

AN ANALYSIS OF PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES FACED BY SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS IN ENGLISH SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is an essential component of English speaking proficiency that directly influences students' intelligibility and communication success. However, many Indonesian EFL learners continue to struggle with accurate pronunciation due to linguistic and environmental factors. This qualitative descriptive study aims to analyze the pronunciation difficulties experienced by seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Falah Johar during English speaking activities. Data were collected through pronunciation performance tasks, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews with five selected students. The findings reveal three major pronunciation challenges: (1) difficulties in producing unfamiliar English phonemes, particularly sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/ due to first language interference; (2) confusion between English spelling and pronunciation, which leads to frequent mispronunciations; and (3) limited exposure and inconsistent speaking practice outside the classroom that negatively affect pronunciation development and confidence. The study concludes that pronunciation-focused instruction, increased exposure to authentic English input, and supportive peer interaction are necessary to help learners improve their intelligibility and fluency. The results are expected to provide useful implications for English teachers in designing effective pronunciation activities that support students' speaking development from an early stage of learning.

Keywords: pronunciation difficulties, speaking skills, junior high school, qualitative research, EFL learners

ABSTRAK

Pengucapan adalah komponen penting dalam kemampuan berbicara bahasa Inggris yang langsung memengaruhi keterpahaman siswa dan keberhasilan komunikasi. Namun, banyak pelajar EFL Indonesia masih kesulitan dengan pengucapan yang akurat karena faktor linguistik dan lingkungan. Studi deskriptif kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan pengucapan yang dialami oleh siswa kelas tujuh di SMP Nurul Falah Johar selama aktivitas berbicara bahasa Inggris. Data dikumpulkan melalui tugas kinerja pengucapan, observasi kelas, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan lima siswa yang dipilih. Temuan menunjukkan tiga tantangan pengucapan utama: (1) kesulitan dalam menghasilkan fonem bahasa Inggris yang tidak familiar, terutama bunyi seperti /θ/ dan /ð/ karena pengaruh bahasa pertama; (2) kebingungan antara ejaan dan pengucapan bahasa

Inggris, yang menyebabkan sering salah pengucapan; dan (3) keterbatasan paparan dan latihan berbicara yang tidak konsisten di luar kelas, yang berdampak negatif pada perkembangan pengucapan dan kepercayaan diri. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajaran yang fokus pada pengucapan, peningkatan paparan terhadap input bahasa Inggris otentik, dan interaksi teman sebaya yang mendukung diperlukan untuk membantu pembelajar meningkatkan keterjelasan dan kelancaran berbicara mereka. Hasilnya diharapkan dapat memberikan implikasi yang berguna bagi guru bahasa Inggris dalam merancang kegiatan pengucapan yang efektif yang mendukung perkembangan berbicara siswa sejak tahap awal pembelajaran.

Kata kunci: kesulitan pengucapan, keterampilan berbicara, SMP, penelitian kualitatif, pembelajar EFL

A. Pendahuluan

One of the most popular languages in the world, English is essential for international communication, education, and work settings. English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia and is now a required junior high school subject. Speaking is sometimes seen as the most difficult of the four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—to master since it necessitates that students coordinate multiple linguistic elements in real time (Hidayat & Saleh, 2021). Pronunciation is a crucial component of speaking proficiency that affects how clear and efficient communication can be. When speakers of English are unable to differentiate between similar sounds, mispronunciation frequently results in misunderstandings or a

breakdown in communication (Sari, 2020).

Correct pronunciation involves more than just making the right sounds; it also involves intonation, rhythm, and stress (Gilakjani, 2021). In spoken communication, these suprasegmental characteristics aid in expressing emotion and meaning. Nonetheless, a large number of EFL students in Indonesia have trouble with both suprasegmental and segmental features (particular sounds). Numerous studies have revealed that because of the effect of their first language, pupils often mispronounce consonants like /θ/ and /ð/, mix up long and short vowels, and forget final consonants (Putri & Astuti, 2022). These problems have an impact on students' confidence and fluency when speaking English.

Furthermore, rather than emphasizing pronunciation, Indonesian EFL teachers frequently concentrate more on vocabulary and grammar (Astuti & Lestari, 2021). Because of this, pronunciation instruction typically receives less attention in the classroom, forcing students to rely more on textbook listening than on real-world spoken input. According to a study by Anggrarini et al. (2023), students' incapacity to correctly identify English sounds was exacerbated by their lack of exposure to real-world pronunciation models. According to Kasyulita et al. (2023), students hardly ever received feedback on their spoken blunders, which impeded their ability to improve over time.

