The EFL Students' Difficulties of Pronunciation Practice

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ABSTRACT

For EFL students especially, pronunciation is the foundation of communication and is crucial when separating meanings or creating understandable utterances. One cannot communicate without speaking in the language. Still, students mostly blame pronunciation for their difficulties communicating. Good English speakers will be understood even if they make mistakes in other spheres. Conversely, students with poor pronunciation will not be understood even with excellent grammar. This study aims to identify the elements influencing the pronunciation practice of the students and their challenges in English pronunciation. Data collection and analysis for this study used a quantitative approach. Thirty University of Muhammadiyah Semarang students enrolled in the pronunciation practice program used English as a foreign language. A structured interview, and a questionnaire were the tools used for data collection. The study found that pronunciation still presents a significant obstacle for EFL learners, compromising their communication capacity even with adequate grammar. Limited practice, lack of exposure, and mother tongue interference are among the elements causing these challenges. To improve their speaking clarity and confidence, teachers should thus advise pupils to interact with real English audio resources and offer more targeted pronunciation practice.

Keywords: EFL Students' Difficulties, Pronunciation Practice, Speaking

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is an important part of speaking, especially for people who are learning English as a Foreign Language (Nushi & Sadeghi, 2021). Even if your grammar is correct, saying something wrong might cause confusion and make it hard to communicate. People who don't pronounce words correctly may have trouble being understood, even if their

vocabulary and grammar are good. On the other hand, people who pronounce words clearly may be able to communicate well even if they make small mistakes(Kurniawan et al., 2022.).

Notwithstanding its significance, pronunciation is all too often neglected in the context of classroom education, largely due to constraints in time and the prioritisation of other aspects within the curriculum. In a multitude of educational settings, particularly within Asian contexts, the issue of pronunciation is often accorded a relatively low priority in comparison to the development of other language skills(Nguyen Cao Thanh, 2011). Consequently, a significant proportion of EFL students encounter challenges in producing appropriate English sounds and intonation patterns.

A survey of the existing literature reveals a preponderance of research that has hitherto focused on teacher-centred approaches and instructional strategies. Such strategies include, but are not limited to, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), shadowing and audio visual aids(Lyn Henrichsen, 2018). However, there has been a paucity of research into the learners' views on the issues they perceive in their own pronunciation, the factors that influence their speaking ability, and the tactics they employ independently to improve. Moreover, the influence of emotional, psychological, and metacognitive elements such as confidence and exposure remains to be thoroughly examined.The current study tries to fix this problem by using a learner-centred approach based on constructivist and self-regulated learning theories (Kharroubi & ElMediouni, 2024).The current study hopes to shed some light on how EFL learners practise pronunciation by looking at each student's unique experiences, learning styles, and perceived obstacles. The present study employs a learner-centred strategy grounded in constructivist and self-regulated learning theories with the aim of resolving this discrepancy (Pastini Ni Wayan, 2023). The present study aims to shed light on how EFL learners approach pronunciation practice by examining students' individual experiences, learning styles, and perceived obstacles.

The following research goals form the foundation for this investigation:

1. The objective of this study is to ascertain which pronunciation issues are encountered most frequently by students of English as a foreign language.

2. The objective of this study is to ascertain the extent of English exposure among students and its subsequent impact on pronunciation.

3. The objective of this study is to investigate how first language (L1) interference affects pronunciation of English.

4. The objective of this study is to examine the speaking confidence levels and self-practice techniques of the students.

5. The objective of this study is to ascertain the extent to which students find real audio-visual resources useful.

The study's objective is twofold: firstly, to inspire teachers to incorporate pronunciation more thoroughly into communicative English instruction, and secondly, to inform more successful, student-focused pronunciation pedagogy(Szyszka, 2018).

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to identify pronunciation issues and the strategies used by EFL students. Thirty undergraduate students from the University of Muhammadiyah Semarang participated in the pronunciation training. Data were gathered using three methods: a structured questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a pronunciation test. The fifteen questionnaire items were organized into five categories: speaking confidence, mother language impact, pronunciation practice, exposure to English, and overall pronunciation performance. The survey included both Likert scale and frequency-based items. The test and interview results confirmed and validated the quantitative findings. The qualitative responses were evaluated using descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation(Fakis & Hilliam, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research results regarding students' EFL difficulties in pronunciation practice. The conclusions are drawn based on students' responses to both questionnaire and interview questions. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from previous research to suit the context of pronunciation difficulties(Szyszka, 2018). It consists of five indicators, with three questions for each indicator, resulting in a total of 15 questions. The questionnaire uses two types of response scales: the first type is an attitude scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), and the second type is a frequency scale (always, often, sometimes, rarely), depending on the nature of each question.

