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Understanding Syllables to Improve English Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Syllables play a key role in shaping pronunciation and fluency for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Insufficient awareness of syllables can hinder learners' ability to produce intelligible speech and affect their communication in academic and daily contexts. This study investigates how five fourth-semester students from the English Education Department at UIN Sumatera Utara identify English syllables through a phonological awareness task. Using a mixed-method approach involving descriptive analysis and interviews, the findings show that although students conceptually understand syllables, their accuracy in practical identification varies—especially with phonetically reduced or irregular words like "vegetable" and "chocolate." Participants used strategies such as clapping, oral segmentation, and visual guessing, but often relied too heavily on spelling. These results underscore the need for explicit, practical syllable-based instruction to help students develop greater fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and speaking confidence.

Keywords: *Syllables, Phonology, Pronunciation, EFL, Language Awareness*

INTRODUCTION

In the study of English phonology, one of the foundational components that significantly affects pronunciation and oral fluency is the understanding of syllables. A syllable is not merely a sound unit but an organizational framework that influences stress, rhythm, and speech clarity. According to Carr (2019), syllables help structure spoken language and determine how words are broken into sound units during both production and perception. This is particularly essential in a stress-timed language like English, where inappropriate syllable segmentation can lead to confusion or miscommunication.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often encounter difficulties in producing accurate pronunciation due to the contrast between English phonological patterns and those of their first language. As Crystal (2003) highlights, learners whose L1 (first language) follows different syllable structures tend to impose those patterns on English, resulting in incorrect stress placement or rhythm. Such interference can hinder intelligibility and reduce confidence in speaking.

Syllables also serve as the basis for prosodic features such as intonation and pitch, which play a central role in conveying meaning in spoken interaction. Fromkin et al. (2007) emphasize that phonological awareness—particularly syllable identification—is a prerequisite for successful listening comprehension and oral fluency. Misunderstandings often stem from a lack of awareness of how words are divided or stressed in natural English usage.

Previous studies, including those by Hasibuan et al. (2023) and Pasaribu et al. (2024), found that Indonesian learners often misidentify syllables based on spelling rather than sound, leading to errors in both reading aloud and spontaneous speech. Similarly, Sabila et al. (2023) argue that many students struggle with complex syllable structures like CCVCC or CCCVC because these are rare in their native language phonotactics.

Despite its importance, syllable awareness is rarely emphasized in the EFL classroom. The focus is often placed on grammar and vocabulary, leaving phonology underexplored. When pronunciation is addressed, it usually revolves around segmental sounds rather than suprasegmental features such as stress and rhythm. As a result, students may recognize syllables in theory but fail to apply them effectively in communication.

This study seeks to explore how well students in the English Education Department understand and identify syllables. It aims to evaluate their methods for identifying syllables, their perceived challenges, and their accuracy in analyzing syllabic structures in common English words. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this research provides insights into learner performance and contributes to the growing body of knowledge on phonological instruction in EFL contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach supported by basic quantitative analysis. The rationale behind this methodology lies in its ability to provide both measurable outcomes and nuanced interpretations of learners' responses in analyzing English syllables. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how students process, interpret, and apply phonological knowledge in identifying syllables across various word types.

The participants were five students from the fourth semester of the English Education Department at UIN Sumatera Utara. They were purposively selected based on their enrollment in a phonology course and their willingness to participate in the study. These participants represent learners with foundational knowledge of English phonetics and phonology, making them suitable for the purposes of this mini research.

The data collection instrument was a structured online questionnaire, developed using Google Forms. It comprised two sections: (1) a word-based syllable identification task involving 15 commonly used English words of varying phonological complexity, and (2) a series of open-ended reflection questions designed to elicit students' reasoning, strategies, and perceived challenges when identifying syllables. The words selected for analysis included both regular and irregular forms, such as "banana," "chocolate," "beautiful," and "breakfast," aiming to capture a range of difficulty levels.

Quantitative data were gathered by scoring each participant's responses based on syllable count accuracy. These scores were then used to determine the percentage of correct responses per word and per student, allowing the researcher to identify patterns of success and confusion.

For the qualitative component, students' open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. The researcher looked for recurring themes related to syllable identification strategies, such as the use of auditory pronunciation, vowel counting, syllable clapping, and reference to spelling. Particular attention was paid to discrepancies between correct answers and the strategies used, as these highlight gaps in learners' phonological awareness or misapplication of rules.

This dual-layered analysis—quantitative and qualitative—enabled a comprehensive view of students' phonological reasoning. Moreover, it offered insights not just into what students got right or wrong, but into why those errors occurred and how students perceive syllables as units of speech. Overall, the method aligned with the exploratory nature of this study and the limited but focused sample size.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of interviews and syllable identification tasks conducted with five 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 identify or pronounce English sounds that do not exist in their native language, Bahasa Indonesia. A particularly common issue was the misidentification of syllable count in words with reduced vowels, such as "chocolate," "vegetable," and "camera."

These inaccuracies stem largely from the reliance on spelling rather than phonological awareness. For example, some students assumed that each vowel in a word represented a syllable, which led to over-segmentation. This orthographic bias indicates a lack of formal instruction in phonological rules, echoing what Gihar et al. (2024) noted in their research on syllable confusion among EFL learners. Similar to findings from Pasaribu et al. (2024), this study revealed that students often fail to differentiate between orthographic and phonological syllables, especially in words that contain schwa or elision.

