

# Factors Affecting Indonesian Students in Learning English Pronunciation

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## Abstract

Oral fluency is very important in communication. It involves different skills like grammar and vocabulary. Pronunciation, however, is very significant for successful communication. Many learners of the English language have major problems with English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. Certain factors affect the learners' pronunciation learning and the present study aims to identify the factors that affect Indonesian students in learning pronunciation of English as a foreign language. Participants were 45 first-semester students who enrolled in a Pronunciation class in a private university in West Java, Indonesia. A mixed method was used to gather data. The researcher used a quantitative method by using a questionnaire to identify the factors and a qualitative method by using observation, records, and note-taking to identify the problems students have in learning pronunciation. Data were collected, categorized, and analyzed. From this study, it is identified that the factors influencing the students' pronunciation accuracy were native language interference, phonological awareness, pronunciation instruction, corrective feedback, and the most important of all was the response students gave to achieve their goal. The researcher also suggests some strategies to help students overcome the problems concerning those factors. It is hoped that by knowing the factors affecting students in learning English pronunciation, the teachers can help students to have English pronunciation accuracy.

**Keywords:** pronunciation accuracy, native language interference, phonological awareness, pronunciation instruction, corrective feedback

## 1. Introduction

Pronunciation plays an important role in communication. Good pronunciation will create an atmosphere where there is no misunderstanding. The speaker is easily understood and the listener is willing to listen. Poor pronunciation, on the contrary, will create an unpleasant situation where the listener is confused, which leads to misunderstanding, even if the speaker uses sophisticated grammar and vocabulary (Shankar 2008). As an important part of communicative competence, pronunciation plays a significant role in successful communication (Gilkjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Learners of English as a foreign language have an ideal goal of wanting to speak English as accurately and fluently as a native speaker of English. However, some learners of English face a lot of problems with pronunciation due to a great variety of affecting factors. They are more than just the segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation. Many kinds of research have been conducted to look into those factors. They are among others native language, corrective feedback, attitude, motivation, age, exposure, pronunciation instruction, and learners' social identity.

This research tried to identify the factors that affect the first semester students of a private university in West Java, Indonesia, in learning the pronunciation of English as a foreign language. They attended a Pronunciation class for one semester.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the factors that influence Indonesian students in learning English pronunciation?
2. What kinds of problems do the students face in learning English pronunciation?
3. What strategies can teachers carry out to help students overcome the problems in learning English pronunciation due to those factors?

The objectives of the present study are to identify the factors affecting Indonesian students in learning pronunciation

of English as a foreign language and the kinds of problems faced by the students and to find out strategies that can help students overcome their problems in learning English pronunciation. It is hoped that this study can contribute to the success of the teaching and learning process in Pronunciation class in particular and other subjects in general so that students can speak with accurate pronunciation.

## 2. Literature Review

Various factors affect pronunciation learning, especially the pronunciation of English as a foreign or second language. First of all, the native language of the learners plays an important role in learning English pronunciation. Hodgetts (2020) stated that “Possible difficulties . . . could arise when a speaker of a syllable-time language attempts to learn a stress-time language” (p. 52). English is a stress-time language whereas the Indonesian language dealt with in this research is a syllable-time language.

Another factor is the amount of exposure to English that the learners experience. Gordon & Darcy (2016) commented that “an increased amount of exposure to an L2 or more L2 use positively influences the accuracy with which the sounds of the L2 are perceived and produced” (p. 58). It means that a learner who makes use of opportunities to frequently listen to and use English will surely be able to develop his English pronunciation skill. The next factor is phonological awareness which indicates the degree of sensitivity of a learner to the structure of the sounds (Antony & Francis, 2005). It indicates the ability of the learner to identify English consonants and vowels including diphthongs and triphthongs in terms of knowing how to articulate them precisely (Hişmanoğlu, 2011). By knowing in detail how to pronounce the English sounds, a learner can produce the sounds accurately. The fourth factor is motivation and concern for good pronunciation. If a learner has a strong concern for pronunciation, he has strong motivation to do well in pronunciation. On the contrary, “without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough to ensure student achievement” (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998, p. 203).

