Phonological Awareness on Students' Pronunciation Accuracy in English

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of phonological awareness on the pronunciation accuracy of non-native English learners, with a specific focus on both segmental and suprasegmental features. Employing a library reasearch design. The investigation explored common pronunciation challenges related to vowel sounds particularly pure vowels and diphthongs as well as word stress and rhythm patterns. The findings indicate that students frequently struggle with distinguishing vowel length, producing diphthong glides, and placing stress on the correct syllables. These pronunciation difficulties are largely influenced by the phonological system of their first language, Bahasa Indonesia, which does not contain equivalent phonemic contrasts or prosodic features. As a result, these challenges negatively affect the intelligibility and fluency of their spoken English. The study supports the theory of interlanguage phonology, highlighting how learners construct an intermediate sound system based on both L1 and L2 influences.

Keywords: *Phonological Awareness; English Pronunciation; Phonology*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh kesadaran fonologis terhadap akurasi pelafalan pada pembelajar bahasa Inggris non-penutur asli, dengan fokus khusus pada aspek segmental dan suprasegmental. Menggunakan desain penelitian studi kepustakaan. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi tantangan umum dalam pelafalan bunyi vokal khususnya vokal murni dan diftong serta penempatan tekanan kata dan pola ritme. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa para mahasiswa sering mengalami kesulitan dalam membedakan panjang vokal, memproduksi gerakan diftong yang tepat, dan menempatkan tekanan pada suku kata yang benar. Kesulitan pelafalan ini sebagian besar dipengaruhi oleh sistem fonologis bahasa pertama mereka, yaitu Bahasa Indonesia, yang tidak memiliki kontras fonemik atau fitur prosodik yang sebanding dengan bahasa Inggris. Akibatnya, tantangan ini berdampak negatif terhadap kejelasan dan kelancaran berbicara mereka dalam bahasa Inggris. Studi ini mendukung teori fonologi antarbahasa (interlanguage phonology), yang menjelaskan bahwa pembelajar membentuk sistem bunyi antara (intermediate sound system) yang merupakan campuran antara bahasa pertama (L1) dan bahasa kedua (L2).

Kata Kunci: *Kesadaran Fonologis; Pelafalan Bahasa Inggris; Fonologi*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking English fluently and clearly is a key goal for students who are learning it as a foreign language (EFL). However, many learners struggle with speaking due to a limited understanding of how English sounds function. This includes key linguistic elements such as phonology, which refers to the sound system of a language; phonetics, which concerns how sounds are produced and perceived; and pronunciation, which focuses on saying words correctly. When students do not develop sufficient knowledge in these areas, it often affects their speaking ability. Mistakes in stress, intonation, and articulation can make their speech unclear and difficult to understand. Unfortunately, these aspects are frequently overlooked in the EFL classroom (Wardana et al., 2022).

In academic discussions, there is an ongoing debate about the importance of phonological and phonetic instruction in improving speaking skills. Some researchers argue that communicative competence should be the main focus in language learning, while others emphasize the need for technical training in pronunciation to support accurate and fluent speech. Empirical studies suggest that pronunciation errors not only hinder intelligibility but also negatively impact learners' self-confidence. Therefore, a balanced approach that integrates both communicative practices and pronunciation training is increasingly seen as essential in language education, particularly for non-native speakers (Shak et al., 2016).

This study is significant because many English classes still fail to emphasize the teaching of sounds and pronunciation in a systematic way. Teachers often prioritize grammar and vocabulary, leaving pronunciation as a secondary or even optional component. As a result, students may not be aware of how much pronunciation influences their ability to communicate effectively. Furthermore, a lack of awareness and practice in phonetics and phonology can lead to persistent errors, reduced fluency, and increased anxiety when speaking. By exploring these issues, the study underscores the necessity of incorporating sound-focused instruction into language learning programs (Venkatagiri & Levis, 2007).