Further complicating the issue was the absence of schwa awareness. Students struggled with syllables that are phonetically reduced or entirely silent in spoken English but visible in spelling. For instance, the second syllable in "chocolate" is reduced in natural pronunciation, yet many participants marked it as a full syllable. This finding reinforces Carr's (2019) argument that learners without auditory training often misinterpret syllabic boundaries. Similarly, words like "family" and "camera" tend to be articulated as two-syllable words in fluent speech, which contradicts the spelling-based segmentation learners tend to rely upon.

In addition to these segmental issues, suprasegmental aspects such as stress and rhythm also posed a problem. Several students were unsure where to place stress in multisyllabic words, especially those with variable stress like "record" (noun vs. verb). Their speech tended to be flat or robotic, lacking the natural intonation patterns that native speakers employ. This aligns with Crystal's (2003) assertion that intonation and stress are often neglected in formal language instruction in EFL contexts. Without sufficient exposure to native-like stress patterns, students risk developing an unnatural speech rhythm, further complicating their listening comprehension and intelligibility.

The strategies applied by students in identifying syllables were diverse and revealed the extent to which phonological intuition plays a role in the absence of formal training. Some students used clapping or oral segmentation, while others relied heavily on visual cues. Clapping strategies worked well for basic and polysyllabic words like "banana" or "elephant," where syllables are clearly segmented. However, this approach was less successful for phonologically reduced or elided words such as "vegetable" and "chocolate." Oral strategies that involved pronouncing the word aloud were slightly

more accurate but inconsistently applied across respondents. Visual strategies, which included counting vowel letters or syllabic-looking segments in spelling, were the least effective and led to repeated errors. As Fromkin et al. (2007) highlighted, syllable awareness must be developed through multimodal, experiential learning to avoid these pitfalls.

Analyzing responses individually, Student A showed a high level of phonological awareness and consistency, particularly with regular syllable patterns and reduced forms. This student often employed oral segmentation and reported mimicking native speech as a practice strategy. Student B made frequent errors, most notably oversegmenting words due to reliance on written forms. Student C applied mixed strategies but lacked stability across word types. Student D displayed partial understanding but frequently misjudged vowel clusters. Student E exhibited the most difficulties, mostly relying on intuition and guessing syllable counts without consistent methodology.

The thematic analysis of student reflections further reinforces the link between phonological awareness and speaking confidence. Many participants reported uncertainty when pronouncing longer or unfamiliar words. They expressed that syllable confusion often led to mispronunciation, which diminished their confidence in oral communication. This aligns with findings from Yasmin et al. (2024), who emphasized the psychological dimension of phonology learning—students not only need instruction but also positive reinforcement to overcome pronunciation anxiety.

Furthermore, the gap between classroom instruction and real-world speech was evident in students' comments. Several students stated that while they could identify syllables in slow or formal speech, they struggled when listening to native speakers, particularly in informal contexts where reductions and connected speech are prominent. Words like "going to" becoming "gonna" or "want to" pronounced as "wanna" were not easily recognized, contributing to confusion in listening tasks and conversation.

The implications are clear: phonology instruction must be embedded into the core EFL curriculum and treated not as a theoretical topic but as a practical skill. Students require explicit, repeated exposure to syllabic structures, stress placement, and vowel reduction. Using techniques such as minimal pair exercises, speech shadowing with native recordings, and visual phonetic charts can help bridge the gap between the written and spoken forms of English. As Sabila et al. (2023) and Fatmawati et al. (2023) suggest, phonology should be contextualized within speaking and listening tasks to promote deeper awareness and retention.

In conclusion, this study confirms that English phonology presents multifaceted challenges to Indonesian EFL learners—from syllable segmentation and vowel reduction to suprasegmental features and psychological barriers. However, with targeted instruction and practical syllable awareness training, learners can overcome these challenges. Integrating phonological training into classroom routines, supported by

feedback and practice, will ultimately lead to improved fluency, intelligibility, and learner confidence.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how EFL learners in Indonesia—specifically five students from the fourth semester of the English Education Department at UIN Sumatera Utara—recognize, interpret, and identify English syllables in both regular and reduced word forms. The findings reveal that while students are aware of the concept of syllables and use varied strategies to count them, there remains a significant gap between their theoretical understanding and phonological accuracy. Overreliance on orthographic clues, insufficient awareness of vowel reduction (e.g., schwa), and limited exposure to native-like pronunciation were the main contributors to syllable misidentification.

The study also emphasizes the crucial role of explicit phonology instruction in improving students' pronunciation skills. Without targeted training on suprasegmental features and reduced forms, learners continue to struggle with natural speech patterns. Their self-reported anxiety, reliance on self-developed strategies, and challenges in real-world listening contexts demonstrate a broader instructional deficiency within current EFL pedagogy.

It is therefore recommended that syllable instruction be more deeply integrated into phonology and speaking classes, not merely as a theoretical subject but as a practical skill-building component. Educators should incorporate auditory models, minimal pair activities, and rhythm-based exercises to foster learners' awareness of spoken English patterns. With consistent exposure and practice, students are likely to experience improved fluency, intelligibility, and confidence.

Future research with a larger participant pool and more diverse linguistic backgrounds could offer broader insights. Nonetheless, the current study provides a valuable foundation for understanding the relationship between syllable awareness and oral proficiency in an EFL context.

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