Besides the above-mentioned factors, pronunciation instruction, and corrective feedback from the teacher have been proved to be other factors that affect language pronunciation. Thomson & Derwing (2015) stated that pronunciation instruction could significantly improve learners’ pronunciation whereas Gordon & Darcy (2016) in their research concluded that pronunciation instruction played a significant role in improving intelligibility and comprehensibility. As for corrective feedback, Nushi, Jafari, and Golesorkhi (2019) underlined the fact that corrective feedback from the teachers could improve learners’ pronunciation. It is effective to help learners identify their difficulties and learn to correct them by themselves (Darcy, 2018). These two factors – pronunciation instruction and corrective feedback – should be provided together at the same time for better results (Kissling, 2013).

Numerous researches have been conducted concerning factors affecting learners’ pronunciation learning. Zhang (2009) researched the affecting factors of native-like pronunciation. He categorized them into internal factors which relate to biological factors and individual differences, and external factors which include learners’ learning environment and relates to learners’ native language, exposure, and educational factors.

Gilakjani, Leong, and Sabouri (2012) focused on the role of motivation in foreign language learning and teaching. The result was that “motivation is a crucial factor in learning a foreign language, which is influenced by different variables: personality variables, the attitudes of learners, their learning styles” (p. 15).

Kosasih (2017) in her research proved that the problems faced by the students were most affected by their native language (Indonesian language). Differences in terms of segmental and suprasegmental features between Indonesian and English languages affect the students in learning English pronunciation.

Gilakjani, Namaziandost, and Ziafar (2020) in their research found out that “motivation, pronunciation instruction, learners’ social identity, error correction, native language, exposure, and attitude were some factors that had considerable effects on learners’ pronunciation learning” (p. 117). They dealt with Iranian EFL learners as their research object.

The last-mentioned research inspired the researcher to conduct the present research. As different countries have their kind of characteristics in learning L2, this research will focus on Indonesian learners. What is also different is that this research will also point out some strategies for teachers to help students overcome their difficulties. It is hoped that the students can speak English with accurate or at least intelligible pronunciation to avoid misunderstanding in communication.

## 3. Methodology

In this research, a mixed method was used to gather data. According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods research is

“an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms of research” (p. 230). A quantitative method was applied by using a questionnaire as the instrument to identify the factors affecting the students’ pronunciation learning. The questionnaire was in the form of a Google Form for the students to fill in. A qualitative method was applied by using observation, records, and note-taking during the course to know more about the effects of those factors. The questionnaire was adopted from Gilakjani, Namaziandost, and Ziafar (2020) with some modifications to suit the target of the study.

Participants were 45 first-semester students who enrolled in a Pronunciation class in a private university in West Java, Indonesia. They were chosen because they were involved in the process of teaching and learning pronunciation so that the problems they faced could be identified. In the course of their learning, the students were given handouts, model recordings for practicing, oral and written quizzes, written exercises, and oral drills.

Quantitative data were arranged, tabulated, and analyzed by using frequency and percentage. Data gained qualitatively were classified according to the factors and problems faced. Both kinds of data were then related one to the other.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

##### 4.1 Result

The result of the questionnaire is shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Result of the questionnaire

No	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Learning pronunciation is very important	19 (42%)	26 (58%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
2	I want to make my accent similar to native speakers of English	15 (33%)	27 (60%)	3 (7%)	0 (0%)
3	I do not have enough motivation in learning pronunciation	0 (0%)	9 (20%)	28 (63%)	8 (17%)
4	Indonesian sound system is different from the English sound system	13 (29%)	30 (67%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
5	The different sound systems make me difficult to pronounce English sounds	7 (16%)	24 (53%)	14 (31%)	0 (0%)
6	I can identify English sounds and imitate them well	2 (4%)	29 (65%)	13 (29%)	1 (2%)
7	I can identify English phonetic symbols and pronounce them well	5 (11%)	29 (65%)	10 (22%)	1 (2%)
8	Pronunciation drills help me to differentiate English sounds	21 (47%)	22 (49%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)
9	I always do oral and written exercises given by the lecturers	16 (35%)	25 (56%)	4 (9%)	0 (0%)
10	Oral and written exercises help me improve my pronunciation	19 (42%)	26 (58%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11	Knowing the rules in pronunciation can help to improve my pronunciation	16 (36%)	27 (60%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)
12	I don’t care much about the rules in pronunciation so I can’t improve my pronunciation	1 (2%)	10 (22%)	30 (67%)	4 (9%)
13	Oral and written feedback from the lecturer help me improve my pronunciation	24 (53%)	21 (47%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As shown in Table 1, some facts can be classified into factors that affect English pronunciation learning. From data 1, it can be seen that 42% of students strongly agreed and 58% of students agreed to the statement “Learning pronunciation is very important.” Data 2 shows that 33% of students strongly agreed, 60% of students agreed, and only 3% of students disagreed with the statement “I want to make my accent similar to native speakers of English.” According to the findings, all students agreed that learning pronunciation was important for them and most of them wanted to make their accent similar to native speakers of English. From these findings, it can be said that they had in their mind a goal in learning pronunciation.

