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The Influence of Regional Dialects on The English Pronunciation of EFL Students in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of regional dialects on the English pronunciation of Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. With Indonesia's rich linguistic diversity, local dialects often influence learners' articulation of English sounds, particularly phonemes that are absent from their native languages, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /v/. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through questionnaires distributed to students from various regions, including speakers of Batakese, Sundanese, and Javanese. The findings indicate consistent patterns of L1 interference, with dialectal features shaping learners' pronunciation and affecting their intelligibility. While some students develop metacognitive strategies to overcome pronunciation challenges, others experience anxiety or reduced confidence due to social stigma. The study highlights the need for pronunciation pedagogy that promotes intelligibility while respecting students' cultural identity, calling for localized and inclusive instructional practices in multilingual EFL contexts.

Keywords: *Pronunciation, Regional Dialects, EFL Students, L1 Interference, Phonology, Intelligibility, Language Identity, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation plays a vital role in achieving communicative competence in learning a second language. It directly affects not only how understandable a speaker is but also how confident and socially accepted they are (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). In a nation like Indonesia, which is rich in linguistic diversity with numerous local dialects, pronunciation problems often stem from the sound systems of students' mother tongues. These influences lead to consistent pronunciation errors in English among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In the Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, the influence of regional dialects on English pronunciation presents a compelling area of study. Indonesia's linguistic landscape is characterized by hundreds of regional dialects, each with its unique phonetic and phonological systems. These regional language systems often transfer into students' English pronunciation, influencing their speech production in both conscious and unconscious ways (Octaviani et al., 2024). Each dialect in Indonesia has distinct phonetic and phonological features that can carry over into English pronunciation, either consciously or subconsciously. For example, students from North Sumatra who speak Batak or Malay dialects may replace unfamiliar English sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/ with more familiar ones like /t/ or /d/. This phenomenon, known as L1 interference, frequently occurs in second language acquisition (Brown, 2000).

Previous studies by Dewi (2021) and Siregar (2023) show that Indonesian EFL learners often transfer speech habits from their first language to English. These habits, although natural, result in repeated mispronunciations that can impair clarity, especially in classroom discussions, oral tasks, and tests. Learners with noticeable regional accents may also suffer from nervousness, low self-esteem, or stigma, particularly in formal or academic interactions. Their speech might be mistaken as inadequate English ability, when in fact it is influenced by their first language.

Pronunciation also contributes significantly to overall language competence. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) emphasize that how one pronounces words affects not only communication but also perceived credibility and confidence. Pronunciation challenges stemming from dialectal influence can prevent students from fully engaging in educational or professional environments. At the same time, these accents are part of cultural identity, highlighting the need to balance clarity in speech with cultural preservation (Jenkins, 2000). In a multilingual setting like Indonesia, teachers often face difficulties accommodating linguistic diversity. The national curriculum doesn't always account for regional phonetic variations, causing inconsistency in teaching and assessment. This leaves students to cope with pronunciation challenges independently. Tanjung (2020) argues that pronunciation teaching must be adapted to suit local contexts.

Given these complexities, this study aims to provide insight into how regional dialects impact the English pronunciation of Indonesian EFL students. By analyzing student experiences and perspectives collected through questionnaires, **this study** seeks to identify major pronunciation issues, understand their causes, and explore student strategies for adaptation. The findings may help inform more inclusive pedagogical practices and pronunciation instruction that respects linguistic diversity while promoting effective communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Dialects vs. Accents

The distinction between dialects and accents is fundamental in understanding linguistic variation in EFL learning. According to Trudgill (2000), a dialect encompasses not only pronunciation but also grammar and vocabulary, whereas an accent pertains strictly to pronunciation. This distinction is critical in language teaching because a student may speak English fluently (grammatically and lexically), but their accent may still reflect their regional language. For Indonesian learners, dialect and accent interference can occur simultaneously, often complicating the learning process and affecting self-confidence in oral communication.

In the Indonesian context, regional dialects such as Javanese, Sundanese, Bataknese, and Minangkabau exhibit significant phonetic divergence from standard English. For example, Javanese speakers may tend to pronounce English /ε/ as /s/, while Bataknese speakers may have difficulty differentiating between /f/ and /p/ (Rambe, 2021). These sound substitutions are often systematic, rooted in the phonemic inventory of the regional language. As a result, they influence not only intelligibility but also the listener's perception of speaker competence (Sihombing & Ginting, 2020). These challenges are more pronounced in students who receive limited formal pronunciation instruction.