The survey's findings are quite evident, 83.9% of participants reported that listening to English from native speakers improved their word pronunciation. Furthermore, the study revealed that 51.6 % participants reported enhanced word pronunciation after viewing instructional films and listening to recordings of native speakers. According to the poll results, the majority of students concur that authentic audio-visual materials can aid those learning English as a second language in improving their pronunciation. The

precise percentages resulting from people's perceptions and the use of speech training techniques are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.
The percentages of student responses to the six questions attitude scale

Indicator	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1.Do you think listening to English from a native speaker helps improve pronunciation?	16.1%	83.9%	0%	0%	100%
2.Does poor pronunciation make you less confident when speaking?	12.9%	87.1%	0%	0%	100%
3.Pronunciation practice outside of class can help you improve your pronunciation?	16.1%	74.2%	6.5%	3.2%	100%
4.Mother tongue is very influential on the ability to pronounce English?	0%	87.1%	12.9%	0%	100%
5.Having a good pronunciation can increase your confidence in speaking English.	38.7%	58.1%	3.2%	0%	100%
6.Do you feel confident when speaking English in public?	0%	19.4%	61.3%	19.4%	100%

The questionnaire utilized in this study was designed to assess attitudes. The respondents evaluated the statements using a four-point Likert scale. The following options are available for the purpose of indicating one's degree of agreement or disagreement: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree"(Anthony et al., 2009). According to the responses, 87.1% of the participants think that mispronounced words make them less confident when speaking. A significant majority of 74.2% of students attested to a marked improvement in their pronunciation as a result of practicing outside of the classroom. Moreover, 87.1% of participants believed that their mother tongue affected how well they could pronounce English words. The majority of students 58.1% stated that they feel more confident when speaking English when they

pronounce words correctly. The second set of findings corresponds to the rest of the questionnaire's indicators, which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
The percentages of student responses to the six questions frequency scale

Indicator	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Total
1.How often do you listen to English audio or video from native speakers?	9.7%	48.4%	35.5%	6.5%	100%
2.Do you often use original media (movies, podcasts, news) to improve pronunciation?	3.2%	51.6%	41.9%	3.2%	100%
3.Do you find it difficult to pronounce certain sounds due to the influence of your mother tongue?	0%	29%	48.4%	22.6%	100%
4.Do you actively try to correct the influence of your mother tongue in English pronunciation practice?	3.2%	48.4%	32.3%	16.1%	100%
5.Do you have difficulty distinguishing between vowels and consonants in English?	3.2%	54.8%	35.5%	6.5%	100%
6.Do you have difficulty using correct intonation and word stress when speaking?	3.2%	29%	58.1%	9.7%	100%
7.Do you have difficulty connecting words when speaking in English?	6.5%	48.4%	35.5%	9.7%	100%
8.Do you feel confident when speaking English in public?	0%	19.4%	61.3%	19.4%	100%
9.Do you practice English pronunciation outside of class?	9.7%	29%	54.8%	6.5%	100%

The data in Table 2 reveal that 48.4% of students often listen to English audio or video from native speakers, and 51.6% reported that they often use original English media, such as movies, podcasts, and news, to improve their pronunciation. However, issues persist. A significant portion of students have trouble pronouncing words correctly because of the influence of their native tongue. Moreover, a considerable proportion of respondents indicated that they encountered difficulties in selecting the appropriate word, emphasis, and tone. Additionally, 19.4% of students reported feeling at ease speaking English in front of others on a regular basis. These findings underscore the significance of consistent practice and exposure in fostering the self-assurance of EFL learners in their speech and in rectifying pronunciation errors (Mulyo et al., 2024).

The following data is the result of the interview. In collecting this data, the researchers selected five students who had participated in the pronunciation practice program. This interview consisted of six questions designed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in learning English pronunciation(Fisher et al., 2024). The questions focused on aspects such as exposure to English sounds, the influence of the mother tongue, strategies used to improve pronunciation, and students' confidence when speaking. These dimensions align with findings that students benefit from listening to English songs by learning correct pronunciation from native speakers, using lyrics to build vocabulary and comprehension, and gradually improving their spoken confidence (Dewi, Wijayatiningsih, & Budiastuti, 2020). Additionally, students were asked to share what they perceive as the main difficulties and benefits they experience during pronunciation practice. The results from these interviews are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
Interview Results