Data 3 gives an illustration that 20% of students agreed, 63% of students disagreed, 17% of students strongly disagreed with the statement “I do not have enough motivation in learning pronunciation.” This means that there were 9 out of 45 students who lacked motivation, which was the potential to give a negative impact on their pronunciation learning.

Data 4 indicates that 29% of students strongly agreed, 67% of students agreed, 2% students disagreed, and 2% mostly disagreed with the statement “Indonesian sound system is different from English sound system.” Data 5 shows that 16% of students strongly agreed, 53% of students agreed, and 31% disagreed with the statement “The different sound systems make me difficult to pronounce English sounds.” From those findings, it can be said that most learners knew that English and Indonesian have different sound systems, which caused more than two-thirds of students (69%) to face difficulties in learning pronunciation. So, native language interference is a factor that mostly affected the students’ pronunciation learning.

Data 6 shows that 4% of students strongly agreed, 65% of students agreed, 29% of students disagreed, and 2% of students strongly disagreed with the statement “I can identify English sounds and imitate them well.” This means that one-third of the students were not able to identify English sounds (when listening to them) and to imitate them well. Data 7 shows that 11% of students strongly agreed, 65% of students agreed, 22% of students disagreed, 2% of students strongly disagreed with the statement “I can identify English phonetic symbols and pronounce them well.” This means that one-third of the students were not able to identify English phonetic transcription and articulate them well. In this case, they lacked phonological awareness.

Data 8 indicates that 47% of students strongly agreed, 49% of students agreed, and 4% of students disagreed with the statement “Pronunciation drills help me to differentiate English sounds.” The majority of the students felt the use of pronunciation practices the teacher gave them. The more they were exposed to the sounds, the easier they could articulate them accurately.

Data 9 shows that 35% of students strongly agreed, 56% of students agreed, and 9% of students showed their disagreement with the statement “I always do oral and written exercises given by the lecturers.” Data 10 shows that 42% of students strongly agreed and 58% of students agreed to the statement “Oral and written exercises help me improve my pronunciation.” It can be said that most students were aware of the fact that oral and written exercises helped them in improving their pronunciation. Exposure to the L2 affected their ability in pronunciation learning.

Data 11 indicates that 36% of students strongly agreed, 60% of students agreed, and 4% of students disagreed with the statement “Knowing the rules in pronunciation can help to improve my pronunciation.” Data 12 shows that 2% of students strongly agreed, 22% of students agreed, 67% of students disagreed, and 9% of students strongly disagreed with the statement “I don’t care much about the rules in pronunciation so I can’t improve my pronunciation.” The findings show that although the majority of students believed that knowing pronunciation instruction helped them to improve their pronunciation, one-third of students did not put much attention to pronunciation instruction, which affected their achievement.

Data 13 shows that 53% of students strongly agreed and 47% of students agreed to the statement “Oral and written feedback from the lecturer help me improve my pronunciation.” They all agreed that corrective feedback could improve their pronunciation.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The researcher found out that the above-mentioned factors would affect students positively when the students gave a positive response to the factors. As they had known the importance and goal of learning pronunciation which is to make them have a native-like accent, they would be motivated to learn it well. They would try their best to reach their goal by minimizing native language interference, increasing their phonological awareness, exposing themselves to English as much as possible, doing oral and written practices by paying attention to the rules, and making use of the teacher’s corrective feedback to recognize their problems so that they could train themselves to do self-correction.

