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The Role of Phonology in Language Learning: A Case Study of Indonesian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Phonology plays a crucial role in second language acquisition, particularly in enhancing pronunciation, listening comprehension, and overall communicative competence. This study explores the role of phonology in English language learning among Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve university students majoring in English Education. Findings reveal that learners often struggle with English sounds that do not exist in their first language, such as /θ/ in think, which impacts pronunciation and listening. Although phonological instruction was limited, students expressed a strong belief in its importance and advocated for more explicit teaching of sound systems. The study suggests the integration of phonology-focused strategies in EFL curricula to support learners' oral proficiency.

Keywords: *Phonology, Language Learning, Pronunciation, Listening Comprehension, EFL, Second Language Acquisition*

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of second language acquisition (SLA), phonology serves as a fundamental component that underlies several key language skills, including pronunciation, listening comprehension, and vocabulary development. Phonology, as the study of sound systems and patterns in language, enables learners to decode spoken language and produce intelligible speech. Scholars such as Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and

Goodwin (2010) emphasize that an understanding of phonology helps learners grasp how sounds function in a language, which is crucial for developing both receptive and productive skills. Without a solid grasp of the phonological structure of the target language, second language learners may face persistent difficulties in communicating effectively, regardless of their grammatical or lexical knowledge.

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, phonological acquisition becomes particularly critical. When learners' first language (L1) has a significantly different phonological system from English, the transfer of L1 phonological rules often leads to interference, mispronunciations, and reduced speech intelligibility (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). For instance, in the case of Indonesian learners, whose native language lacks certain English phonemes such as the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ (as in think) or the voiced dental fricative /ð/ (as in this), accurate articulation becomes a considerable challenge.

Moreover, English features such as vowel length distinctions, stress-timed rhythm, and intonation patterns are often unfamiliar to Indonesian learners, resulting in difficulty distinguishing between minimal pairs like ship /ʃɪp/ and sheep /ʃi:p/, or maintaining appropriate stress and rhythm in connected speech. These phonological challenges extend beyond mere pronunciation issues. As noted by Derwing and Munro (2005), intelligible pronunciation is closely linked to successful communication. Learners who struggle to produce or perceive target language sounds may find it difficult to understand native speakers or be understood in return, which can lead to frequent communication breakdowns.

Additionally, phonological awareness—the ability to recognize and manipulate sound units—has been shown to influence learners' listening comprehension and even their ability to retain new vocabulary items (Field, 2005; Gilakjani, 2012). When learners cannot decode the phonological form of words they hear, their overall language processing and acquisition are compromised. Despite its importance, phonology often receives insufficient attention in many EFL classrooms. Instructors may prioritize grammar, reading, and writing, with pronunciation and phonological instruction relegated to the margins. This neglect is partly due to a lack of training in how to teach phonology effectively, and partly due to the misconception that learners will “pick up” correct pronunciation over time through exposure. However, research has demonstrated that explicit instruction in phonological features, particularly those that differ from the learner's L1, can significantly enhance both pronunciation accuracy and overall communicative competence (Saito, 2011). Explicit phonetic instruction helps learners notice subtle distinctions between sounds, produce them more accurately, and develop greater confidence in speaking. In the context of Indonesian EFL learners, these issues are particularly relevant. English education in Indonesia often emphasizes reading and grammar, while speaking and listening skills—especially pronunciation and phonology—are underdeveloped.

Many students complete years of English instruction with only limited speaking proficiency and significant pronunciation difficulties. These problems are exacerbated by factors such as limited exposure to native English input, lack of corrective feedback, and low awareness of the importance of phonological features in real-world communication. As a result, many learners continue to speak English with strong L1 interference and reduced intelligibility. Understanding how Indonesian learners perceive phonology and how they experience phonological challenges in their English learning journey is vital for improving instructional practices. Learner perception influences motivation, engagement, and the willingness to practice difficult aspects of language, including pronunciation. If learners view phonology as irrelevant or too difficult, they may avoid working on their pronunciation, reinforcing negative habits. On the other hand, raising awareness of phonology's importance and integrating it effectively into language instruction can empower students to take ownership of their pronunciation development.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions and experiences of Indonesian EFL learners regarding phonology. It seeks to answer questions such as: How do learners understand the role of phonology in their English learning? What specific difficulties do they encounter with English phonological features? And to what extent do their classroom experiences support or hinder their development in this area? By addressing these questions, the study hopes to provide valuable insights for language teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers to enhance phonological instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts and promote more effective, communicatively oriented language teaching. These phonological challenges are not merely surface-level concerns of accent or fluency; rather, they have profound implications for intelligibility – the extent to which a speaker can be understood by a listener (Munro & Derwing, 1995). As Derwing and Munro (2005) stress, intelligible pronunciation, rather than native-like articulation, should be the primary instructional goal in pronunciation teaching. Learners who cannot perceive or produce essential phonemic distinctions often experience communication breakdowns, which can negatively affect both academic and professional interactions.