Jenkins (2000) proposed the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework, advocating for intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation in teaching. This concept challenges traditional models of pronunciation teaching that favor native norms, especially Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). Research by Sihombing and Ginting (2020) showed that students with Batak backgrounds often replaced English sounds with equivalents from their own language, potentially causing misunderstandings. Underhill (2005) highlighted the importance of helping students differentiate between features that affect intelligibility and those that are merely accent-related.

Furthermore, Wells (1982) elaborates that accents are socially marked and can carry judgments about a speaker's education, origin, or competence. In multilingual

countries like Indonesia, where linguistic prestige varies by region, accents can become both identity markers and sources of discrimination. Students from regions with less socio-political influence may feel compelled to suppress their regional speech features to fit into mainstream educational or urban linguistic norms. The pressure to 'neutralize' one's accent may negatively impact motivation and identity.

In the end, recognizing the difference between dialects and accents is essential for designing effective pronunciation teaching. Educators should be able to differentiate between persistent pronunciation errors that hinder communication and natural accent variations that do not affect understanding. According to Underhill (2005), pronunciation should be taught with a focus on awareness and flexibility, not conformity. When educators acknowledge the sociolinguistic background of students, they create an inclusive learning environment that respects regional identity while fostering communicative effectiveness.

2. Factors Influencing Pronunciation

Pronunciation is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors that shape how second language learners perceive and produce sounds. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) outline both internal and external factors that shape pronunciation, such as first language interference, age, exposure to the target language, motivation, identity, and educational background. Among these, L1 interference is the most documented and impactful, particularly in environments where English is not used as a daily communicative tool. In Indonesia, students often rely on L1 phonological rules when articulating English, leading to consistent mispronunciations.

According to Scovel (1988), students who begin learning after puberty may face more difficulties in mastering pronunciation due to the Critical Period Hypothesis. This biological limitation is compounded by social and psychological factors such as fossilized pronunciation patterns and reduced sensitivity to phonetic details. Adult learners in Indonesia, particularly those who begin serious English training in high school or university, may find it difficult to distinguish subtle phonetic contrasts that differ from their regional language sounds.

Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) observed that students who engage with authentic English content tend to develop better pronunciation. However, in many Indonesian settings, such exposure is rare, and pronunciation is often neglected in the classroom (Rambe, 2021). As a result, pronunciation is underdeveloped, and learners fall back on familiar regional sounds when attempting English pronunciation.

Motivation is also a key factor as highlighted by Derwing and Munro (2005), students who aim for intelligibility are more driven in their pronunciation efforts. Identity is another aspect that influences learning. On the other hand, learners with low self-confidence or who are satisfied with intelligible but accented speech may not strive for further improvement. Nasution (2022) found that students who take pride in their

accents may avoid adjusting to standard norms, while others feel compelled to mimic them. This creates a dilemma between staying authentic and being understood.

3. Challenges Faced by Students

Students who speak strong regional dialects often encounter specific challenges when learning to pronounce English. One of the most commonly cited obstacles is the absence of certain English phonemes in their native language, making accurate articulation difficult. Many Indonesian learners find it difficult to pronounce unfamiliar sounds such as /θ/, /ð/, and consonant clusters. Dewi (2021) and Silaban (2020) noted that these are commonly substituted with /t/, /d/, or modified with extra vowels, reducing clarity. Another barrier is the lack of correction from teachers (Hasibuan, 2023). Often, instructors overlook pronunciation errors unless they interfere with meaning.

In addition, another significant obstacle is limited corrective feedback. In Indonesian classrooms, especially in rural areas, pronunciation is rarely prioritized, and mispronunciations are often overlooked unless they severely affect intelligibility. Hutagalung (2019) emphasized that students in rural areas lack access to pronunciation tools like dictionaries, software, or native models. The absence of corrective feedback often leads to fossilized errors, where mispronunciations become permanent habits over time.

Social and psychological factors also hinder students' pronunciation development. Students may feel embarrassed or anxious about how they sound, which can lead to avoidance of speaking activities (Jenkins, 2000). Lubis (2018) found that learners often withdraw from oral tasks due to fear of ridicule, making it essential for educators to foster supportive environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to investigate the influence of regional dialects on the English pronunciation of EFL students. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide rich, detailed insights into learners' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward their own pronunciation. Rather than relying on numerical data, this method allows for a deeper understanding of the social and linguistic challenges that students face when their native dialects interfere with English speech. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted, qualitative research is most effective when exploring how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences.