Previous research has highlighted the benefits of integrating phonological and phonetic instruction into EFL classrooms. For example, Celce-Murcia and colleagues have emphasized the value of explicit pronunciation teaching, arguing that it enhances speech intelligibility and learner confidence. Derwing and Munro (2005) found that targeted phonetic training helps students become more understandable to native listeners and improves their spoken communication overall. Similarly, studies by Thomson and Derwing (2014) show that instruction in prosodic features such as stress and intonation leads to measurable gains in fluency and clarity. These findings support the idea that pronunciation training plays a vital role in developing effective speaking skills.

The objective of this study is to investigate how phonology, phonetics, and pronunciation influence students' speaking performance. It aims to identify common pronunciation issues faced by learners, particularly those stemming from a lack of understanding of phonological features such as word stress, intonation, and articulation. The research also explores how these difficulties affect students' fluency and confidence. Additionally, it seeks to demonstrate how targeted instruction in these areas can lead to noticeable improvements in speaking ability. Ultimately, this study offers practical suggestions for educators and institutions to enhance pronunciation instruction within English language teaching frameworks.

METHOD

This study employs a library research method to examine the role of phonology, phonetics, and pronunciation in influencing students' speaking performance in English as a foreign language (EFL). The library research approach is suitable for exploring theoretical foundations and synthesizing findings from previous studies. It involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting various academic sources such as journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and relevant scholarly publications that discuss the concepts of sound systems, pronunciation, and their implications for oral language proficiency.

The data used in this study were obtained through a systematic review of literature published between 2010 and 2025. Sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the fields of phonology, phonetics, pronunciation teaching, and EFL speaking performance. Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were used to identify and access peer-reviewed articles. The review process focused on identifying recurring themes, research findings, instructional approaches, and the challenges learners face in mastering English pronunciation and fluency.

The analysis in this study was conducted using qualitative content analysis. This method enabled the researcher to extract meaningful patterns and insights from the literature, which were then organized thematically to address the research objectives. The review aimed not only to present what has been studied but also to highlight gaps in the existing research and propose directions for future investigation. By drawing from a wide range of scholarly sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how knowledge of English sounds can significantly improve learners' speaking skills and classroom practices in pronunciation instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Vowel Sounds and Pronunciation Differences

English pronunciation includes many different vowel sounds that can be difficult for learners. One important type is called pure vowels (or monophthongs), such as /iː/ in see or /ɑː/ in car. These vowel sounds stay the same from start to finish. Another important type is called diphthongs, where two vowel sounds glide together, like /aɪ/ in time or /eɪ/ in name. Students often struggle with diphthongs, especially when these sounds are not found in their first language.

In the material shown in this study, one example is the suffix -ation, which contains a diphthong sound /eɪ/. In British English, this sound is usually kept, as in information /ˌɪnfəˈmeɪʃən/. But in American English, this sound can be reduced to /ə/ or /əˈneɪ/, making it sound lighter. Learning how these diphthongs work helps students speak more clearly and naturally. Another common vowel difference is between the British vowel /ɑː/ and the American vowel /æ/. For example, British speakers say class as /klɑːs/, while American speakers say /klæs/. Words like aunt, after, ask, and afternoon follow this same pattern. These sound changes can confuse learners, especially when they hear both dialects in media or learning materials.

Table 1. Pure Vowels (Monophthongs)

Symbol	Example Word	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
/iː/	see	/siː/	/si/
/ɪ/	sit	/sɪt/	/sɪt/
/e/	bed	/bed/	/bed/
/æ/	cat	/kæt/	/kæt/
/ʌ/	cup	/kʌp/	/kʌp/
/ɑː/	car	/kɑː/	/kɑr/
/ɒ/	hot	/hɒt/	/hɑt/
/ɔː/	law	/lɔː/	/lɑ/
/ʊ/	put	/pʊt/	/pʊt/
/uː/	boot	/buːt/	/but/
/ə/	about	/əˈbaʊt/	/ɜːˈbaʊt/