Moreover, a lack of phonological awareness – defined as the ability to attend to and manipulate sound structures in language – can hinder the decoding of spoken language, thereby impairing listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Field, 2005; Saito, 2011; Cutler, 2015). Despite its significance, phonology remains underrepresented in many EFL instructional contexts. In Indonesia, English instruction at the secondary and tertiary levels frequently emphasizes reading and writing skills, while speaking and listening receive comparatively less attention (Hamied, 2012; Zein, 2015). Teachers may avoid teaching phonology due to a lack of pedagogical training, limited phonetic awareness, or the widespread belief that learners will naturally acquire pronunciation through exposure over time (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2016). However, research increasingly demonstrates the effectiveness of explicit phonological

instruction, particularly in addressing phonological contrasts that are absent in learners' L1 (Saito, 2011; Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Explicit instruction not only promotes better pronunciation but also encourages learners to develop metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to self-monitor and adjust their speech production. In addition to instructional gaps, contextual and sociolinguistic factors play a crucial role in shaping learners' phonological competence. Indonesian students often lack exposure to authentic spoken English outside the classroom, limiting opportunities to interact with diverse accents and real-time conversation (Imran, 2018). Large class sizes and an exam-driven education culture further marginalize oral skills, while the limited availability of corrective feedback reduces learners' awareness of their phonological errors (Wahyuni, 2017).

Consequently, many learner complete formal education with fossilized pronunciation patterns that hinder communication in global contexts. Understanding learners' perceptions of phonology and their experiences with phonological learning is therefore essential. Learner beliefs influence their motivation, willingness to practice, and openness to corrective feedback (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). When learners perceive pronunciation as irrelevant or too difficult, they are less likely to engage with it. Conversely, when phonology is integrated meaningfully into instruction, learners are more likely to develop confidence and autonomy in speech production (Baker & Murphy, 2011). In this regard, teachers and curriculum developers must recognize phonology not as a peripheral skill, but as an integral part of communicative competence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how phonology influences English language learning. The method was chosen to capture students' real-life experiences and perceptions about pronunciation, listening, and phonological awareness. Participants in this study were twelve English Education students from UIN Sumatera Utara. They were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that all respondents were active English learners and had relevant experiences with phonology in their learning process. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews using seven open-ended questions. The questions focused on students' difficulties in pronunciation, awareness of sound distinctions, exposure to phonology in class, and their personal strategies to improve speaking and listening skills. Each interview lasted around 20–30 minutes and was transcribed for analysis. Data analysis was done through thematic analysis, where researchers identified recurring themes related to phonological challenges and benefits. Responses were grouped into categories such as “Pronunciation Problems,” “Phonological Instruction,” and “Learning Strategies.” To ensure research ethics, all participants gave their informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Common Phonological Challenges

Based on the results of interviews with twelve English Education students, it was found that phonological challenges are a consistent and significant part of their language learning experience. One of the most prominent difficulties reported by the participants is the inability to accurately pronounce English sounds that do not exist in their native language, Bahasa Indonesia. A particularly common issue was the articulation of the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/, such as in the word *think*, which many students admitted to replacing with /t/, resulting in *tink*. Similarly, the voiced counterpart /ð/ as in *this* was often pronounced as /d/ or /z*. These substitutions suggest a strong tendency among learners to default to sounds that are more familiar or easier based on their first language background.

