

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES IN PHONOLOGICAL ACQUISITION (PRONUNCIATION CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES)

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Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of English language learners in phonological acquisition, particularly focusing on the challenges encountered in pronunciation and the strategies employed to overcome them. Pronunciation is critical for effective communication, yet many learners struggle with phonological aspects due to native language interference, limited exposure, and psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence. A qualitative research method was employed, involving structured interviews with seven English department students from STAI RAKHA. Results revealed that learners face difficulties distinguishing similar sounds, replicating unfamiliar phonemes, and often rely on their native language's phonetic structures, which leads to errors. Participants cited strategies such as active listening to native speakers, imitation, and the use of digital tools for self-practice and feedback as helpful. Additionally, the study highlighted the crucial role of teachers and a supportive learning environment in facilitating phonological improvement. The findings offer insights for educators to support students in overcoming pronunciation obstacles and achieving better proficiency in English.

Keywords: *Language Learners, Learners' Experience, Phonological Acquisition, Pronunciation Challenges and Strategies*

A. INTRODUCTION

Learning a new language could be a lifelong endeavor. It demands a significant amount of time and work. Each language has unique characteristics and learners must be aware of those that exist in a new language. Ideally, when learning a new language, students should be exposed to and engage with real-life resources that will help them build their abilities and competency. One of the most crucial skills is the ability to speak, which allows individuals to communicate more effectively. Studying English as a foreign language can be challenging for learners who wish to communicate effectively since there are so many things to learn (Mohammed and Idris, 2020). Pronunciation is one of the most obvious challenges that English language learners face on their journey to acquire the language. Everyone will be able to pronounce words correctly when speaking in English, gaining self-confidence as they perform so. According to Prashant (2018), having sufficient pronunciation skills could increase your self-confidence when speaking in front of a large group of people. English pronunciation is too complicated

for learners to strive for total accent deletion, but increasing pronunciation will boost self-esteem, facilitate communication, and potentially lead to a better career or more respect in the workplace.

Pronunciation is an important skill that students should master since it is connected to spoken communication (Grandyna, 2018). Ahmad (2019) suggested that English learners nowadays are supposed to concentrate on accurate pronunciation. According to Utami (2020), accurate pronunciation is an evidence of an excellent language knowledge. Proper pronunciation is defined as the replication of language sounds in such a way that the intended message is easily understood (Kobilova, 2022). Many examples of communication confusion were caused by mispronouncing words or using incorrect tone. Furthermore, people who grasp proper pronunciation can benefit much of anything. It has become more and more obvious that pronunciation cannot be underestimated. Kissova (2019) underlined that it is well acknowledged that pronunciation is the first and most significant factor in communication. When the simplest words are mispronounced, the speaker is unable to communicate successfully in English, hence pronunciation may be regarded the primary source of problems in terms of language intelligibility. If someone makes an error in their pronunciation, the listener will be aware of it, which may lead to misunderstandings about the meaning. As a result, effective pronunciation requires a significant amount of effort and continuous practice.

Pronunciation, according to Srakaew (2021), is one of the most challenging components of learning a language, particularly if it is a foreign language. In certain languages, the majority of words are pronounced according to the word; however, this is not the case with English. This is due to the difference between the term and its pronunciation in English. It makes it harder for learners to acquire English as a foreign language. According to Vančová (2019), non-native English learners should master particular pronunciation qualities based on their ability to detect the meaning of words spoken differently from models. Non-native pronunciation differences might be produced by errors, accents, or pronunciation varieties. Pronunciation may be problematic for both language learners and English teachers. Because of the diversity of English spoken across the world, there is no such thing as perfect pronunciation. The pronunciation challenges differ depending on the students' mother tongues.

Acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can be challenging for some students. Their speech production may contain errors and mistakes, including interference from the learners' first language. Languages from diverse language families have distinct characteristics that need a lengthy learning process to acquire. Furthermore, the involvement of EFL learners' mother tongue is frequently observed throughout their learning process. Generally, the mother tongue element influences learners' speech output (Mohammed and Idris, 2020; Nangimah, 2020; Septianasari et al., 2019). Another element influencing student's acquisition of the target language is a lack of exposure to the language. Some study discovered that inadequate exposure to

the language from a native resource was the most significant obstacle to learning English in a non-native country (Ahmad, 2019; Albiladi, 2019; Azane, 2021). As a result, people may have trouble comprehending and acquiring all components of the language effectively. Another element shown by various studies is that one of the main issues in learning English language pronunciation is connected to psychological variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and attitudes (Azarias and Capistrano, 2019; Fadillah, 2020; Naser and Hamzah, 2018). As a result, it is possible to conclude that all of these characteristics contributed someone pronounce English words correctly.

