

## **EFL Learners' Opinion on Difficulties in Pronouncing English Sounds**

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### **Abstract**

Mastering the pronunciation of English sounds often poses a significant challenge for EFL learners. This study investigated the students' opinion on difficulties in pronouncing English sounds. The study employed a quantitative method with survey research design. Approximately 90 students of the third semester of English Education Department participated to answer a questionnaire which included the pronunciation features and the factors that affect the problem. The data collected were analyzed by employing descriptive analysis. The results indicated that the third semester students of English Education Department had negative opinion in pronouncing English sounds. The difficulties involved vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation. Related to factors that affect pronunciation, the findings revealed that native language was the most dominant factor compared with others. It could be concluded that pronouncing English sounds became a problem of the students due to different phonological system. These research findings have implication for learners to be aware of specific pronunciation challenges. Moreover, teachers also need to adopt phonetics-based approaches in teaching process. Further study could investigate research that explore more on research samples, research design, and instruments to gain more specific results.

**Keywords:** *difficulties, opinion, pronouncing English sounds, segmental features, supra-segmental features*

### **A. Introduction**

Pronunciation plays a significant role that contribute to a successful communication. It is a known fact that pronunciation is an important element in oral English because it is one the key aspects of speech (Vančová, 2019). Good pronunciation does not only make someone confidence to speak up but also improve his/her listening skill (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2020). Moreover, pronunciation does not only become part of speaking skill, but also of listening. Both pronunciation and listening comprehension skill are interconnected (Rogerson & Gilbert, 2008).

Therefore, to ensure the effective communication, students need to possess good pronunciation. As Ekanem et al. (2022) mention that verbal communication might be useless and significantly limited without accurate pronunciation. Moreover, Zhang (2009) states that learners with good pronunciation in English are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. Therefore, people can use simple words or grammar structures to make others understand them, but they cannot use simple pronunciation.

Despite the significance of pronunciation, English pronunciation errors cannot be avoided by EFL learners. Ur (2003) mentions that it is due to particular sounds which may not exist in their mother tongue. The learner tends to substitute the nearest equivalent sounds he or she knows. For instance, the substitution of /ð/ to be /d/ as in word *that*. Another problem relates to stress and intonation that the students are using the patterns from their mother tongue which is inappropriate to the target language.

The facts show that languages differ greatly with the phonological system. In English, the sounds system is different from Indonesian. For this reason, pronunciation has always been considered a tough area by foreign language teachers and learners (Fraser, 2000), but at the same time it is an important aspect (Zhang, 2009). Jenkins (2000) states that the area pronunciation is the most threatens intelligibility. It might become the greatest barrier to successful communication.

Therefore, it is significant for EFL learners make a distinction between English language and their mother tongue. The two languages might be different in terms of both segmental and supra segmental features (Kelly, 2000). In the case of segmental, EFL learners realize that some sounds do not exist in their L1 such as /θ/ in *think*, which is substituted to be /t/. Producing vowels is another case. The same letters that represent different sounds make the students confused such as letter [a] in happy /æ/, face /ei/, about /ə/ and talk /ɔ/ (Ur, 2003). Even though Indonesian also has such the system, yet it is not too complicated such as /e/ in *pernah* and /è/ in *bebek*. Moreover, stress and intonation as the aspects of supra segmental features should be considered (Rusinak, 2025). The system above leads students to make errors in pronunciation.

Relating to the issues of the learning of pronunciation, several previous researches have been conducted relate to the difficulties of English pronunciation. First, Ha (2023) investigates

the difficulties the English teachers meet in teaching pronunciation to first-year English majors. Second, Hoang (2025) finds out the difficulties in pronunciation encountered by English language majors freshmen. Third, Uyen & Diem (2023) figure out common problems in learning pronunciation of the students majoring in English. Fourth, Fadillah (2020) examines the research surrounding English pronunciation by EFL learners all over Indonesia.

However, this research bridges the gap on the difficulties in pronouncing English sounds that include the aspects of segmental features (vowels and consonants) and supra-segmental features (stress and intonation) students commonly have problem on it. Moreover, the dominant factors that affect their pronunciation should be investigated, specifically in higher education level. Therefore, the research questions are formulated as follows.

- a. How is the students' opinion on difficulties in pronouncing English sounds?
- b. What is the dominant factor that affect the pronunciation problem?

