

## L2 Acquisition of Prosodic Cues for Disambiguating *Wh*-words in Korean: Evidence from French-Speaking Learners

This study investigates how French-speaking learners of L2 Korean acquire prosodic cues to disambiguate the meanings of *wh*-words. In Korean, bare *wh*-words are lexically ambiguous between interrogatives and indefinites/existentials, yielding three different interpretations: (i) a *wh*-question with an interrogative meaning ((1a)), (ii) a yes/no-question with an indefinite reading ((1b)), and (iii) a declarative statement with an indefinite meaning ((1c)). In the absence of contextual information, prosody plays a crucial role in resolving this ambiguity (cf. Choe 1985, Kang 1988, Jun & Oh 1996, Lee & Ramsey 2000, Yun 2013, Choi et al. 2022). Specifically, strong prosodic emphasis on the *wh*-word signals an interrogative interpretation ((1a)), while the absence of such emphasis indicates an indefinite/existential interpretation ((1b/c)). Additionally, a rising sentence-final contour differentiates yes/no-questions from declarative statements.

The acquisition of these prosodic features presents a challenge for L2 learners, as the lexical ambiguity of *wh*-words and their associated prosodic patterns are rarely taught explicitly. Instead, learners must rely on exposure to ambient language input. As a result, they tend to overinterpret bare *wh*-words as interrogatives. Previous studies on L2 Korean learners from English, Mandarin, and Japanese backgrounds have shown limited acquisition of prosody required for indefinite/existential readings (Choi 2009, Gil et al. 2021). Expanding on these findings, this study examines an understudied group: French-speaking learners. To our knowledge, this is the first study on how L1-French speakers acquire prosodic disambiguation of *wh*-words (WH-prosody) in Korean, offering new insights into the role of prosody in L2 Korean processing.

To assess WH-prosody acquisition, we designed an identification task involving two factors: WH-prominence and sentence-final rising tone. The study involved 40 French-speaking learners of Korean (12 2<sup>nd</sup>-year undergraduates, 16 3<sup>rd</sup>-year undergraduates, and 12 graduate students) and 20 native speakers of Korean as a control group. Sentences were recorded with neutral prosody, and prosodic features were manipulated using the PSOLA algorithm in Praat. Participants listened to the sentences without context and were asked to select the most appropriate interpretation from three choices (NP answer vs. y/n-answer vs. *Really?*), depending on the assigned prosodic patterns. The test consisted of 25 sentences, including 15 test items (5 per condition) and 10 fillers. Experimental conditions and predictions are detailed in Table 1.

Results (Figure 1) show that French-speaking learners predominantly interpreted bare *wh*-words as interrogatives, whereas native speakers of Korean correctly distinguished all three meanings based on prosody. WH-prominence was linked to *wh*-questions, but learners struggled with indefinite readings. The sentence-final rising tone improved yes/no-question identification but was less effective for indefinites. Advanced learners performed better, though their accuracy remained below native levels. Statistical analyses revealed significant effects of prosodic conditions ( $\chi^2(2) = 435.88, p < .001$ ) and L2 proficiency ( $\chi^2(2) = 38.77, p < .001$ ). Post-hoc comparisons indicated higher accuracy in Condition 3 (WH-prominence), with graduate students outperforming undergraduates ( $p < .001$ ).

These findings reveal asymmetries in the acquisition of WH-prosody among French-speaking learners of L2 Korean. While they more readily acquired the prosody for *wh*-questions, their ability to process yes/no-questions with indefinite readings remained limited. Proficiency played an important role in the acquisition of prosody for declarative statements, with graduate students demonstrating significantly better performance ( $\chi^2(2) = 34.28, p < .001$ ). These results highlight the importance of explicit prosodic instruction in L2 Korean and suggest that increased exposure to native speech may facilitate more accurate prosodic processing.

- (1) Sue-ka           mwues-ul   mek-ess-e  
 S-NOM           WH-ACC   eat-PST-INT  
 a. ‘*What* did Sue eat?’  
 b. ‘Did Sue eat *something*?’  
 ‘Sue ate *something*.’

Table 1. Experimental conditions and predictions

	Prosodic patterns	Sentence features	Expected sentence type	Expected answer type
Condition 1	Neutral Prosody	[-WH, -Q]	Declarative	<i>Really?</i>
Condition 2	Final Rising Tone	[-WH, +Q]	y/n-question	y/n-answer
Condition 3	WH-Prominence	[+WH, +Q]	<i>wh</i> -question	NP answer

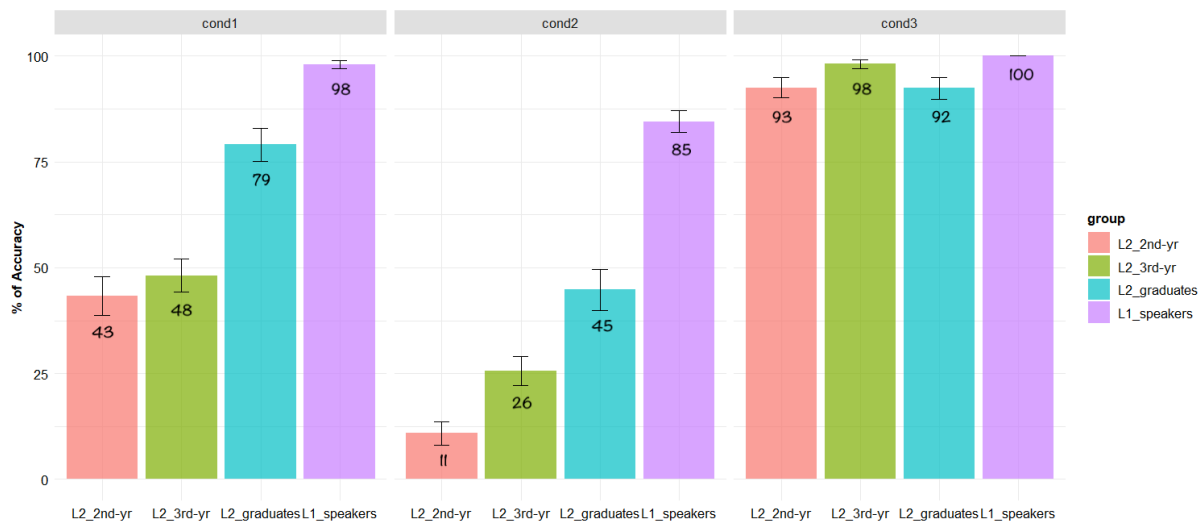


Figure 1. Experimental results

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