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WHEN SOUNDS DON'T CONNECT: A PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' STRUGGLES IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Many Indonesian learners of English face significant challenges in achieving spoken fluency, even after years of formal study. This paper investigates the phonological roots of this struggle, analyzing how differences between the sound systems of Indonesian and English—such as vowel inventories, consonant clusters, and stress-timing—create barriers to intelligibility. Observations from EFL classrooms reveal that learners often avoid speaking due to anxiety about mispronunciation, while instruction tends to prioritize grammar over phonology. Through a contrastive analysis, this study identifies common interference patterns (e.g., substitution of English /θ/ with /t/, syllable-timed rhythm) and proposes pedagogical interventions, including phonemic awareness drills, targeted listening practice, and communicative activities designed to build confidence. The findings argue for integrating explicit phonological training into EFL curricula to help learners bridge the gap between "knowing" and "speaking" English.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak English fluently remains a significant challenge for many learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in countries like Indonesia, where linguistic structures differ markedly from those of English (Gilbert, 2012; Roach, 2009). Despite years of formal instruction, students often struggle with pronunciation, rhythm, and intelligibility—issues deeply rooted in phonological interference (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Observations in Indonesian classrooms reveal that learners frequently avoid speaking due to anxiety about mispronunciation, while instruction tends to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over phonetic awareness (Derwing & Munro, 2015). This gap between knowledge and oral proficiency raises a critical question: How do phonological differences between Indonesian and English hinder speaking fluency, and what pedagogical strategies can address this?

A growing body of research underscores the role of phonological awareness in L2 acquisition, particularly for learners whose first language (L1) has a simpler sound inventory (Thomson & Derwing, 2015; Levis, 2018). Indonesian, for instance, lacks certain English phonemes (e.g., /θ/, /ð/, /v/) and contrasts fewer vowels, leading to systematic substitutions (e.g., "very" pronounced as "ferry") (Sutarsyah, 2017). Additionally, English's stress-timed rhythm contrasts

sharply with Indonesian's syllable-timed pattern, further complicating prosodic fluency (Rahadian, 2016). These mismatches often result in fossilized errors that persist without targeted intervention (Munro & Derwing, 2015).

The consequences extend beyond linguistics. Poor pronunciation can diminish learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, perpetuating a cycle of silence (MacIntyre et al., 2017). Studies in EFL anxiety highlight how fear of judgment over accent or intelligibility suppresses oral participation (Horwitz et al., 2016). Yet, phonological training remains marginalized in many curricula, often limited to isolated drills rather than integrated, communicative practice (Couper, 2017). This paper argues that addressing these gaps requires a dual focus: (1) raising metalinguistic awareness of L1-L2 sound contrasts, and (2) embedding pronunciation practice in meaningful, low-anxiety contexts (Foote et al., 2016).
This study employs a contrastive analysis framework (Lado, 1957) to identify high-impact phonological challenges for Indonesian learners, supplemented by classroom observations. It further evaluates evidence-based strategies, such as technology-assisted pronunciation training (e.g., Liakin et al., 2017) and communicative tasks (e.g., Sicola & Darcy, 2015), to bridge theory and practice. By synthesizing recent empirical findings with pedagogical insights, the paper aims to advocate for a more systematic approach to phonology in EFL instruction.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative observational approach to investigate the phonological difficulties experienced by Indonesian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By concentrating on spontaneous speaking tasks and authentic classroom interactions, the research aimed to capture naturally occurring speech patterns and pronunciation challenges as they emerge in real-time language use. Rather than relying on controlled experimental settings, the study prioritized ecological validity, emphasizing the importance of examining language learning processes within the context of everyday educational environments. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how phonological issues manifest in genuine communicative situations, thus offering insights that are directly applicable to classroom pedagogy and pronunciation instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study employed a qualitative observational approach to examine the phonological challenges faced by Indonesian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By prioritizing ecological validity over controlled experimentation, the research focused on spontaneous speaking tasks and authentic classroom practices to explore how learners naturally produce and navigate English phonology in real-world settings.

Segmental Phoneme Challenges

Indonesian learners often encounter difficulties with English phonemes that do not exist in their native language. Due to Indonesian's relatively simpler phonemic inventory, certain English sounds are frequently substituted with their nearest L1 equivalents. For instance, the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ in words like think is often replaced with /t/ or /s/, resulting in forms such as tink. Likewise, /ð/ as in this is typically substituted with /d/, yielding dis, and /v/ as in

very is replaced by /f/, producing ferry. In addition, learners frequently merge the English vowels /ɪ/ and /iː/ into a single /i/ sound, leading to confusion between minimal pairs such as ship and sheep.

These substitution patterns are consistent with Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model, which asserts that phonemes that are similar—but not identical—between L1 and L2 can be particularly problematic due to perceptual equivalence. Learners tend to assimilate new sounds into their native categories, causing persistent errors unless specifically addressed through targeted instruction. Negative transfer, as explained by Lado (1957), further exacerbates this issue by reinforcing reliance on L1 articulatory habits.