## **Review of Literature**

### *Features of Pronunciation*

According to Pennington & Rogerson-Revell (2019), pronunciation is a component of language and communication that conveys many different kinds of meaning and includes linguistics competence that involve segmental level and supra-segmental level. Besides, pronunciation is the production of significant sounds in two senses: it is used as a part of a code of a particular language and to achieve meaning in contexts of use (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

Kelly (2000) mentions two main features of pronunciations: phonemes and supra-segmental features. Phonemes are the different sounds within a language. The sounds consist of vowels and consonants that the most general distinction between different speech sounds. When producing vowels, the air flows freely out of the mouth because vowels have an open vocal tract. In contrast, when the airstream is obstructed in the vocal tract, the consonants are produced (Dauer, 1993; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Zsiga, 2013).

Vowel sounds consist of pure vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs (Kelly, 2000; Roach, 2009). It is called pure vowels because the quality of sound does not change from the beginning to the end, such as /i:/ in *sea*, /æ/ in *bag*, /e/ in *egg* and /u:/ in *food*, etc. Diphthong is a combination between two vowels, such as /ei/ in *table* or /oʊ/ in *goes*, whereas triphthong is a combination between three vowels, such as /aʊə/ in *our* and *power*/aɪə/ in *higher*, *fire*, and /eɪə/ in *layer*.

Besides vowels, consonant clusters are a common feature of English (Kelly, 2000). It

can be defined as two or more consonant sounds grouped together in a word. They are pronounced with no vowels between them, for instance [spr] in *spry*, [spl] in *splash*, [skr] in *screen*, [skw] in *squad*, and [str] in *strap*. However, consonant clusters are difficult for many international speakers of English to pronounce (Dale & Poms, 2005).

Furthermore, supra-segmental features include stress and intonation. Stress has three features: loudness, pitch change, and a longer syllable. Stress can fall on the first, middle, or the last syllable of words (Kelly, 2000). In English, proper use of stress enables you to clearly understand the difference between such words as the noun present (a gift) and the verb present (to introduce; to offer) (Dale & Poms, 2005).

In addition, speech has a melody called intonation. The two basic melodies are rising and falling (Kenworthy, 1992). Speakers frequently depend more on intonation patterns to convey their meaning than on the pronunciation of the individual vowels and consonants. For example, in English, the same words can be used to make a statement or ask a question. If your vocal intonation rises, you are asking a question: "He speaks English?" (Dale & Poms, 2005).

#### *Factors Influencing Pronunciation*

Several factors that effects pronunciation include students' native language. Each language has specific phonological system. The obstacles and difficulties of learners in pronouncing sounds can be predicted by comparing the sound systems of English and other languages (Kenworthy, 1992). In reality, Indonesian sounds have certain same characteristics as English sound. So, the sound similarity might help students to acquire the spoken English. It may not happen to certain places. In short, the more differences those sound, the more difficult the learners in pronouncing English.

Furthermore, age factor might affect one's pronunciation. There is a common assumption that someone pronounces a second language easily as he/she learners his/her native language. Conversely, if someone never begins learning a second language, it is hard to acquire the language (Kenworthy, 1992). Therefore, Celce-Murcia et al. (2007) suggest teachers to redefine the goal of pronunciation class to be intelligibility rather than accuracy due to inability of most adults. Besides, exposure that generally relates to the length of time that the learners live in a target language environment can affect students to pronounce English sounds. It does not matter the place or country the learners stay, but depends on how much they use English in their daily life. The more they spend their time for listening and speaking English, the better their English pronunciation will be (Brown, 2014).

Moreover, some learners have motivation, so they are more concerned about their pronunciation. They are confident to speak up to request correction, whereas some of them are reluctant to speak. It shows us that the students worry about challenges in pronunciation which is regarded as one of complicated aspect in teaching and learning (Zhang, 2009). In addition, every human is born with phonetics ability. This innate ability capable them to discriminate two sounds or more and to imitate sound accurately (Kenworthy, 1992).

In conclusion, students often face significant difficulties in pronouncing English sounds due to a variety of factors. These challenges might lead to interference and mispronunciation. Additionally, these difficulties can create barriers to clear communication and may affect students' confidence in speaking.

## **B. Research Methodology**

The study investigated the students' difficulties in pronouncing English sounds and factors that caused the problem. Since this study investigated on students' opinion on the issue related to pronouncing English sounds, the researcher employed a quantitative with a survey study research design (Gay et al., 2012). The research design is also in line with what J. Creswell & Creswell (2018) said that a survey research is a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population, or tests for associations among variables of a population, by studying a sample of that population.