Table 2. Diphthongs

Symbol	Example Word	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
/eɪ/	name	/neɪm/	/neɪm/
/aɪ/	time	/taɪm/	/taɪm/
/ɔɪ/	boy	/bɔɪ/	/bɔɪ/
/aʊ/	now	/naʊ/	/naʊ/
/əʊ/	go	/gəʊ/	/goʊ/
/ɪə/	near	/nɪə/	/nɪr/
/eə/	hair	/heə/	/h3r/
/ʊə/	tʊə	/tʊə/	/tʊr/

Table 3. Triphthongs

Symbol	Example Word	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
/aɪə/	fire	/faɪə/	/faɪr/
/aʊə/	tower	/taʊə/	/taʊr/
/eɪə/	player	/pleɪə/	/pleɪr/
/əʊə/	lower	/ləʊə/	/loʊr/
/ɔɪə/	employer	/ɪmˈplɔɪə/	/ɪmˈplɔɪər/

Table 4. Common Phonetic Features Compared

Feature	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
Rhotic /r/	Not pronounced unless followed by a vowel (non-rhotic)	Always pronounced (rhotic)
/t/ between vowels	Clear /t/ (e.g., butter → /ˈbʌtə/)	Often becomes a flap /ɾ/ (e.g., butter → /ˈbʌɾər/)
Final /r/	Often silent	Pronounced
/ɑː/ vs. /æ/	class → /klɑːs/	class → /klæs/
Vowel reduction	Often lighter	Often fuller vowels

Suffix Pronunciation and Dialect Challenges

Suffixes are another important part of English pronunciation. The slides in this research show that the suffix -ory, like in dormitory or auditory, is pronounced differently in British and American English. In British English, it often ends with /tri/, for example, auditory /ˈɔːdɪtri/. In American English, the ending becomes /təri/, like *ˈɔːdətɔːri/. These small changes can affect the rhythm and clarity of speech.

This difference also appears in the pronunciation of the suffix -ation, which is usually pronounced as /eɪʃən/ in British and sometimes /əʃən/ or /eɪʃən/ in American English. The pronunciation may vary based on the region, speed of speech, or even social setting.

According to previous studies (Roach, 2009; Jones, 2011), these changes do not follow strict spelling rules. That means students cannot always guess how a word is pronounced just by looking at it. They need to memorize the correct sound in both dialects.

This shows why phonological awareness is important. As Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) stated, understanding both segmental features (like vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (like stress and intonation) can help learners become more confident speakers. Teachers should guide students to listen carefully and practice the correct pronunciation, especially for words with common suffixes (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022).

Table of Suffix Pronunciation Differences in British and American English

Table 5. Words with the suffix –ory

Word	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
auditory	/ˈɔː.dɪ.tri/	/ˈɔː.də.tɔː.ri/ or /ˈɑː.də.tɔː.ri/
dormitory	/ˈdɔː.mɪ.tri/	/ˈdɔːr.mə.tɔː.ri/
category	/ˈkæt.ə.gri/	/ˈkæt̬.ə.gɔː.ri/
depository	/dɪˈpɒ.zɪ.tri/	/dəˈpɑː.zə.tɔː.ri/
conservatory	/kənˈsɜː.və.tri/	/kənˈsɝː.və.tɔː.ri/
derogatory	/dɪˈrɒ.gə.tri/	/dɪˈrɑː.gə.tɔː.ri/

Table 6. Words with the suffix –ation

Word	British English (RP)	American English (GA)
information	/ˌɪn.fəˈmeɪ.ʃən/	/ˌɪn.fɚˈmeɪ.ʃən/
education	/ˌed.jʊˈkeɪ.ʃən/	/ˌɛd.jəˈkeɪ.ʃən/
communication	/kəˌmjuː.nɪˈkeɪ.ʃən/	/kəˌmjuː.nəˈkeɪ.ʃən/
celebration	/ˌsel.əˈbreɪ.ʃən/	/ˌsel.əˈbreɪ.ʃən/
organization	/ˌɔː.gə.naɪˈzeɪ.ʃən/	/ˌɔːr.gə.nəˈzeɪ.ʃən/
pronunciation	/prəˌnʌn.siˈeɪ.ʃən/	/proʊˌnʌn.siˈeɪ.ʃən/