EFL learners must overcome the negative factors that hinder pronunciation learning in order to minimize communication breakdowns among speakers. Regardless of the difficulties students confront in gaining accurate pronunciation, Prashant (2018) stated that people should constantly do their best to achieve correct pronunciation. As a consequence, students who want to improve their pronunciation, regardless of their individual goals, must usually do so on their own time, which clearly requires the ability to set realistic goals, choose appropriate learning methods, engage in constant monitoring, and conduct valid self-evaluation (Pawlak and Szyszka, 2018).

Regarding the pronunciation learning strategies, Taladgoen et al. (2020) found some strategies the students can employ to overcome pronunciation problems. Students might use a psychological strategy to reduce their nervousness by convincing themselves that they can pronounce words properly. According to Jahara and Abdelrady (2021) findings, students' pronunciation improved due to their continuing motivation to study English sounds in order to improve their pronunciation alongside their listening abilities. Furthermore, the social learning strategy might be adopted since it involves consulting teachers and classmates for pronunciation demonstrations. Almusharraf (2022) and Sardegna et al. (2018) agreed that learners can practice reading aloud and record their pronunciation of a specific speech for evaluation by themselves or others. Finally, learners might employ the cognitive learning strategy to solve pronunciation issues. It involves consultations with technology applications. Furthermore, learners should use computer technologies, media, mobile phones, and online communication tools to improve their pronunciation by exposing them to real content (Almusharraf, 2022).

Besides strategies from the students themselves, the role of the environment, especially the teacher, is inevitable to help deal with this pronunciation challenges. In order to properly motivate learners, Nangimah (2020) proposed that English teachers can help them in developing stronger pronunciation abilities. Related to this, Srakaew (2021) believed that the role of the teacher as a model in foreign language education requires solid abilities, particularly in accurate English, in order to serve as an example for students. Teachers in non-English speaking nations have to figure out alternate methods for teaching students new languages such as English. Albiladi (2019) claimed that boosting students' awareness, encouraging them to listen, and involving a variety of

stimulating learning experiences into the classroom are excellent and effective strategies to teach pronunciation.

This study aimed to explore students' experiences in phonological acquisition in particular the challenges faced and the strategies used to deal with them. By conducting this research, it was expected to contribute to the field of education by providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies associated with phonological acquisition. The findings are expected to facilitate the development of effective strategies and recommendations for learners and educators to improve phonological acquisition success, which will ultimately benefit English language learners.

B. METHOD

This study utilized qualitative research methodology. The study investigated issues and phenomena through the experiences and thoughts of individuals. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research entails investigating an issue and developing a thorough grasp of a key phenomenon. In addition, he pointed out that the goal of qualitative research is to comprehend participants' experiences. The statements mentioned are consistent with the goal of this study, which was to analyze detailed information in phonological acquisition, including pronunciation issues and solutions for overcoming them based on participant experiences. This research utilized a case study that was used to investigate a unit in depth (Saldaña, 2011). According to Ary et al. (2010), the unit could refer to an individual, a group, a site, a class, a policy, a program, a process, an institution, or a community. In this case study, the unit of research was a group of English Department students of STAI RAKHA.

In this research, researchers conducted interview to 7 English Department students of STAI RAKHA. This study used structured interview method to obtain data about the students' phonological acquisition. The questions were included the level of interest orientation and challenges and strategies related to phonological acquisition. The research technique used was to provide a total of 10 questions divided and dichotomized in several sections to 7 interviewees and answered according to their respective opinions.

The technique of analyzing the data in this study applied the Ary et al. (2010) concept. They believed that the analysis of qualitative data consists of three steps: organizing and familiarizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. The data through interviews were organized by dividing interview answers into some folders for each participant. Then, the data were sorted into categories to identify the challenges faced and the strategies to overcome the challenges. Finally, the shorted data were interpreted and represented in narration.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researchers presented the findings related to the students' experiences in phonological acquisition in particular the challenges faced and the strategies used to deal with them, which is organized under three main subheadings to discuss the findings in detail.

