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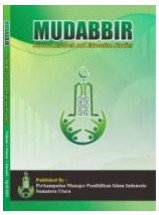

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Exploring EFL Learners' Perceptions of Phonological Awareness in Improving English Pronunciation: A Psycholinguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding the role of phonological awareness in improving English pronunciation from a psycholinguistic perspective. The study uses a descriptive qualitative approach involving twelve university level EFL students in Indonesia. Data were collected through semi structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.The results of the study show that most learners view phonological awareness as an important foundation for understanding and producing English sounds more accurately. Awareness of the differences between spelling and pronunciation, sound structure, and suprasegmental aspects helps learners identify previously unnoticed pronunciation errors. However, this study also found that learners still face phonological challenges, especially in distinguishing long and short vowels, pronouncing sounds that do not exist in their native language, and applying word stress and intonation consistently. In addition, increased phonological awareness encourages learners to develop more reflective and metacognitive learning strategies, such as minimal pairs exercises, imitation of native speakers, and recording their own voices. Overall, this study confirms that phonological awareness plays an important role in the development of English pronunciation in EFL learners. The findings of this study have pedagogical implications for pronunciation teaching by emphasizing the importance of explicitly integrating phonological awareness in English language learning.

Keywords: EFL Learners, English Pronunciation, Phonological Awareness, Psycholinguistics, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation has long been recognized as a central component of English language proficiency, forming the basis for oral communication and intelligibility in EFL

contexts. Despite its importance, pronunciation remains one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners to master due to the complexity of English phonology, limited exposure to native input, and interference from learners' first language (L1). Many learners struggle with both segmental features such as individual consonants and vowels and suprasegmental features, including stress, rhythm, and intonation. These challenges often result in reduced intelligibility, communication breakdowns, and decreased confidence in speaking English.

One key factor that has been increasingly emphasized in pronunciation research is phonological awareness, defined as the conscious ability to recognize, analyze, and manipulate the sound structures of language. Within second language (L2) learning, phonological awareness has been found to facilitate learners' ability to perceive phonemic contrasts, decode phoneme grapheme relationships, and internalize prosodic patterns. Recent studies highlight that learners who possess higher phonological awareness tend to demonstrate stronger pronunciation accuracy (Wildhani et al., 2025). For example, syllable awareness has been shown to help learners avoid common phonological errors, especially when dealing with consonant clusters or unfamiliar sound combinations.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, phonological awareness plays a crucial role in how learners perceive, process, and produce speech sounds. Psycholinguistics explains that pronunciation involves complex cognitive processes, including auditory discrimination, phoneme categorization, mental representation of sound patterns, and articulatory planning. Learners need to accurately perceive distinctions such as vowel length, voicing, aspiration, and stress placement before they can produce them correctly. Sihombing et al. (2025) argue that many pronunciation errors among EFL learners occur due to weak phonological awareness, particularly in distinguishing long versus short vowels and in producing diphthongs, which are often absent in learners' L1 systems.

Several recent empirical studies also underline the pedagogical value of phonological awareness in improving learners' pronunciation competence. Wardana et al. (2025), for example, found that instruction explicitly targeting phonological awareness improved not only learners' articulation of segmental sounds but also their suprasegmental control, including stress and intonation. Likewise, Sheir and Awad

(2022) demonstrated that phonological awareness instruction significantly strengthened the pronunciation competence of EFL teachers, suggesting its effectiveness across different proficiency levels. These findings collectively indicate that phonological awareness is not merely a supportive element but a foundational cognitive skill necessary for effective pronunciation learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Phonological awareness has been widely recognized as a crucial predictor of learners' ability to perceive, process, and produce the sound system of a second or foreign language. Originally grounded in first language literacy research, phonological awareness refers to the metalinguistic capacity to identify and manipulate the sound structures of language, such as phonemes, syllables, onset–rime units, and prosodic features. In the context of second language acquisition (SLA), phonological awareness enables learners to understand the phonemic contrasts between languages and facilitates more accurate pronunciation.