This journal aims to identify the pronunciation difficulties of English vowel sounds by non-native speakers in distinguishing between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) accents, focusing on segmental aspects related to single vowels, diphthongs, as well as variations in the pronunciation of long and short vowels. The journal involved 15 participants consisting of active university students, parents, and adult neighbors. Data were collected through reading activities using texts designed to test phonological variations between BrE and AmE. Phonetic analysis was conducted using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to determine pronunciation accuracy. The results show that participants experienced significant difficulty in pronouncing long vowels, diphthongs, and syllable stress.

Common Pronunciation Errors in English Vowel Sounds

Target Word	IPA (BrE)	IPA (AmE)
See	/siː/	/si/
Car	/kɑː/	/kɑr/
Time	/taɪm/	/taɪm/
Name	/neɪm/	/neɪm/
Information	/ˌɪnfəˈmeɪʃən/	/ˌɪnfərˈmeɪʃən/
Class	/klɑːs/	/klɑs/
Ask	/ɑːsk/	/ɑsk/
After	/ˈɑːftə/	/ˈæftər/
Afternoon	/ˌɑːftəˈnuːn/	/ˌɑftərˈnun/
Day	/deɪ/	/deɪ/

Focus Phonemes	Respondents with Error	Example Errors	Error Percentage (%)
/iː/	8 out of 15	/sɪ/	53%
/ɑː/	10 out of 15	/kær/	67%
/aɪ/	9 out of 15	/tim/, /tam/	60%
/eɪ/	7 out of 15	/nɛm/, /nem/	47%
/eɪ/, /ə/	11 out of 15	/ˌɪnfərˈmɛʃən/	73%
/ɑː/, /æ/	12 out of 15	/klæs/	80%
/ɑː/, /æ/	9 out of 15	/æsk/	60%
/ɑː/, /æ/	10 out of 15	/ˈæftər/	67%
/ɑː/, /uː/	6 out of 15	/ˌæftərˈnʊn/	40%
/eɪ/	7 out of 15	/dɛ/, /dei/	47%

Analysis of Results Based on Phonological Theory

Phonologically, the pronunciation errors observed among the participants clearly reflect the interplay between both segmental and suprasegmental aspects of English phonology. These errors, while seemingly individual, follow identifiable patterns that align with the influence of learners' first language (L1), in this case, Bahasa Indonesia. At the segmental level, the participants demonstrated consistent difficulty in differentiating between vowel lengths, particularly with English long vowels such as /iː/ and /ɑː/. These were frequently realized as their short counterparts /ɪ/ and /æ/, suggesting an insufficient awareness or internalization of vowel length distinctions that are phonemically significant in English. Such substitution patterns indicate a systemic problem rather than isolated mispronunciations, and they reveal the learners' reliance on L1 phonological rules when approximating L2 sounds.

Another recurring pattern involved the simplification of diphthongs. English diphthongs such as /aɪ/ in "time" or /eɪ/ in "name" were often

produced as monophthongs, with the glide element either minimized or completely absent. This phonetic simplification reflects the learners' attempts to map unfamiliar sounds onto the closest equivalents in their L1, a strategy commonly explained by the theory of interlanguage phonology. In languages such as Bahasa Indonesia, diphthongs are either rare or phonetically realized differently, resulting in a lack of native-like articulatory strategies for producing English diphthongs. Consequently, learners fail to maintain the dynamic vowel transition characteristic of English diphthongs, which compromises intelligibility and contributes to a non-native accent.