1. Importance of Pronunciation

Learning a language typically involves the goal of being able to communicate, and good pronunciation is a crucial component in good communication. Taladngoen et al. (2020) emphasized that pronunciation is an essential skill for EFL learners to successfully and intelligibly express their messages in English. Correct pronunciation leads to success for EFL students throughout the world. During the interviews, one of the participants verbalized:

“I think pronunciation is important because it can affect our overall communication skills. by learning good pronunciation, it can help the other person understand us more easily and reduce misunderstandings.” (Student 6)

In terms of pronunciation misunderstandings, some participants admitted to experiencing this frequently, especially when faced with words with similar pronunciation. Furthermore, Prashant (2018) underlined that good pronunciation might boost people's self-confidence while speaking in front of others. In contrast, inadequate English proficiency in pronunciation hinder the development of communicative aptitude, which is essential for the establishment of a communication bridge between speakers and listeners (Mohammed & Idris, 2020). As evidently stated:

“Besides being easily understood, having clear pronunciation also increases our confidence in speaking and interacting with other people, especially native speakers.” (Student 7)

“I ever experienced in a situation where my pronunciation causes misunderstanding. My interlocutor had a little difficulty in understanding the meaning of what I said.” (Student 6)

As a result, Almusharraf (2022) noted that EFL learners should be aware that clear and intelligible pronunciation is the most acceptable pronunciation aim for English learners today, regardless of whether they desire to achieve native-like pronunciation or not.

2. Challenges Faced

It was found that all participants said that they had difficulty in distinguishing sounds, especially for sounds that look the same at first glance but are actually different. As presented by the following verbalizations:

"I often have difficulty distinguishing sounds in English that sound very similar. I think, for example, the words "to" and "two" sound very similar and I cannot tell the difference." (Student 4)

"Yes, I often have difficulty in distinguishing similar sounds such as "see" and "sea". (Student 5)

Pronunciation challenges are caused by missing or differing segments or sounds from the target language (Naser and Hamzah, 2018). The Indonesian influence that underlies English pronunciation might cause certain sounds to appear unusual or difficult to pronounce appropriately in an English setting. Undoubtedly, most non-native speakers adopt the equivalent native language sounds in their target language speaking performance (Kissova, 2019). As evidently stated during the interviews with the participants:

"The habit of pronouncing the letters P, F, and V in my native language which are all pronounced the same way, namely P, became an obstacle when I learned English pronunciation" (Student 2).

"The R in Indonesian is always pronounced clearly while the R in English is soft and almost inaudible in some words" (Student 7)

When speaking the target language, learners frequently depend on their native language structures to construct a response. If the two languages' structures are distinctly different, someone could indicate a relatively high frequency of mistakes in the target language, indicating mother tongue influence (Mohammed & Idris, 2020). According to Turgay (2021), pronunciation problems made by speakers of other languages are mostly due to the fact that the two languages are quite diverse, particularly in terms of phonological and phonetic qualities. As stated by Nangimah (2020), learners whose native tongue is a syllable-timed language, such as French, Turkish, Singaporean English, Malaysian English, or Indonesian, find it difficult to understand English pronunciation due to the differences in systems. This is evident in the following statements:

"Yes, because the influence of the Indonesian language makes it difficult to pronounce English sounds." (Student 7)

Of course, there are difficulties because English is not my mother tongue. (Student 1)

In this study, it is interesting to note how the students revealed their lack of exposure to the English language practice. As verbalized by one of the students:

"Actually, when studying theoretically I felt I had mastered the pronunciation but after listening to others and practicing it all went blank. At that point I felt the need to practice more. Also, when listening to native speakers I feel more relaxed." (Student 2)

As highlighted by Albiladi (2019), the biggest challenge with learning English in a non-native country is that learners might not have appropriate exposure to the language from native speakers. As a result, people might experience trouble comprehending and acquiring all components of the language effectively. Furthermore, Azane (2021) discovered that factors influencing students' ease of acquiring pronunciation included novelty in exposure to phonetics exercise, the effect of mother language, and a lack of enthusiasm.