In addition to difficulties with consonant production, vowel distinction also posed a serious challenge for many learners. Several participants described frequent confusion between minimal pairs such as *ship* and *sheep*, or *live* and *leave*. These vowel contrasts, though subtle to the untrained ear, can drastically change meaning in English, which makes mastering them essential. Learners often expressed frustration that despite years of study, they still struggled to hear and produce these differences clearly. This difficulty is likely due to the more limited vowel inventory in Bahasa Indonesia, which does not require learners to differentiate between sounds like /ɪ/ and /i:/ on a daily basis.

Beyond segmental sounds, students also reported problems with suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation. For instance, some participants noted that they were unsure where to place the stress in longer words, especially in cases where the shift in stress also changes the grammatical function of the word, such as *record* (noun) and *record* (verb). Furthermore, many of them described their English speech as "flat" or "robotic", indicating a lack of natural intonation patterns. This not only affects how native-like their speech sounds but can also lead to misunderstandings, especially in spoken communication where tone and stress carry meaning.

A further layer of difficulty emerged in the area of connected speech. Learners observed that when listening to native speakers, they often found it difficult to follow conversations due to the rapid blending or reduction of sounds. Phrases like *want to* sounding like *wanna*, or *going to* becoming *gonna*, created confusion for learners who had only encountered the dictionary forms of words. Several participants admitted that these changes in casual or fast speech made it hard for them to recognize even familiar vocabulary, suggesting a gap between classroom pronunciation practice and real-world listening demands.

Compounding these technical issues was a psychological barrier that appeared repeatedly in interviews. Students often expressed anxiety about speaking in English, particularly in front of peers or lecturers. They feared being judged for their

pronunciation, and some admitted to avoiding speaking altogether in certain situations. This emotional hesitation suggests that pronunciation difficulties are not only a matter of phonological competence but also affect learners' confidence and willingness to use the language actively.

Overall, these phonological challenges—ranging from unfamiliar sounds, minimal pairs, stress and intonation patterns, to connected speech—highlight the complexity of English phonology for EFL learners. They also point to a deeper issue: the insufficient emphasis on pronunciation and phonology instruction in formal education. Despite recognizing the importance of accurate pronunciation, many participants noted that they had received very little focused training on these elements during their studies. This gap suggests the need for a more structured and sustained approach to phonology in language teaching to help learners overcome these persistent obstacles.

Learners' Experiences in Phonological Aspects of English Learning

Through the interviews conducted with twelve English Education students, it became evident that their experiences with phonology in learning English were diverse but shared several common threads. Most of them began learning English relatively early—some as early as kindergarten, and others during their elementary school years. However, early exposure to English did not necessarily translate into phonological competence. Several participants admitted that although they had been learning English for years, they still found pronunciation and listening to be among the most difficult skills to master. This reinforces the idea that without focused instruction and meaningful practice, mere exposure is often not sufficient for learners to internalize the sound system of a second language.

A strong sense of awareness regarding the importance of pronunciation was consistently present among the participants. Almost all of them acknowledged that correct pronunciation plays a vital role in communication, and many emphasized that even minor errors in pronunciation could lead to misunderstandings. One student gave a personal example of confusing the word sheet with shit, which resulted in an awkward classroom moment. Another shared how mispronouncing desert as dessert had caused confusion in a writing presentation. These stories demonstrate not only how learners are aware of phonological contrasts, but also how these contrasts affect their confidence and performance in academic and social contexts.

Despite this awareness, the participants revealed that phonological instruction in their formal education had been minimal. Most of them could not recall any consistent or in-depth training on phonemes, stress, or intonation during their years of English learning. While some mentioned brief exposure to phonology in one or two courses, they felt that the subject was often treated as a theoretical component rather than as a practical skill to be developed. As a result, students often resorted to self-learning techniques such as mimicking native speakers in movies, listening to English songs, or practicing through

repetition and voice recordings. These strategies, while helpful, were described as inconsistent and lacking structured guidance.

Despite the limited formal instruction, students agreed that even small doses of phonological content—such as learning about stress patterns or syllable structure—had helped them become more aware of their speech and boosted their confidence. Several participants said that understanding intonation had helped them sound more natural when speaking, and recognizing stress placement helped them comprehend spoken English more effectively, especially in listening tests or when communicating with native speakers online. They noted a noticeable improvement when they paid attention to rhythm, pitch, and intonation, especially in spontaneous speech.