The third semester students of Department of English Education of Islamic State University of Sultan Syarif Kasim took part in this study. They had taken several courses such as speaking, listening, and phonetics and phonology. It showed that the students had been familiar with English sounds for three semesters. Since the students were available and willing to this study, the researcher employed convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, they could provide useful information to answer the research questions. The total of the samples (n=90) consisted of males and females, between 18-22 years old.

The instrument used of this study was a questionnaire survey consisted of 13 items. It utilized Likert scales with a five-point scales (5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree). The statement items were adapted from (Kenworthy, 1992; Kelly, 2000; Dale & Poms, 2005; Roach, 2009). To answer the first questions, the researcher designed the survey that describes the main features of pronunciation that include segmental features (basic sounds, vowel combination, consonants with different flavors, consonantal clusters, silent letter, and un-existed sounds) and supra-segmental features (stress position and intonation roles) adapted from (Kelly, 2000; Dale & Poms, 2005; Dale & Poms,

2005). To answer the second questions, the statements was were adapted from Kenworthy (1992) concerning on several factors that affect pronunciation: native language factor, age factor, motivation and concern, the amount of exposure, and phonetics ability.

The questionnaire consisted of eight statements that included the students' difficulties to pronounce English sounds and five statements related to the factors affect their difficulty in pronouncing the English sounds. The questionnaire was designed in Google-form and assigned through WhatsApp. It permitted the researcher to collect a data from a much larger sample (Gay et al., 2012). Further, a try-out was conducted before giving out the questionnaire to the sample. The result showed that all items were valid. Furthermore, the questionnaire was distributed to the sample (n=90).

Before administrating the survey, the researcher assigned a try out in order to examine the validity of the questionnaire. It was construct validity, tested by using Pearson Product Moment. All items reached an r-count above the r-table (0.553). It meant that all survey items were valid. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested by using Cronbach Alpha with a score of 0.90 (high reliability).

After collecting the data, the researcher employed descriptive analysis to analyze the data and transcribed the result of the questionnaire by calculating the percentage of each item. To get the percentage of the questionnaire, the researchers used a formula as proposed by Sudijono (2008):  $P=f/N \times 100$ , where P=Percentage, f=Frequency, N=Number of respondent, and 100=Constant number. In this section, the researcher compared the findings with the previous studies with the same phenomenon, specifically pronunciation features. The researcher also stated the lacks that exist in this research and then provide suggestions for future researchers with related themes. At last, the researcher concluded the findings.

### C. Results and Discussion

In what follows, data of (1) aspects of pronunciation features and (2) factors that affect pronunciation learning which had been received from 90 students are presented respectively.

#### 1. Results

##### *(1) Aspect of Pronunciation Features*

**Table 1.** Students' Opinion on Difficulties in Pronouncing English Sounds

Items	Total Score	Average Score	Average Score of all Items	Categorization
Basic sounds of vowel letters	255	2.83	2.72	<b>Negative</b>
Vowel combination	240	2.66		

Consonants with different flavors	253	2.81
Consonantal clusters	235	2.61
Silent letters	240	2.66
Un-exist sounds	240	2.66
Stress	240	2.66
Intonation	257	2.85

From table 1, it is noticed that the students' opinion on difficulties in pronouncing English sounds is negative. It is also clearly shown in each statements of the survey that the students' respond is negative. It can be concluded that the students face problem in pronouncing English vowels sounds, English consonants sounds, English stress and intonation.

**Table 2.** Students' Difficulties in Each Item

Items	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	DA (%)	SDA (%)
Basic sounds of vowel letters	5.5	35.5	30	27.7	1.1
Vowel combination	8.8	37.7	33.3	17.7	2.2
Consonants with different flavors	5.5	40	24.4	26.6	3.3
Consonantal clusters	10	38.8	34.4	13.3	3.3
Silent letters	12.2	34.4	31.1	18.8	3.3
Un-exist sounds	16.6	33.3	23.3	20	6.6
Stress	8.8	38.8	32.2	16.6	3.3
Intonation	6.6	35.5	28.8	24.4	4.4