Recent studies show consistent relationships between phonological awareness and English pronunciation accuracy. Wildhani et al. (2025) demonstrated that syllable awareness is strongly correlated with students' ability to produce English words containing consonant clusters a common source of difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners. They found that learners with stronger phonological awareness were able to segment sound patterns more effectively, leading to clearer articulation and fewer phonological errors. Their study confirms the importance of syllable-level sensitivity, especially when learners' L1 does not contain complex syllable structures.

Additionally, phonological awareness encompasses learners' capacity to decode phoneme–grapheme correspondences, which is relevant for English due to its opaque spelling system. Learners who can mentally map letters to sounds such as distinguishing /iː/ and /ɪ/—tend to demonstrate better pronunciation accuracy and more stable phonological representations.

Pronunciation learning has deep psycholinguistic roots, particularly in the areas of phonetic perception, auditory discrimination, phonological encoding, and articulatory planning. From a psycholinguistic perspective, second language pronunciation depends on learners' ability to form accurate mental representations (phonological categories) of

new sounds. These representations are shaped by input quality, attention to phonetic detail, and the learner's existing L1 phonological system.

Sihombing et al. (2025) argue that L2 learners often struggle with vowels, diphthongs, and word stress patterns because they lack strong perceptual awareness of these features. Their findings highlight that incorrect vowel length and diphthong production stem from weak phonological sensitivity rather than from articulatory inability alone. This supports the psycholinguistic view that accurate L2 speech production must begin with accurate perceptual encoding.

Moreover, phonological awareness training can refine learners' perceptual boundaries, helping them recognize distinctions between phonemes that do not exist in the L1. For example, Indonesian learners often confuse /θ/ and /t/ or /ð/ and /d/, as these fricative sounds are absent in Indonesian. Phonological awareness helps them reconstruct new phonemic categories and adjust articulatory habits accordingly.

A growing number of studies emphasize the importance of explicit instruction in phonological awareness. Wardana et al. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study revealing that learners who received direct instruction in phoneme identification, word stress, and intonation patterns experienced significant improvement in pronunciation accuracy. Beyond linguistic proficiency, their study also found increased motivation and confidence, suggesting that phonological awareness training supports both linguistic and affective domains of learning.

Similarly, Sheir & Awad (2022) demonstrated that EFL teachers who underwent training in phonological awareness exhibited notable improvements in their pronunciation competence. This indicates that phonological awareness is beneficial not only for learners but also for educators reinforcing its universal relevance in EFL settings. Their findings highlight that pronunciation competence is strongly linked to teachers' own awareness of phonological rules, which shapes their ability to model accurate English sounds.

Together, these studies emphasize the pedagogical need to integrate phonological awareness activities such as minimal pairs, phonetic transcription practice, and stress intonation drills into pronunciation teaching. Such approaches allow learners to develop explicit knowledge of sound patterns, leading to more accurate and intelligible speech.

Phonological errors among EFL learners are often rooted in the transfer of L1 phonological rules. Indonesian learners, for instance, frequently apply Indonesian sound patterns to English, leading to assimilation, deletion, epenthesis, or substitution errors. Utami & Putra (2025), in their study of Balinese EFL students, identified recurrent patterns such as consonant assimilation, insertion of vowel sounds in consonant clusters, and deletion of final consonants. These processes are typical of learners whose L1 does not permit complex coda structures.

These findings align with broader phonological transfer theory, which argues that learners map new language sounds onto the existing categories of their L1 until they develop more refined L2 phonological representations. This highlights the necessity of developing phonological awareness so learners can consciously differentiate English phonological rules from their L1.

Phonological errors are also closely linked to suprasegmental challenges. Stress placement, rhythm, and intonation patterns in English differ significantly from those in Indonesian. Research consistently shows that incorrect stress placement reduces intelligibility more severely than segmental errors. Studies like Wardana et al. (2025) and Sihombing et al. (2025) emphasize that learners with stronger awareness of suprasegmental features develop more natural and intelligible pronunciation.

Although many studies have examined the relationship between phonological awareness and pronunciation performance, most rely on quantitative or experimental designs. These studies are valuable but lack insights into learners' subjective experiences, internal difficulties, cognitive processing strategies, and personal beliefs. For example:

- Wildhani et al. (2025) measured syllable awareness quantitatively but did not explore how learners perceive its usefulness.
- Wardana et al. (2025) focused on instructional effects rather than learner cognition.
- Sihombing et al. (2025) examined accuracy but not perceptions.
- Utami & Putra (2025) analyzed phonological errors but not learners' awareness.

