowing: Listening to video or audio materials, and repeating after the speakers; imitating their pronunciation and intonation can be helpful, if the materials are interesting to you. Avoid overdoing this, or using materials that are uninteresting to you, or you may become tired or discouraged.

3. Reading: Reading can help your overall language skills, especially vocabulary; it can also reinforce the mental connections between words and their pronunciations. It will be helpful to read a variety of materials, from different genres, such as reading materials within your field of study, materials outside your field, and popular reading materials for interest and leisure. Most of all, they should be materials that you want to read – materials that you find informative, interesting, or entertaining.

4. Think in English. Making yourself think in English sometimes can be a means of rehearsal or practice. Thinking to yourself and even talking to yourself in English can be helpful when you do not have access to native English speakers for practice.