For the analysis, majority of the students reveal that they face difficulties to pronounce English sounds in each aspect of the item. The first statement above indicates that most of students get confused to differentiate basic sounds of vowels letters such as *letter a in happy, all and about* (41% of 90 students). The second statement shows that most of the students get confused to differentiate vowel combination such as *letter ie in friend, believe and die* (46.5%). The third statement implies that most of students get confused to differentiate consonants with different flavours such as *letter s in words see, busy, and tension* (45.5%). The fourth statement denotes that they get it difficult to pronounce consonantal cluster such as *letter lps in helps, spl in splash, and str in street* (48.8%). The fifth statement points out that the students are confused to pronounce silent letter such as *in words honest, listen, and Wednesday* (46.6%). The sixth statement states that the students get it difficult to pronounce several English sounds which do not exist in Indonesian such as *sounds /ð/ in this, /ə/ in bath, /z/ in measure*. (49.9%). The seventh statement reveals that the students get it difficult to determine stress position position such as *stress on first*

syllable in word radio, stress on the second syllable in word potato, and stress on the last syllable in word entertain (47.6%). The last statement admits that the students get it difficult to determine intonation rules properly such as rising intonation in “Are you oke?” and falling intonation “How are you?” (42.1%).

It can be concluded that most of the students get it difficulties in English pronunciation for both segmental and supra-segmental features. For vowels analysis, the students face problem to differentiate the different sounds produced by the same letter in different words. Moreover, they find it difficult to distinguish the sounds of the same diphthongs in different words. For consonants analysis, the students prove that difficulty to discriminate the same consonants which produce different sounds is valid. Besides, the respondents confuse to pronounce two or more consonants sounds grouped together in a word. The students also face trouble to pronounce letters representing no sound in words. Furthermore, the respondents face obstacle to pronounce certain sounds that are not available in their phonological system. For supra-segmental features analysis, the students are fail in placing stress on certain words. Finally, the respondents reveal that intonation is another problem faced by the students in pronunciation.

**(2) Factors that Affect Pronunciation**

**Table 3.** Factors That Affect Pronunciation

<b>Statement</b>	<b>SA (%)</b>	<b>A (%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>DA (%)</b>	<b>SDA (%)</b>
<i>native language</i>	13.3	61.1	18.8	5.5	1.1
<i>Age</i>	1.1	11.1	18.8	53.3	15.5
<i>motivation and concern for good pronunciation</i>	12.2	41.1	26.6	20	0
<i>amount of exposure</i>	2.2	44.4	28.8	24.4	0
<i>phonetics ability</i>	13.3	46.6	22.2	16.6	1.1

Table 3 indicates that majority of the respondents reveal that they encounter pronunciations due to native language factor (74.4%). It becomes the dominant factor that affect students’ pronunciation among others. It convinces us native language becomes the main factor of pronunciation error. Furthermore, approximately 68.8% of the student argue that the age factor influences their pronunciation ability. Besides, there are 53.3% of them reveal that motivation and concern for good pronunciation is needed to solve the problem. The students (46.6%) also admit that they need the amount of exposure to support their pronunciation ability. In this case, majority of them realize that they might do it properly with

practice. In addition, there are 59.9% of the respondents recognize their lack of phonetics ability as one of crucial problem in pronouncing sounds in English.

Based on the analysis the collected data above dealing with students' difficulties on pronouncing English sounds and the factors that affect pronunciation, this study has investigated some findings. First, in terms of vowels, pronouncing vowels combination is more difficult than basic vowels. Second, related to consonants, producing consonant clusters is more complicated than consonants with different flavors. Referring to supra-segmental features, Third, placing stress is more challenging than placing intonation. Fourth, pronouncing un-exist sounds is the most difficult of all. Fifth, related to the factor affected the problem, native language became the dominant factor that caused the pronunciation errors. On contrast, they rejected the age factor as one of the cause of their failure.

## 2. Discussion

This study presents the contribution of investigating students' difficulties of pronouncing English sounds and factors affect their pronunciation problem. The researcher discusses the findings of the first question in terms of two main features of pronunciation; segmental and supra segmental features. Comparing between basic sounds of vowels and vowels combination, it is found out that 46.5% of the students was difficult to pronounce diphthongs such as *letter ie in friend, believe and die*. This finding is in line with the research finding of Dewi & Astriyanti (2021) that the dominant errors pronunciation of minimal pair words by the participants in vowel sounds were /æ/ and /eɪ/, approximately 91,7% of the students. However, Garita Sánchez et al. (2019) found out different results. Based on the data obtained after organizing vowels sounds from the most difficult to the easiest, the results revealed that the three most difficult vowels for students were /ɪ/, /æ/ and /o/ as basic sounds.