Interview Question	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
What are the main challenges you face when learning to pronounce English correctly?	I find it hard to pronounce /r/ and /l/ sounds clearly.	Intonation is confusing and I often stress the wrong syllable.	I struggle with long and short vowel sounds.	I cannot pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ properly.	I mix up voiced and voiceless consonants like /s/ and /z/.
How does your	I tend to pronounce	My accent sounds	I use intonation	It makes me	I notice I apply

mother tongue affect your pronunciation?	English words the way I speak in Javanese.	too local and affects the clarity.	patterns from my first language.	replace English sounds with Indonesian ones.	Javanese stress patterns in English words.
What strategies do you usually use to improve your pronunciation?	I listen to English songs and repeat the lyrics.	I use an online dictionary with audio pronunciation.	I watch English movies and try to copy how the actors speak.	I record my voice and compare it with native speakers.	I practice speaking English with my friends.
How confident do you feel when speaking English aloud?	I'm not confident,especially in front of many people.	A bit confident, but only in casual conversation.	I get nervous because I might pronounce something wrong.	I have low confidence and worry people won't understand me.	I rarely speak English in public because I'm afraid of mistakes.
What type of English exposure helps you the most?	Listening to music and watching YouTube videos.	Native speaker videos and classroom listening tasks.	Movies with subtitles help me understand and imitate sounds.	Audiobooks and podcasts are helpful for listening practice.	I learn a lot from lecturers corrections during speaking class.
What suggestions do you have for improving pronunciation learning?	More speaking practice in class would be helpful.	Practice in groups and get feedback from peers.	Use pronunciation apps or games to make it more fun.	Include more listening and shadowing activities.	Teachers should focus more on pronunciation drills.

Five students were selected for in-depth interviews, and the results indicated several recurring themes regarding the challenges they faced in accurately articulating English words, the impact of their mother tongue, and the strategies they employed to enhance their proficiency.

The majority of students identified specific phonemes as their primary challenges, including the identification and production of /r/ and /l/, /θ/ and /ð/, and the differentiation between voiced and voiceless consonants(Rahman & Hasan, 2019). Two additional issues that have been documented with a high degree of frequency include misplaced stress in multisyllabic words and issues with intonation patterns.

According to the study's participants, students' native tongues particularly Javanese and Indonesian exerted a significant influence on their capacity to communicate in English(Lu, 2021). The participants' accents underwent notable changes, characterized by the substitution of consonants from specific regional dialects for English and the adoption of stress patterns that were deemed inappropriate. This phenomenon reflects the broader challenge of pronunciation difficulties commonly faced by EFL learners in online learning environments, where limited face-to-face interaction and reduced corrective feedback hinder effective oral language development (Mulyadi et al., 2024).

In response to inquiries regarding their approach to addressing pronunciation concerns, pupils offered a range of techniques that they had independently developed. These activities included the viewing of films, the recording of voices, the rehearsal with peers, the listening of English music, and the utilization of the pronunciation tools in digital dictionaries. Despite their best efforts, all five students reported feelings of apprehension when speaking English aloud, particularly in formal or public settings.

In response to inquiries regarding their methodologies for addressing pronunciation concerns, students proposed a range of self-directed strategies(Keo & Lan, 2024).The instructional method employed by the teachers included collaborative learning with their peers, voice recordings, film viewings, the use of digital dictionary pronunciation aids, and exposure to English music.These methods reflect the integration of various technologies to enhance student engagement and support active learning, as teachers facilitated access to digital tools and authentic materials that stimulate learners' curiosity and participation (Mulyadi et al., 2020). Despite their best efforts, all five students reported feelings of unease when speaking English, especially in formal or public contexts. The predominant variables contributing to this dearth of trust were concerns regarding misunderstandings and mispronunciation.

In terms of exposure, students learnt the most from authentic English input sources such as music, YouTube videos, audiobooks, and classroom activities led by native or skilled speakers. Finally, students suggested that more opportunities for oral expression in the classroom, feedback from peers,

interactive pronunciation aids, and targeted activities will help them improve their pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important components of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is pronunciation, which poses a number of difficulties for learners, including intonation, stress, confidence, and sound articulation. One of the most important abilities that has a big impact on students' capacity to communicate effectively and be understood is pronunciation. According to study findings, 87.1% of students believe that their confidence in speaking English is diminished by poor pronunciation. This demonstrates unequivocally how pronunciation issues affect students' ability to use language in authentic situations. A significant additional challenge in pronunciation practice is the interference from the mother tongue can make it hard to pronounce words correctly. It can cause incorrect stress patterns and mispronunciation. Other things that make it hard for students to improve their speaking skills include not being exposed to real English, not having enough practice, not being confident when speaking in public, and not using digital tools to improve their pronunciation.

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