Data were collected through a Google Form-based questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. These questions were designed to explore the participants' native dialects, their awareness of pronunciation issues, common phonetic

errors, and personal experiences in academic speaking contexts. This instrument enabled the researcher to gather individual reflections and self-assessments, providing a nuanced perspective on the specific difficulties students encounter due to dialectal influence. These reflections are essential for understanding how dialect-based pronunciation issues manifest in real classroom or communication settings.

2. Instrument

The primary instrument of this research was a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and open-ended items, allowing respondents to both identify specific phonological challenges and elaborate on personal experiences. These questions were designed to explore the participants' native dialects, their awareness of pronunciation issues, common phonetic errors, and personal experiences in academic speaking contexts. This instrument enabled the researcher to gather individual reflections and self-assessments, providing a nuanced perspective on the specific difficulties students encounter due to dialectal influence. These reflections are essential for understanding how dialect-based pronunciation issues manifest in real classroom or communication settings. The instrument was validated through expert judgment and peer review to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the target population of Indonesian EFL students.

3. Participants and Data Collection

The data sources for this research were English Foreign Language students from various regions in Indonesia. Seventeen respondents included from Medan, Pematangsiantar, Rantau Prapat, Asahan, Kota Binjai, Central Java, Bandung, Guntung (Lima Puluh Pesisir), Kuningan (Jawa Barat), and other locations within North Sumatera and Indonesia took part in the study. These students spoke different regional dialects such as Bataknese, Sundanese, and Javanese. The data collection process lasted two weeks, and anonymity was ensured to promote openness and honesty in responses. The data sources that became the reference material for this study were some of random people or EFL students, namely:

Table 1. Data of Respondents

INITIAL OF RESPONDENTS	PLACE OF ORIGIN
HSS	Medan
NRT	Pematangsiantar
LER	Rantau Prapat
IA	Asahan
AFW	Kota Binjai
TMF	Central Java
BGW	Bandung
CW	Asahan
AM	Guntung, Lima puluh Pesisir
MNA	Medan
SF	Medan
SNA	Medan
RSN	Indonesia
NAR	North Sumatera
JL	Medan
IM	Kuningan, Jawa Barat
Dz	Sumatera Utara

The responses were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework, which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Thematic patterns such as error types, emotional impacts, and learning techniques were identified to assess the relationship between L1 influence and pronunciation challenges. These findings were then interpreted in light of related theories and past studies. To ensure data credibility, the researchers employed triangulation by comparing responses with established phonological data and existing literature. Member checking was also used, allowing participants to verify their responses. Additionally, a reflective journal was maintained to minimize researcher bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings indicate that regional dialects significantly affect the English pronunciation of EFL students in Indonesia. Participants commonly mentioned replacing specific English sounds with those found in their native languages. For example, many reported substituting /θ/ with /t/, /ð/ with /d/, and /v/ with /f/. These sound changes reflect the phonological limitations of dialects such as Bataknese and Javanese, which do not include these fricatives. This supports the concept of interlanguage phonology, which states that second language learners construct a new pronunciation system by adapting elements from their first language (Brown, 2000).

Another notable challenge identified was the simplification of consonant clusters, particularly at the end of words. Words like “asked” or “world” were often articulated with inserted vowels (e.g., “as-ke,” “wor-el”), a phenomenon known as epenthesis. This tendency is especially common among speakers of dialects like Javanese and Sundanese that follow a consonant-vowel syllable structure. Underhill (2005) suggests that such native syllable patterns strongly influence second language pronunciation, and without targeted instruction, learners may not realize the divergence from standard pronunciation norms.

Participants also reported struggling with vowel duration and reduction. Many had difficulty differentiating short and long vowel sounds (e.g., “ship” versus “sheep”) or recognizing reduced vowels such as the schwa in unstressed syllables. These difficulties affected their clarity, especially in academic contexts. The learners’ native languages do not always differentiate vowel length, and typically follow a syllable-timed rhythm, unlike English’s stress-timed nature. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) emphasized that while suprasegmental features like stress and rhythm are critical for natural speech, they are frequently neglected in classroom instruction.

A number of respondents expressed an awareness of their pronunciation limitations, particularly those who had engaged with English media or practiced using digital tools like language apps. These students described active strategies such as mimicking native speakers, repeating phrases, and using subtitles to enhance learning. Their actions show strong metacognitive engagement and align with Gilakjani & Ahmadi’s (2011) findings that exposure to real-life English input contributes positively to pronunciation skill development.