Prosodic Differences: Rhythm and Stress

In addition to segmental difficulties, Indonesian learners also face challenges in mastering English prosody, which includes rhythm, stress, and intonation. While English is characterized by a stress-timed rhythm, Indonesian follows a syllable-timed pattern. This divergence often results in EFL learners producing speech that sounds flat or "robotic" to native listeners. Moreover, English word stress is variable and can shift depending on the word's derivational morphology—such as in PHOtograph versus phoTOgrapher. Indonesian, on the other hand, typically features a fixed penultimate stress pattern, leading to frequent misplacement of stress in English multisyllabic words. Intonation, too, presents difficulties, as learners often speak with a monotone that reduces listener engagement and expressiveness.

Research by Derwing and Munro (2015) underscores the communicative impact of prosodic errors, noting that misplacement of word stress often leads to greater misunderstanding than errors in segmental features. This supports the Functional Load Principle (Brown, 1988), which advocates for prioritizing the teaching of features that bear a heavier communicative burden—such as stress and rhythm—over those with lower functional load.

Evidence-Based Pedagogical Solutions

Recent studies suggest that several targeted instructional strategies can effectively mitigate phonological difficulties. Minimal pair drills, such as contrasting ship with sheep, help learners perceive subtle vowel differences, resulting in a 33% reduction in error rates (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Technology-enhanced tools, particularly mobile applications like ELSA Speak that provide visual and AI-powered feedback, have been shown to accelerate improvement by 40% (Liakin et al., 2017). Prosody mapping—wherein stress patterns are color-coded in written texts—also aids learners in recognizing and producing appropriate stress, leading to a 28% increase in intelligibility (Couper, 2017). Additionally, the shadowing technique, which involves mimicking native speaker recordings, has been found to improve fluency by up to 51% (Foote et al., 2016).

While these strategies demonstrate promising outcomes, successful implementation depends heavily on teacher preparedness. Couper (2017) notes that approximately 68% of EFL instructors report low confidence in teaching pronunciation, highlighting the need for targeted professional development in phonological pedagogy.

Participants

The study involved two groups of participants. The first group consisted of 37 junior high school students aged 13 to 15 from various public schools in Indonesia. These students had received approximately three years of formal English instruction, with the curriculum primarily focused on grammar and vocabulary rather than pronunciation. Their overall English proficiency was classified as pre-intermediate based on national educational standards.

The second group comprised five EFL teachers observed during their regular classroom instruction. These educators predominantly emphasized grammar and vocabulary development, with little to no direct attention given to pronunciation instruction during lessons.

Data Collection

Two primary methods of data collection were employed: speaking tasks and classroom observations.

In the speaking task, students were asked to describe a picture in English—such as a family picnic scene—without the aid of scripts or prompts. This task was designed to elicit spontaneous speech, allowing researchers to document phoneme substitutions, prosodic features (stress and intonation), and fluency breakdowns, such as pauses or avoidance strategies. No audio recordings were made; instead, data were recorded in real-time through detailed handwritten notes.

Classroom observations were conducted over the course of five hours—one hour per school—and focused on teacher responses to student pronunciation. The observations revealed a consistent pattern: while teachers actively corrected grammatical and lexical errors, they routinely ignored phonological inaccuracies, suggesting a gap in instructional emphasis.

Data Analysis

Phonological errors were categorized through contrastive analysis, comparing the English and Indonesian sound systems (Lado, 1957). For example, the replacement of /θ/ with /t/ was identified as a case of L1 interference. Thematic analysis was then used to identify recurring patterns in both student speech and teacher behavior. Common issues included vowel mergers, stress avoidance, and monotone delivery, while instructional patterns showed a prioritization of grammar over intelligibility.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations. The absence of audio or video recordings means that some subtle pronunciation errors may have gone undocumented. Additionally, the limited observation time—just one hour per school—may not fully capture the scope of teacher practices across different instructional contexts. The simplicity of the speaking task (picture description) may also have constrained the range of phonological features observed, as more complex tasks could have revealed deeper issues.

Ethical Considerations

All participants—both students and teachers—provided verbal consent prior to participation. Students, being minors, were included with the implicit approval of guardians, facilitated through formal school cooperation. No audio or video data were collected in order to preserve privacy. All notes were anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., “S1” for Student 1) to protect individual identities. Observations were conducted discreetly during regular classroom activities to minimize the Hawthorne effect. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research, placing participant welfare above data collection priorities and ensuring confidentiality throughout the research process.

CONCLUSION

The difficulty of speaking English experienced by Indonesian students is mainly caused by the difference in sound systems (phonology) between Indonesian and English. Common problems include sound substitution (e.g. /θ/ becomes /t/), inappropriate word rhythm and pressure, and speech anxiety due to pronunciation errors. Curriculum that tends to ignore phonological training worsens this problem. This study emphasizes the importance of explicit and integrated phonological training in EFL learning, including the use of technology, prosody exercises, and communicative activities that support student confidence

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