The results of this study confirmed Fadillah's (2020) research, which discovered that there are several elements influencing the occurrence of pronunciation challenges, namely biological aspects such as ear perception, the influence of mother tongue, and target language exposure. All of these factors contribute to a people's accurate pronunciation of English words. As a result, without removing these factors, the probability of replicating native-like pronunciation is smaller.

3. Strategies Used

To improve pronunciation skills in English, there are several strategies that was proven effective by the participants. Active listening is the key. Listening to native speakers through movies, music, or learning videos helps familiarize the ear with the correct sounds as well as proper pronunciation patterns. In accordance with Prashant (2018), the most effective way to learn any language is to listen to a native speaker. In addition, mimicking methods and recording the voice of oneself to compare and improve pronunciation are particularly powerful learning tools. Almusharraf (2022) recommended students to videotape or audiotape their pronunciation of a certain speech for evaluation by themselves or others. Such assessments could boost awareness of their pronunciation needs. It might also give them more control over their learning outside of class, resulting in autonomous pronunciation learning. As verbalized:

"By listen to the song while looking at the lyrics, then repeat it is effective strategy to overcome pronunciation problems". (Student 3)

"To improve my English pronunciation, I practice pronunciation by imitating native speakers either from YouTube content or

movies, using pronunciation practice apps, and practicing by speaking to myself." (Student 4)

"By listening to and imitating the pronunciation of movies watched on YouTube and studying the pronunciation." (Student 7)

The resources and tools available currently are quite beneficial in improving pronunciation. Learners from a technologically competent generation acknowledged to be more likely to use digital platforms. Students can benefit from technologies and applications that can assist them whenever and wherever they need it (Ahmad, 2019; Almusharraf, 2022; Taladngoen et al., 2020). Based on interviews with students, apps like Elsa Speak, Google Translate, and online dictionaries provide immediate feedback that helps in identifying and correcting pronunciation errors. Additionally, using social media platforms such as Discord or Twitter Spaces can also be a useful resource for interacting with native speakers and practicing pronunciation in person. As presented by the following verbalizations:

"I often use online dictionaries rather than conventional dictionaries because through online dictionaries we can listen to the correct pronunciation audio from native speakers immediately." (Student 2)

"I personally think the Elsa Speak app has really helped me improve my pronunciation skills." (Student 4)

"I usually practice by chatting on discord or in a Twitter room where there are some people from overseas." (Student 6)

To overcome feelings of hopelessness due to difficulties in pronunciation, consistency in practice is essential. One of the participants verbalized:

"I once felt hopeless in learning English especially in pronunciation problems. My way to overcome it is to practice pronunciation regularly" (Student 6)

In this study, the participants realized the importance of regular and consistent practice, despite the challenges. As Jahara and Abdelrady (2021) suggested to consistently practice with a few sample words every day. Recording and repeating exercises, as well as using a variety of resources to improve pronunciation, are strategies that help in maintaining motivation and seriousness in learning. In addition, they argue that support from the surrounding environment, including from lecturers and friends, also plays an important role in helping to overcome despair and maintain a spirit of learning. Students might find these difficulties demotivating in learning English pronunciation. In order to successfully motivate students, English teachers should help them better develop their

pronunciation skills (Nangimah, 2020). Related to this matter, Srakaew (2021) emphasized the role of the teacher as a model in the teaching of foreign languages must have good skills, especially in correct English so it can be an example by learners in good language. So, with consistent practice and environmental support, learners will be able to overcome difficulties and improve their pronunciation skills. These strategies showed that an integrated approach between auditory, visual, and technological can have a significant impact on phonological learning of English.

D. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant pronunciation challenges faced by English language learners and the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles. The findings indicate that learners struggle with distinguishing similar sounds, interference from their native language, and limited exposure to authentic English pronunciation. These challenges contribute to difficulties in achieving accurate and intelligible pronunciation, which is essential for effective communication. However, learners have developed effective strategies to improve their pronunciation, including listening to native speakers, practicing with digital tools, and engaging in self-evaluation through recorded exercises. The role of teachers, peer support, and consistent practice further enhances their pronunciation skills.

To support pronunciation improvement, educational institutions should create an environment that encourages language practice and offers access to pronunciation resources, such as digital tools and media. Teachers should integrate pronunciation-focused activities in their curriculum and provide feedback to guide students' pronunciation development. By implementing these strategies, both students and teachers can work together to address pronunciation challenges, ultimately improving English learners' communication skills and confidence.

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