From the data, it is shown that quite a lot of the students, however, seemed to face some problems in pronunciation learning, although they had the goal in their mindset. They were aware of those affecting factors, and yet some students lacked motivation in learning pronunciation.

#### 4.2.1 Problems in Pronouncing Certain English Vowels and Consonants

In this research, the Pronunciation class used the Received Pronunciation or British English as the standard. “To be truly intelligible to a wide range of listeners, and not just to willing listeners of their language background, speakers need to come fairly close to some kind of a recognized standard” (Yoshida, 2016, p. 2). Native language – in this case, Indonesian language - interference became a prominent factor as there are quite a lot of differences in vowels and consonants in the two languages. The differences made it difficult for students to pronounce the sounds. For example, students could not differentiate the front vowels / i: - ɪ / and / e - æ / because students were familiar only with /i/ and /e/ in their native language. The back vowels / ɑ: - ɒ - ɔ: / were also difficult to differentiate as their native language has only the /o/ sound. Diphthongs such as / eə / and / əʊ / were also difficult to pronounce because the Indonesian language does not have such sounds. The same thing happens to consonants such as fricatives / θ - ð / and /ʃ - ʒ/, and affricates / tʃ - dʒ /, which do not exist in the Indonesian language.

Besides native language interference, phonological awareness also plays an important part in the students’ difficulty pronouncing certain English vowels and consonants. Some students were not able to identify how the sounds should be articulated correctly, although pronunciation instruction and corrective feedback had been provided. They seemed to have less anxiety in receiving the feedback than the teacher in providing it (Roothoof & Breeze, 2016).

#### 4.2.2 Problems in Dealing with Word Stress

English is a stress-time language in which word stress is very important. The word stress (the primary stress), however, is not fixed in position. Giving stress to the wrong syllable can create misunderstanding. For students whose native language is a syllable-time language like the Indonesian language, English word stress is not an easy thing to learn. Mistakes often made by students were among others: stress on the first syllable (such as in the words 'programme and 'passenger) was usually misplaced on the second syllable; stress on the second syllable (such as in the words har'monic and Sep'tember) was usually misplaced on the first syllable; stress on the third syllable (such as engi'neer and ciga'rette) was usually misplaced on the first syllable, and words with different function such as 'export (noun) and ex'port (verb) were mispronounced with no difference in the stress. Although there are general rules of putting stress, a lot of English polysyllabic words have no specific rules to follow. For example, three-syllable words such as 'beautiful, de'velop, and ciga'rette have different stress positions.

Problems occurred due to native language interference, pronunciation instruction, and exposure. In their native language, students never used stress but in English, every word has its stress. Pronunciation instruction in the form of word stress rules was provided, practices were given for them to be exposed to the words and familiar to them. From the data, it is shown that 24% of students ignored the rules and 20% lacked the motivation to learn pronunciation.

#### 4.2.3 Problems in Using Strong and Weak Forms in Sentences

Every English word has its stress when they stand alone. When in sentences, function words – which carry only grammatical meaning – are usually weakened and pronounced with schwa / ə / whereas content words – which carry real meaning – are always stressed. Problems occurred when students did not pay attention to the rules about function words and content words. They ignored the weak forms in pronouncing function words in sentences which results in awkward utterances. Some function words that were usually mispronounced as strong forms are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mispronounced function words

Structure word	Strong form	Weak form
has	/ hæz /	/ həz /
for	/ fɔ: /	/ fə /
to	/ tu: /	/ tə /, /tu /
from	/ frɒm /	/ frəm /
are	/ ɑ: /	/ ə /
of	/ ɒv /	/ əv /, / əf /
the	/ ði: /	/ ðə /, / ði /
can	/ kæn /	/ kən /

Exposure to the L2 in the form of oral and written practices had been given and all students agreed that practice helped them to improve their pronunciation. The majority of them also knew that pronunciation instruction was important. However, some of them still did not do the exercises given (4%) and ignored the instruction (24%). This is in line with their lack of motivation in learning pronunciation.