There is a clear need for qualitative research that captures learners' perceptions and metacognitive reflections on phonological awareness. Such insights are essential to fully

understand how learners interpret, internalize, and apply phonological knowledge in real pronunciation learning.

Thus, this study fills an important gap by examining EFL learners' perceptions of the role of phonological awareness in improving English pronunciation, interpreted through a psycholinguistic framework.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore EFL learners' perceptions of the role of phonological awareness in improving English pronunciation from a psycholinguistic perspective. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand learners' subjective experiences and cognitive awareness in the process of learning pronunciation.

The research participants consisted of 12 university level EFL students in Indonesia who were selected using purposive sampling techniques. All participants had taken courses related to pronunciation or phonology and had experience using phonological awareness strategies in pronunciation learning.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews that focused on participants' understanding of phonological awareness, pronunciation difficulties experienced, and strategies used to improve sound accuracy. Interviews were conducted individually, recorded with participants' permission, and then transcribed verbatim (Assingkily, 2021).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006), which included the processes of coding, grouping themes, and interpreting the main patterns in the data. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation and member checking. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles, including participant consent and data confidentiality.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This section presents research findings based on an in depth interview analysis of twelve EFL learners. The data were analyzed thematically and presented in the form of analytical narratives supported by direct quotations from participants as empirical evidence. The analysis resulted in three main themes that represent learners' perceptions and experiences related to phonological awareness in improving English pronunciation.

Most participants (9 out of 12) stated that phonological awareness helped them understand that English pronunciation cannot rely solely on spelling. Participants reported a change in their way of thinking about sound production after learning phonological aspects such as phonemes, syllables, and phonetic symbols.

One participant said:

"*Previously, I pronounced words according to their spelling, but after learning phonetics, I realized that many sounds are different from their spelling.*"

Another participant said that understanding phonetic symbols helped them recognize pronunciation errors that they had not previously been aware of:

"*I just realized that I had been mispronouncing several words that I use often.*"

This data shows that phonological awareness functions as a cognitive foundation that enables learners to construct more accurate mental representations of English sounds, in line with the psycholinguistic perspective on language processing.

Despite having phonological awareness, all participants reported still experiencing difficulties in certain aspects of English pronunciation. The most dominant difficulties were related to differences in vowel sounds, consonants that do not exist in their native language, and word stress.

Eight participants mentioned difficulty distinguishing between short and long vowels, such as /ɪ/ and /iː/. One participant stated:

"I often get confused between the sounds 'ship' and 'sheep', especially when native speakers talk fast."

In addition, 7 participants admitted to having difficulty pronouncing fricative sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/ because they do not exist in the Indonesian phonological system:

"*I know the sounds are different, but my tongue automatically pronounces them like 't' or 'd'.*"

At the suprasegmental level, more than half of the participants expressed uncertainty in the use of word stress and intonation. This caused their speech to sound less natural even though it was grammatically correct.

These findings indicate that phonological awareness is not always accompanied by accurate sound production, especially when the influence of the first language is still strong.

The data shows that participants not only recognized their pronunciation errors, but also developed strategies to overcome them. A total of 10 participants reported using listening and imitation exercises as their main strategy, especially through videos or audio recordings of native speakers.

One participant explained:

"I often imitate the way native speakers talk and pay attention to their word stress."

In addition, 6 participants mentioned the use of minimal pairs to train their sensitivity to sound differences:

"*Minimal pair exercises help me distinguish between sounds that previously sounded the same.*"

Several participants also stated that recording their own voices and comparing them with model pronunciations increased their metacognitive awareness:

"*By recording my own voice, I became aware of which parts were wrong.*"

These data show that phonological awareness not only plays a role in passive awareness but also encourages learners to apply active and reflective strategies in pronunciation learning.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that phonological awareness is perceived as an important factor in improving English pronunciation. Phonological

awareness helps learners understand the English sound system, identify sources of error, and develop more focused and cognitively aware learning strategies.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the research findings by relating them to psycholinguistic perspectives and previous research on phonological awareness and English pronunciation in EFL learners. The discussion focuses on how phonological awareness affects learners' cognitive processes in understanding and producing English sounds, as well as the challenges that still exist in pronunciation practice.