Pronunciation issues at different educational levels have been studied in the past. For instance, Pratama (2022) discovered that high school pupils frequently had trouble with stress placement and vowel length differences. Rahmawati (2023) observed that students' awareness of pronunciation decreased as a result of less oral practice in online courses. Studies explicitly examining pronunciation issues among junior high school pupils, especially those

who are just beginning to study English, are still few, nonetheless. Since the verbal and cognitive skills of younger students at this level are still growing, teaching pronunciation is both crucial and difficult.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the pronunciation issues that seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Falah Johar Karawang encounter when participating in English speaking exercises. This study aims to determine the most prevalent pronunciation issues (accuracy, stress, and fluency) and investigate the causes of them using qualitative techniques like observation, recording, and semi-structured interviews. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will give English teachers important information for developing pronunciation-focused exercises and fostering a more encouraging learning atmosphere for students to advance their speaking abilities

The potential for this research to close the gap between theory and classroom practice is what makes it significant. By concentrating on early teenage learners, it adds to the expanding corpus of research on pronunciation in EFL environments. In

practice, the results can assist educators in identifying students' pronunciation issues and creating focused plans to improve their oral communication abilities. In the end, enhancing pronunciation will boost students' confidence and drive to speak English in addition to making them more understandable.

B. Metode Penelitian

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore pronunciation difficulties experienced by seventh-grade students during English speaking activities. The data were gathered through three main instruments: classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and students' recorded reading tasks. These instruments were designed to complement one another and provide triangulated data to ensure credibility and accuracy of findings.

The observation instrument was used to record students' behavior, engagement, and performance during pronunciation and speaking activities. The semi-structured interview instrument was applied to obtain deeper insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and

attitudes toward English pronunciation. The recording and pronunciation analysis sheet served as an evaluative tool to analyze students' actual pronunciation performance based on measurable aspect.

Forms of Instruments

1. Observation Guidelines

The observation sheet consisted of several indicators focusing on students' pronunciation performance and classroom participation. The aspects observed included:

- Students' engagement during pronunciation activities.
- Reactions when receiving corrective feedback.
- Collaboration and peer support during reading or speaking.
- Classroom atmosphere and students' enthusiasm during the activity.

2. Interview Guidelines (Semi-Structured)

The semi-structured interview contained five key questions designed to explore students' difficulties and perceptions regarding English pronunciation:

- What English sounds do you find most difficult to pronounce?

- What do you do when you are unsure of how to pronounce a word?
- How often do you practice pronunciation outside class?

3. Recording and Pronunciation Analysis Sheet

The pronunciation analysis form was used to assess students' oral production when reading short English texts aloud. The evaluation focused on three dimensions:

- Accuracy: Correct articulation of English sounds.
- Stress & Intonation: Proper emphasis and tone according to sentence meaning.
- Fluency: Smoothness and natural flow of speech delivery.

This research used a qualitative descriptive method, which allows the researcher to describe students' pronunciation difficulties based on observation and interpretation rather than numerical measurement. The procedure consisted of three main stages:

1. Data Collection: Students were asked to read short English texts aloud. Their voices were recorded and observed using the observation

sheet. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand their experiences and perceptions.

2. Data Analysis: The recordings were analyzed using the pronunciation analysis sheet focusing on accuracy, stress & intonation, and fluency. Qualitative coding was applied to identify recurring pronunciation errors and patterns.
3. Data Interpretation: The results from observation, interviews, and recordings were triangulated to identify major pronunciation difficulties and their possible causes.

Pronunciation Rubric

This rubric was adapted from Brown (2004) and Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) to evaluate pronunciation performance in qualitative speaking assessment.

Table 1. Pronunciation assesment rubric

Criteria	4 (ExcelInt)	3 (Good)	2 (Fair)	1 (Poor)
Accuracy	Pronounces almost all sounds correctly; minimal errors that do not affect intelligibility.	Several minor errors, but meaning remains clear.	Frequent errors, some words unclear.	Many mispronunciations; difficult to understand
Stress & Intonation	Uses stress and intonation naturally; enhances meaning.	Generally correct stress and intonation; minor lapses.	Stress and intonation sometimes misplaced, affecting naturalness.	Incorrect or monotonous intonation throughout.
Fluency	Speech is smooth, natural, and effortless.	Mostly smooth with minor pauses or hesitation.	Frequent pauses and hesitations that interrupt flow.	Very hesitant and fragmented speech, hard to follow.

C. Hasil Penelitian dan Pembahasan

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate pronunciation difficulties faced by seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Falah Johar during English speaking activities. The data were collected through two main instruments: (1) pronunciation performance tests, where students read short English texts aloud, and (2) semi-structured interviews conducted immediately after the speaking activity.