#### 4.2.4 Problems in Pronouncing Inflection -s, -es, -d, -ed

In English, inflections -s and -es are used when forming plural forms for countable nouns and verbs for third person singular in the simple present tense. Inflections -d and -ed are used to form regular verbs in the past tense. The Indonesian language does not have such inflections. That is why students did not pay much attention to them. Pronunciation instruction about inflections was given to the students and practices were also given with the hope that they could pronounce the inflections accurately. However, some students were ignorant of the rules, or had no phonological awareness to differentiate the voice and voiceless sounds, and did not use the opportunities to practice so that mistakes were often made. They did not show motivation in learning about this particular issue. They often ignored the inflections and thus pronounced them wrongly. For example, they pronounced the word wonders /wʌndəz / as / wʌndə / or / wʌndəs /; the word baked / beɪkt / as / beɪk / or / beɪkɪd /; the word birds / bɜ:dz / as / bɜ:d / or / bɜ:ds/, and the word manages / mænɪdʒɪz / as / mænɪdʒ / or / mænɪdʒɪs /.

#### 4.2.5 Problems in Identifying Written Phonetic Symbols and Writing them Correctly

From the beginning of the course, students were given a list of British English phonetic symbols with instructions on how to write and read the symbols accurately. Model recordings were also given for them to practice. They were introduced to the symbols for the first time as they did not learn them during high school. Difficulties occurred when they had to identify the symbols of 12 vowels, 8 diphthongs, and 24 consonants. Some did not have phonological awareness, some ignored how to write individual symbols, and some were confused about how to combine the symbols to become words, let alone sentences. They were confused about when to use /e/ and /ə/, /θ/ and /ð/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, and some other symbols, especially when they did not know how to pronounce the sounds individually or the words. In some cases, they could pronounce the words correctly but they could not write the transcription of the words due to lack of written practice and ignorance of corrective feedback.

#### 4.3 Strategies to Overcome Problems

The fact that some students faced various problems in mastering English pronunciation due to the affecting factors showed that strategies to help students overcome the problems are needed. First of all, as motivation is the most important factor in learning English pronunciation which has different characteristics from the Indonesian language, the teacher can give more individual assistance as different students have different kinds of problems. The teacher should identify each student's need to help them and pay more attention to their motivation. Without adequate motivation, students will not be able to do anything they should do in learning pronunciation.

Another strategy is to expose the students more to the English language by giving them more oral and written practices and by providing more models in the forms of audio and visual recordings. This can also help to build the students' phonological awareness and lead them to pay more attention to pronunciation instruction. There goes a saying that practice makes perfect.

More specific oral and written feedback can also help the students improve their pronunciation. The teacher can

directly mention the mistakes and how to correct them, and ask students to correct their oral mistakes immediately or rewrite their phonetic transcription based on the specific feedback right from the beginning of the course so that there will be no piling up of mistakes, which will be too late to correct.

Lastly, the teacher can remind the students to use appropriate (online) dictionaries. If the course uses the Received Pronunciation as its model, then the students are not advised to use a dictionary of North American English. This is to avoid different symbols used and how to write and pronounce them. Using unsuitable dictionaries will certainly disrupt the learning process.

## 5. Conclusion

From the findings and discussion, it is clear that the Indonesian students as the object of this research knew their goal in learning English pronunciation and the majority of them had the motivation to achieve their goal. Some factors which affect the students in learning pronunciation were motivation, native language interference, phonological awareness, exposure to the language, pronunciation instruction, and corrective feedback. Students who had the adequate motivation and therefore gave positive responses to what they were learning by making use of all the factors to the fullest would achieve improvement in their pronunciation accuracy and thus their intelligibility. Those who did not pay much attention to the factors or had a lack of motivation would face problems in achieving their goal. They lacked phonological awareness, ignored rules and feedback, showed laziness in doing practices, and were ignorant in using suitable dictionaries. It is the teacher who can help the students to overcome their problems so that all students can gain great achievement in pronunciation accuracy.

The current research is limited to discussing mainly the external factors that improve or impede pronunciation mastery such as native language interference, exposure to the language, pronunciation instruction, and corrective feedback. It has not dealt with the internal factors - language aptitude ability, ear perception, personality, attitude, to name but a few. It is therefore suggested that further research could include the internal factors to see comparative impacts on the students' pronunciation development.

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