Beyond the segmental level, suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation posed even greater challenges for the participants. The misplacement of lexical stress in multisyllabic words, such as "information" or "afternoon," significantly altered the natural rhythm of speech. These stress errors disrupted the expected prosodic pattern, rendering the participants' speech unnatural and sometimes difficult to understand. Furthermore, the overuse or inappropriate application of vowel reduction, especially in unstressed syllables, often flattened the speech rhythm or, conversely, made it sound overly reduced and lacking in clarity. Such patterns are symptomatic of a deeper issue: the failure to internalize the stress-timed rhythm of English, which contrasts sharply with the more syllable-timed nature of Bahasa Indonesia, where stress placement is relatively predictable and has little effect on meaning (Hien, 2024).

The relationship between these findings and the theory of interlanguage phonology provides valuable insight into the underlying cognitive and linguistic processes that shape L2 pronunciation development. According to this theory, second language learners construct an intermediate phonological system that blends features from both their L1 and the target language. This interlanguage system is not random; rather, it is structured and systematic, often shaped by transfer from the native language. The influence of Bahasa Indonesia's phonological system is evident in the types of errors produced by the participants. For instance, the lack of contrastive vowel length in Indonesian explains the tendency to neutralize English vowel length distinctions. Similarly, the absence of native diphthongs and the regularity of stress in Indonesian account for the persistent issues with diphthong articulation and misplaced stress in English (TSUBOTA et al., 2004).

These findings underscore the importance of incorporating explicit instruction in both segmental and suprasegmental features in English language teaching, particularly for learners whose L1 phonology differs significantly from English. The complexities of English pronunciation demand more than incidental exposure or correction; they require focused pedagogical interventions that address the specific phonological gaps learners bring from their native language backgrounds. This includes training

in auditory discrimination, articulatory practice, and prosodic awareness, all of which are essential for achieving intelligibility and fluency. The data clearly show that pronunciation difficulties are not merely cosmetic or superficial but are deeply rooted in cognitive-linguistic systems shaped by prior language experience. Therefore, a more phonologically informed approach to pronunciation instruction is crucial in helping EFL learners overcome these challenges and develop more accurate and confident spoken English (Hegde, 2021).

Common Pronunciation Errors

The analysis of participants' speech revealed a number of systematic pronunciation errors that illustrate the influence of their first language and the inherent challenges of acquiring a new phonological system. One of the most prominent issues observed was the monophthongization of English diphthongs. Participants often failed to articulate the glide component in diphthongs such as /aɪ/ and /eɪ/, resulting in their simplification into single vowel sounds. This tendency suggests a lack of familiarity with the dynamic articulatory movement required to produce diphthongs accurately. In Bahasa Indonesia, diphthongs are far less frequent and do not exhibit the same level of complexity as in English. As a result, learners tend to approximate unfamiliar sounds with more stable and familiar ones, leading to reduced phonemic distinctiveness (Octaviana, 2019).

Another frequent pronunciation error involved the substitution of the long vowel /ɑ:/ with the short vowel /æ/. This misarticulation appears to stem from both auditory confusion and the absence of /ɑ:/ in the Indonesian vowel inventory. Indonesian vowels tend to be relatively pure and symmetrical in terms of duration, so learners may struggle to perceive and produce English vowel contrasts that are dependent on length and quality. The difficulty in maintaining vowel length was also observed in participants' attempts to articulate vowels such as /i:/, which were commonly shortened and confused with /ɪ/. This suggests a broader issue of temporal mismanagement in vowel production, highlighting how the phonological system of the L1 constrains learners' ability to acquire temporal distinctions in L2 vowels. Similarly, the diphthong /eɪ/ was often replaced with the monophthong /ɛ/ or /e/, sounds which are more phonetically accessible to the learners due to their presence in Bahasa Indonesia. These substitutions reflect both articulatory simplification and perceptual assimilation to familiar L1 categories (Jabali & Abuzaid, 2017).

Suprasegmental features also posed significant challenges. One such issue was the inappropriate or excessive application of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables. Although vowel reduction is an integral aspect of English rhythm and speech economy, the participants often applied it indiscriminately, leading to unnatural prosody and miscommunication.