Dealing with segmental features, it is clearly seen that challenging in pronouncing vowels was complicated rather than consonants, even thou they also faced trouble to distinguish the same consonant letters that may represent several different sounds. A research conducted by (Rullu et al., 2023) support this statement.

Based on IPA transcription of 12 monophthongs, 8 diphthongs, and 5 triphthongs, the participants made error vowels as many as 10 in monophthongs (/i:/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, /ɑ:/, /ʊ/, /u:/), 5 in diphthongs (/eɪ/, /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/), and 3 in triphthong.

Furthermore, in terms of supra segmental features, placing stress was more difficult part of the students than placing rising and falling (47.6%). This result was in line with a

study conducted by Abdalla et al. (2020) who found that stress placement seemed to be the most problematic area for the students. Ahmed et al. (2022) also found out that students got confused in pronouncing stress on word classes: noun, verb, adjective that have same spelling and pronunciation. On the contrary, Harmer (2009) argue the statement above. He reveals that the most problematic area of pronunciation is intonation. Students find it extremely difficult to identify the different patterns of rising and falling tones. Lasi (2020) in her study also found out that students mostly had the enough level of the ability at the elements of supra-segmental, specifically in determining intonation (65.3% of the students).

Referring to factors that affect pronunciation, native language factor became the most problematic factor faced students that influenced their ability in pronouncing English sounds (74.4%). It has a big relationship to the problem faced by the students, it is the phonological system difference. The finding relates to a study conducted by Karim (2021) that was to find some probable areas of influence of vowel from Bengali to English. It was found that the L1 influence was present in the highly proficient English as a second language speaker. Therefore, it was concluded that the pronunciation errors were mainly due to L1 interference. It is in line with what Ur (2003) states that learners' mother tongue might affect the learners' errors of pronunciation. Moreover, Ali (2013) also revealed that differences between L1 and L2 presented the causes of the production problems by Sudanese university learners. In his research, Ali (2013) also exposed that the lack of L2 phonemic knowledge as a second factor that led to the problems. The finding was the same as the result of this study that 59.9% of the students had lack of phonetics ability.

On top of that, lack of motivation and age were another causes of the problem. Yet, age factor was not a big obstacle for them in producing sounds. It is in line with the study of Hohle in Kenworthy (1992) that the two groups of learners (17 years old and 21-31 years old) received the highest scores in pronunciation. Since the students' age was about 18-22 years old, so they argued the age factor. Additionally, Khan (2020) adds that young learners are more likely to acquire the correct English pronunciation.

Regarding the importance of good pronunciation, it is essential to compare the phonological system of L1 and the target language in pronunciation instruction. It is supported by a research conducted by Rajadurai (2001) about the effectiveness of teaching pronunciation. The main reason was that it enabled others to understand them easily which gave them confidence.

#### **D. Conclusion and Suggestion**

This study reveals difficulties on pronouncing English sounds and the factors affect the problem. In terms of challenges, it is obvious that the different phonological system of English and Indonesian should be aware in order to anticipate the problems faced in learning the target language. The tendency to substitute certain sounds to another sounds can be predicted as the influence of their native language, whereas in the case of factors that affect pronunciation learning, teachers can do some efforts. In this case, teachers can adopt phonetics-based approaches in teaching process.

There are some useful suggestions for EFL teachers to help learners improve their English pronunciation. *First*, teachers should speak clearly and slowly in their pronunciation classes and they should convince their learners that their language is understandable. This can help their students improve their pronunciation by listening to them carefully. In this case, slow speech with correct pronunciation is much better than fast speech with wrong pronunciation. *Second*, teachers should familiarize their learners to both American and British English and learners should be able to understand both varieties of pronunciation. *Third*, pronunciation should be viewed as more than correct production of individual sounds or words. Teachers can urge their learners to monitor their own pronunciation and practice their speaking skills as much as possible in and outside the classroom.

While this study provides valuable insights into the pronunciation difficulties students face and the contributing factors, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was relatively limited to learners from a single linguistic background which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study's reliance on survey that may have limited the accuracy of pronunciation error identification. Future research should involve more diverse research samples, research design, and instruments to gain more specific results.

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