Research findings show that most EFL learners view phonological awareness as an important foundation for improving English pronunciation. From a psycholinguistic perspective, these findings are consistent with the view that awareness of the sound structure of language helps learners build more stable phonological representations in long-term memory. This awareness allows learners to process the sounds of language more systematically, rather than simply imitating them mechanically.

The awareness that spelling does not always reflect pronunciation indicates a shift from orthography based processing to phonological processing. This supports the theory that effective pronunciation learning requires an explicit understanding of the sound system of the target language. In other words, phonological awareness serves as a bridge between auditory input and more accurate speech production.

This finding is consistent with previous research stating that learners with higher levels of phonological awareness tend to have clearer and more intelligible pronunciation. In the context of EFL, this awareness is particularly important due to limited exposure to native speakers.

Although phonological awareness is perceived as an important aspect, research results show that learners still face significant difficulties in perceiving and producing English sounds. Difficulties in distinguishing long and short vowels and pronouncing

consonants that do not exist in the mother tongue demonstrate the strong influence of the phonological system of the first language.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, this phenomenon can be explained through the concept of phonological transfer, in which learners tend to map the sounds of the target language onto existing phonological categories of their first language. As a result, even though learners are consciously aware of certain sound differences, their speech production is still influenced by the articulatory habits of their native language.

In addition, difficulties in suprasegmental aspects such as word stress and intonation indicate that pronunciation learning involves not only individual sound units but also more complex prosodic patterns. These findings support previous research stating that suprasegmental aspects are often overlooked in EFL teaching, even though they greatly affect speech intelligibility.

The findings also reveal that increased phonological awareness encourages learners to develop more reflective and conscious learning strategies. The use of minimal pairs exercises, imitation of native speakers, and recording one's own voice shows the development of metacognitive awareness in pronunciation learning.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, these strategies indicate that learners do not only process sounds passively, but also actively monitor and evaluate their speech production. This process reflects the involvement of high level cognitive control that enables learners to identify gaps between their pronunciation and the target language model.

These findings reinforce the argument that phonological awareness not only plays a role in the early stages of language learning but also contributes to the development of learner autonomy. With increased awareness of phonological errors, learners become more confident and strategic in improving their pronunciation independently.

Overall, this discussion shows that phonological awareness plays a central role in improving English pronunciation, but its effectiveness greatly depends on how it is integrated into learning practices. Phonological awareness needs to be supported by

repeated practice, exposure to authentic input, and adequate feedback in order to produce significant changes in speech production.

These findings indicate that pronunciation teaching in an EFL context should not only emphasize imitation, but also provide explicit understanding of the English sound system. Thus, learners can develop more accurate, conscious, and sustainable pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding the role of phonological awareness in improving English pronunciation from a psycholinguistic perspective. Based on the results of the interview data analysis, it can be concluded that phonological awareness is perceived as a fundamental component in the development of English pronunciation.

The findings show that awareness of English sound structures, differences between spelling and pronunciation, and suprasegmental aspects help learners understand and produce sounds more accurately. Phonological awareness also plays a role in improving learners' metacognitive awareness, which is reflected in their ability to identify pronunciation errors and apply more reflective learning strategies, such as minimal pairs exercises, imitation of native speakers, and self-evaluation through voice recording.

However, this study also reveals that EFL learners still face significant phonological challenges, mainly due to the influence of their first language on their perception and production of English sounds. Difficulties in pronouncing certain sounds and applying consistent word stress and intonation indicate that improving phonological awareness needs to be supported by continuous practice and adequate exposure to language input.

Overall, this study confirms that the explicit integration of phonological awareness in pronunciation learning has great potential to improve the pronunciation quality of EFL learners. Therefore, pronunciation teaching should not only emphasize imitation, but also cognitive understanding of the English sound system. Future research could examine the relationship between phonological awareness levels and pronunciation

accuracy quantitatively or explore the effectiveness of phonological awareness-based learning interventions in a broader EFL context.

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