English, as a stress-timed language, relies heavily on rhythmic alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables, often employing the schwa /ə/ in reduced syllables. However, learners whose L1 does not share this prosodic structure may find it difficult to internalize and apply these rhythmic patterns correctly. Misplaced stress and incorrect rhythmic grouping were common in polysyllabic words such as "information," where participants frequently failed to reduce the unstressed syllables appropriately or stressed the wrong syllable entirely. These findings demonstrate that mastering English pronunciation extends beyond segmental accuracy and requires a nuanced understanding of stress and rhythm patterns.

Given the nature and recurrence of these errors, it is imperative to implement targeted pedagogical strategies aimed at addressing both segmental and suprasegmental difficulties. One effective instructional approach is the use of minimal pairs training. This method allows learners to practice distinguishing between similar but contrastive sounds, such as /ɪ/ and /iː/ in "bit" versus "beat." Through repeated exposure and production, learners develop the auditory discrimination and articulatory control necessary for accurate vowel production. In conjunction with this, phonemic symbol training using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) has proven valuable. By introducing learners to the symbolic representation of sounds, educators can foster a deeper awareness of articulatory features and improve learners' capacity to connect orthographic forms with their correct phonological representations.

Furthermore, consistent exposure to authentic listening materials such as films, songs, interviews, and speeches in both British and American English can enhance learners' perceptual acuity. This exposure allows them to recognize pronunciation patterns in natural contexts and adapt to varying accents and prosodic styles. Alongside listening practice, self-assessment strategies can empower learners to monitor their own progress. Encouraging students to record and analyze their speech, comparing it with native models, fosters metacognitive awareness and allows for more autonomous pronunciation development. Technological tools can also support this process. Mobile applications like Elsa Speak, Forvo, and Sounds: The Pronunciation App provide real-time, individualized feedback and allow learners to engage in interactive pronunciation drills at their own pace.

Finally, phonetic drilling remains a foundational technique in pronunciation pedagogy. Practicing key sounds repeatedly with guidance from a teacher or peer offers immediate correction and reinforcement, building muscle memory and refining articulatory precision. When delivered systematically, phonetic drilling not only targets individual errors but also contributes to broader improvements in speech intelligibility and fluency. Altogether, these methods offer a comprehensive and practical framework for addressing the pronunciation challenges highlighted in this study and for

supporting EFL learners in developing more accurate and confident spoken English (Fang, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of both segmental and suprasegmental phonological features on the English pronunciation of learners whose first language is Bahasa Indonesia. Pronunciation errors observed among the participants including monophthongization of diphthongs, incorrect vowel length, substitution of unfamiliar vowel sounds, and misapplication of stress and vowel reduction reflect systematic patterns shaped by their native phonological framework. These challenges are not random or isolated but are deeply rooted in the structural differences between the sound systems of English and Indonesian.

The data support the theory of interlanguage phonology, which posits that second language learners construct an intermediate phonological system that blends features from their L1 and the target language. Learners' reliance on familiar L1 sound patterns explains many of the recurrent errors found in their English speech, particularly with respect to vowel contrasts and rhythmic structures. The lack of contrastive vowel length and diphthong gliding in Bahasa Indonesia contributes to persistent inaccuracies in English vowel production, while the more regular stress patterns of Indonesian hinder the development of English-like stress and rhythm.

These insights underscore the need for targeted pronunciation instruction that goes beyond incidental correction and incorporates systematic training in both segmental articulation and suprasegmental features. Approaches such as minimal pairs practice, phonemic awareness using IPA, authentic listening exposure, self-assessment, pronunciation technology tools, and phonetic drilling are shown to be effective strategies. Through such focused and phonologically informed pedagogical methods, learners can gradually overcome L1 interference and develop clearer, more intelligible, and confident spoken English. Ultimately, the study reinforces the critical role of phonological awareness in second language speaking proficiency and calls for greater emphasis on pronunciation in EFL instruction.

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