Nevertheless, despite this awareness, several participants admitted feeling insecure and afraid of being judged when speaking English publicly. Some recounted experiences of being mocked or corrected by peers and teachers, which led to anxiety and reluctance to speak. This aligns with Jenkins’ (2000) observation that stigma related to pronunciation can hinder students’ willingness to speak, ultimately slowing their language development and fluency.

Students’ attitudes toward their regional accents varied. Some viewed their accent as a barrier to be overcome, while others considered it an essential part of their cultural identity. This reflects the complex interaction between pronunciation and self-perception. Nasution (2022) highlighted that students often find it challenging to choose between sounding intelligible and maintaining their linguistic identity. Therefore, teaching approaches should be mindful of these personal and cultural tensions.

The research also highlighted noticeable differences in pronunciation based on dialect background. For example, Batakese speakers were more likely to add vowels or mispronounce fricatives, while Javanese speakers tended to have flatter intonation and evenly stressed syllables. These differences mirror the distinct sound systems of each dialect and suggest that regional variation plays a substantial role in shaping English

pronunciation. Hence, instructional materials should account for such variability rather than applying a uniform standard.

Another common theme was the lack of structured pronunciation instruction in the classroom. Most participants noted that their teachers seldom emphasized pronunciation and typically addressed it only when specific words were mispronounced. There was little to no feedback on elements like sentence stress or intonation. As Hasibuan (2023) reported, many Indonesian educators lack proper training in phonology and rely heavily on materials that do not prioritize pronunciation, causing many pronunciation errors to become entrenched.

Students from less developed or rural areas appeared to be at a greater disadvantage. They reported limited access to pronunciation resources such as phonetic dictionaries, audio tools, or models of native English. This technological gap was reflected in their weaker pronunciation skills compared to students in more urban settings. Hutagalung (2019) stresses that unequal access to language learning tools continues to widen the gap between regions, and inclusive strategies are needed to address this imbalance.

Motivation and learner initiative emerged as major factors influencing pronunciation improvement. Students who were personally driven either by career aspirations or interest in the language, showed greater effort and creativity in developing their pronunciation. These findings are in line with Derwing and Munro (2005), who emphasize that motivation is a decisive factor in pronunciation success. On the other hand, those who felt pressured or embarrassed due to accent-related ridicule were less inclined to engage in speaking practice.

The evidence suggests a need for rethinking pronunciation pedagogy in Indonesia. Rather than striving for native-like articulation, teachers should focus on helping students achieve clear and comprehensible speech. Methods like shadowing, listening drills, and peer practice should be integrated with sensitivity toward students' linguistic backgrounds. Equally important is building a supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages experimentation and reduces fear of mistakes.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of recognizing both the functional and cultural aspects of pronunciation. While ensuring understandability is vital, regional accents are deeply rooted in personal and social identity. Teachers should help students distinguish between pronunciation traits that hinder comprehension and those that merely reflect natural variation. As argued by Jenkins (2000) and Tanjung (2020), pronunciation instruction must be locally grounded and adaptable to diverse learner backgrounds, particularly in a multilingual country like Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the influence of regional dialects on the English pronunciation of EFL students in Indonesia through a qualitative analysis of student responses. The findings revealed that regional dialects contribute significantly to the mispronunciation of English phonemes, especially sounds not present in the learners' native phonological systems. Substitutions such as /θ/ to /t/, or /v/ to /f/, were prevalent and strongly linked to specific dialects like Batak, Sundanese, and Javanese. These phonological interferences serve as direct evidence of L1 transfer in EFL contexts.

Students' awareness of their pronunciation issues varied, with many acknowledging challenges and some actively trying to correct their speech. However, not all learners saw pronunciation as a priority, particularly when it did not hinder communication. This indicates that intelligibility, rather than native-like pronunciation, is often the primary goal. Moreover, personal attitudes and identity played crucial roles in shaping students' perspectives which some felt empowered by their accent, while others experienced anxiety or embarrassment.

The study also uncovered a significant pedagogical gap in pronunciation instruction. Many students reported limited formal guidance and relied on self-directed learning. This highlights the need for curriculum reform and teacher training to include phonological instruction, especially in regions with limited access to language resources. Without proper intervention, pronunciation problems rooted in dialectal influence are likely to persist and fossilize.

In conclusion, regional dialects significantly impact English pronunciation among Indonesian EFL students. While these dialects may cause systematic deviations, they also serve as important aspects of students' identity. Educational responses must strike a balance, helping learners improve intelligibility without erasing their cultural uniqueness.

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