Interestingly, students expressed a clear desire for phonology to be more present in the curriculum—not just in theory-based courses, but as a regular part of speaking and listening practice. Many felt that their struggles in speaking fluently and confidently were not due to lack of vocabulary or grammar, but due to uncertainty in how to sound right. They wanted their pronunciation to be intelligible and natural, and recognized that this required more than just knowing how to form sentences; it required understanding the music of the language.

Moreover, several students described how phonological awareness influenced their listening comprehension. They observed that they often struggled to understand native speakers, especially in fast or informal speech, not because they didn't know the words, but because they didn't recognize them when spoken. Connected speech phenomena such as assimilation and elision were rarely discussed in class, so learners found themselves surprised and frustrated when encountering real-life English conversations that didn't sound like what they had learned from textbooks.

Overall, the students' experiences highlight the deep connection between phonology and both receptive and productive language skills. While they are clearly aware of how important phonology is in real communication, they feel that their formal education has not given them enough tools to master it. Their testimonies reflect a strong motivation to improve and a desire for more accessible, practical, and engaging instruction in this area. These insights suggest that with more consistent and applied phonology teaching, learners could significantly enhance their fluency, confidence, and comprehension in English. Cara menulis hasil dan pembahasan dilakukan secara langsung dengan mengulas secara tajam satu demi satu hasil penelitian yang diperoleh dengan didukung referensi yang relevan dan diutamakan dari sumber primer (jurnal). Hasil yang disajikan dalam bagian ini adalah hasil "bersih". Proses analisis data seperti perhitungan statistik dan proses pengujian hipotesis tidak perlu disajikan. Hanya hasil analisis dan hasil pengujian hipotesis saja yang perlu dilaporkan. Hasil penelitian dapat dilengkapi dengan tabel, gambar dan grafik (ketentuan penulisan pada informasi untuk author) untuk memperjelas penyajian hasil penelitian secara verbal.

Limited Instructional Exposure

The issue of limited instructional exposure to phonology goes beyond the mere absence of explicit lessons; it reflects a systemic undervaluation of pronunciation in English language education. Participants consistently expressed that, throughout their schooling, phonological elements such as intonation, rhythm, syllable stress, and individual phonemes were rarely – if ever – discussed in a meaningful or consistent manner. In most cases, pronunciation was treated as a secondary concern, something to be corrected incidentally when errors occurred, rather than taught proactively as part of a language skill set.

Several learners recalled that their English classes were predominantly focused on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary memorization, often due to the exam-oriented nature of Indonesia's national education system. Speaking and listening activities were minimal, and pronunciation drills were almost entirely absent. As a result, learners often relied on self-study or external sources such as YouTube channels, pronunciation apps, or English-language music to develop their phonological awareness – resources that varied greatly in quality and effectiveness.

Some students also shared that their teachers appeared hesitant or uncomfortable teaching pronunciation, particularly more nuanced elements such as intonation or connected speech. This hesitation may stem from a lack of adequate training in phonology during pre-service education programs. Without the confidence or knowledge to teach these topics, many educators may opt to avoid them altogether. Moreover, pronunciation instruction is often not included in English teaching handbooks or syllabi used in schools, which reinforces the notion that it is not a necessary component of English proficiency.

Another barrier identified was the traditional teacher-centered approach used in many classrooms. Instead of allowing students to practice speaking and receive feedback, many lessons involve passive learning, where students listen to the teacher or complete written exercises. This method leaves little opportunity to address individual phonological challenges or encourage learners to become more conscious of their own articulation and listening accuracy.

In addition, regional accents and dialectal variation in Bahasa Indonesia may influence how teachers model English pronunciation. Inconsistent models or non-standard pronunciation may confuse learners or lead to the internalization of incorrect phonological forms. This highlights the need for standardized materials and training to ensure accurate and consistent pronunciation modeling.

The cumulative effect of these issues is a generation of learners who are aware of their pronunciation limitations but lack the tools and opportunities to overcome them. This instructional gap creates frustration and may limit students' performance in higher education or professional environments where clear spoken English is essential.