The data collection process was guided by Brown's (2004)

pronunciation framework, which emphasizes two key aspects of pronunciation: segmental features (individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress, intonation, and rhythm). These aspects were used as the analytical basis for assessing students' oral performance. In addition, Lado's (1957) theory of language interference was used to interpret how students' first language (Indonesian) influenced their English pronunciation patterns.

The recorded speaking tests were transcribed verbatim, ensuring that all verbal and non-verbal cues were retained to maintain data

authenticity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis involved coding the data into themes using a thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke (2019). Interview responses were analyzed to identify recurring patterns, perceptions, and difficulties related to pronunciation learning.

Based on the analysis, three major themes emerged:

1. Difficulty in Pronouncing Certain English Sounds

According to Brown (2004), difficulties in producing foreign sounds are common when the target language contains phonemes absent in the learners' native language. The findings support this notion. Most students demonstrated difficulty producing the sounds /θ/ and /ð/, commonly replacing them with /t/ or /d/ (e.g., think → tink, this → dis).

This pattern indicates strong first language interference, aligning with the claim by Anggrarini et al. (2023) that Indonesian learners tend to substitute unfamiliar English phonemes with the nearest equivalent in their native language.

"I can't really say words like think or this, it feels weird in my mouth."
(Student 2 – Nara)

Observation also revealed that Fahira and Satria struggled the most in articulating these sounds, often mumbling or skipping problematic words. Their speech rhythm and stress were unstable, reflecting limited phonological control.

2. Confusion Between Spelling and Pronunciation

Fraser (2020) emphasized that effective pronunciation learning requires phonological awareness — the understanding that English spelling does not always match pronunciation. The students' responses and performances clearly showed that they relied heavily on spelling patterns rather than sound recognition.

"Some words look easy but sound totally different, like enough or laugh. I always get them wrong."
(Student 4 – Fahira)

Words such as through, neighbor, and enough were pronounced phonetically as they appeared in text. Similar findings were noted by Rahmawati (2023), who reported that Indonesian EFL learners' dependence on orthography leads to recurring pronunciation errors. This suggests a lack of exposure to authentic English input, which is

essential for developing accurate pronunciation models.

3. Limited Exposure and Practice Outside the Classroom

The interviews revealed that students had minimal opportunities to use English outside school. While a few mentioned watching English videos or listening to songs, consistent speaking practice was rare. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, limited exposure and low confidence can restrict input processing, preventing learners from acquiring correct pronunciation naturally.

"I sometimes watch YouTube or listen to English songs, but I don't really practice speaking much."
(Student 1 – Danis)

This observation corresponds with the study by Sari (2020), who found that insufficient exposure to spoken English results in weak phonological awareness and persistent pronunciation errors among junior high school students. Both Fahira and Satria displayed low self-confidence and anxiety while reading, often hesitating and lowering their voices during pronunciation tasks.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the analysis revealed that the main pronunciation difficulties faced by seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Falah Johar are influenced by three interconnected factors:

- (1) first language interference in producing foreign sounds,
- (2) confusion caused by English orthography, and
- (3) limited exposure and low confidence in practicing English outside the classroom.

The findings align with Brown's (2004) and Fraser's (2020) theoretical frameworks, reinforcing the importance of pronunciation-focused instruction in early English learning stages. Teachers are encouraged to implement more interactive and communicative pronunciation activities, such as peer correction, listening imitation, and repetition tasks. These practices can help students build both phonological awareness and speaking confidence, leading to more intelligible English pronunciation over time.

D. Kesimpulan

This study concludes that seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Falah Johar experience a range of pronunciation difficulties that influence

their oral communication skills in English. The most prominent challenges identified are the influence of Indonesian phonology on the production of unfamiliar English sounds, particularly /θ/ and /ð/; students' reliance on orthographic forms that causes confusion between spelling and actual pronunciation; and their limited exposure to English input beyond classroom situations. These difficulties were consistently observed through pronunciation performance, supported by students' interview responses expressing anxiety, unfamiliarity, and hesitation when reading English texts aloud. Such results demonstrate that pronunciation remains a fundamental obstacle for EFL learners at the early secondary level and must be recognized as a core component of developing speaking proficiency.

Given these findings, there is a strong need for pronunciation instruction to be integrated more purposefully into English classroom practices. Teachers should create an encouraging learning atmosphere where students feel comfortable practicing pronunciation repeatedly without fear of making mistakes. Strategies such as meaningful peer

interaction, explicit modeling of English stress and intonation, corrective feedback, and increased exposure to authentic spoken English through multimedia resources are recommended to build phonological awareness and confidence. By addressing pronunciation difficulties earlier in students' learning trajectory, educators can help ensure that learners gain clearer, more intelligible speech, improved fluency, and a stronger motivation to communicate using English in both academic and real-life contexts. Strengthening these skills is essential not only for current learning success but also for long-term language development as students progress to higher education levels.

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