Perceived Benefits of Phonology Instruction

Despite the limited formal instruction, participants overwhelmingly agreed on the value of learning phonology, particularly in improving their ability to communicate clearly and confidently. Even basic instruction in phonological concepts led to noticeable improvements in learners' pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, and overall language fluency.

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits was increased intelligibility. Students who had some exposure to phonology found that their speech became easier for both native and non-native speakers to understand. They reported fewer instances of needing to repeat themselves and felt more successful in conversations, interviews, and oral presentations. This boost in communicative effectiveness reinforced their motivation to continue improving.

Another key benefit was heightened self-awareness. Phonology instruction helped learners recognize their own habitual pronunciation errors and understand the phonetic distinctions that could change a word's meaning. For example, they became more aware of the differences between /æ/ and /ʌ/, or the importance of sentence stress in conveying emphasis or contrast. With this awareness came a greater capacity for self-correction and autonomous learning.

Furthermore, many learners indicated that understanding suprasegmental features such as intonation and rhythm helped them decode spoken English more efficiently. They found it easier to follow native speaker speech in movies, podcasts, and everyday conversations, especially when fast or connected speech was involved. This comprehension again directly supported their listening skills in academic and real-world settings.

Several participants also highlighted that phonology instruction made English feel more alive and dynamic. Unlike rote grammar drills or vocabulary lists, learning how English "sounds" added a new layer of interest and interactivity to their studies. Some students described phonology classes as "fun" or "engaging," particularly when teachers used games, roleplays, or media to teach pronunciation patterns.

Importantly, many students viewed phonology as foundational to their broader language development. They noted that better pronunciation led to better spelling, increased reading fluency, and more accurate writing, since they could more easily recognize how spoken and written forms of English are connected. One student commented, "Before I learned phonology, I memorized words without understanding them. Now I hear the patterns and it makes more sense."

The social dimension of phonology learning was also evident. As students became more confident in their spoken English, they were more likely to initiate conversations, participate in classroom discussions, and engage with English-speaking peers online. For some, this opened up opportunities for language exchange, international friendships, or even part-time work that required English communication skills.

The overall picture painted by these reflections is clear: students see phonology not as a peripheral topic but as a key pillar of language mastery. They want more time, attention, and resources dedicated to it. As one participant concluded, “If we learned this earlier and practiced it more, I think we would all speak much better English by now.” This powerful statement underscores the urgent need to integrate phonology more fully into English language instruction in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that phonology plays an essential and multifaceted role in the process of English language learning, particularly for EFL learners in Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research captured the real-life experiences of twelve English Education students who face persistent and varied challenges related to pronunciation, listening comprehension, and phonological awareness.

The findings reveal that learners commonly struggle with segmental aspects of English, such as unfamiliar consonants and vowel distinctions, as well as suprasegmental features including stress, intonation, and rhythm. Furthermore, connected speech phenomena often pose significant comprehension difficulties, especially in informal or fast-paced spoken English. These challenges are compounded by psychological barriers, such as fear of mispronunciation and lack of confidence, which inhibit learners’ willingness to actively use the language.

Despite their awareness of the importance of phonological competence, most students reported minimal exposure to systematic instruction in this area. The absence of structured phonology teaching in formal education – often overshadowed by grammar-focused and exam-oriented curricula – has led many learners to rely on inconsistent self-directed strategies. Moreover, a lack of teacher confidence and insufficient emphasis on pronunciation pedagogy further contribute to this instructional gap.

However, the study also highlights the strong perceived benefits of phonology instruction. Even limited exposure to phonological concepts led to noticeable improvements in learners’ speech clarity, self-awareness, listening skills, and overall communicative effectiveness. Participants expressed a clear desire for more accessible and engaging phonology-based instruction, recognizing its impact not only on oral proficiency but also on reading, writing, and personal confidence.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that English language programs integrate phonology more explicitly and consistently into their curricula. Educators should be equipped with the tools and training necessary to teach phonological elements effectively, and students should be given more opportunities to develop their pronunciation and listening skills through interactive, research-informed approaches. Strengthening phonological instruction holds significant potential for enhancing learners’ fluency, intelligibility, and engagement with the English language.

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