



Exploring Pronunciation Difficulties in English Vocabulary Among Slow Learners in an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

This study investigates pronunciation difficulties in English vocabulary experienced by a slow learner in an inclusive classroom. The research aimed to identify the types of pronunciation difficulties and the factors influencing them in classroom practice. A qualitative case study design was employed to explore the phenomenon in its natural setting. The participant was one slow learner in a third-grade inclusive elementary classroom, supported by one English teacher as a key informant. Data were collected through three classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed seven pronunciation difficulties grouped into three dimensions: phonological difficulties (elision of final consonants, sound confusion, vowel errors, and difficulty with consonant clusters), orthographic difficulties (spelling-based pronunciation and letter confusion), and affective difficulties (lack of confidence). These difficulties were interconnected and influenced by first language interference, limited phonological awareness, slower information processing, and classroom learning conditions. The study concludes that pronunciation difficulties experienced by slow learners are multidimensional and require differentiated pronunciation instruction, phonological awareness activities, and supportive learning environments in inclusive classrooms. This study contributes to limited research on slow learners in inclusive EFL settings by highlighting the interaction between phonological, cognitive, orthographic, and affective factors in pronunciation learning.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is foundational to English language learning as it encompasses form, meaning, and usage. Pronunciation, as a critical component of word form (Nation, 2001), directly affects communicative competence in spoken English (Derwing & Munro, 2005). In EFL contexts, students are expected to achieve accurate pronunciation to communicate effectively, yet pronunciation remains one of the most challenging aspects of language learning.

Pronunciation difficulties arise from multiple interacting factors. Linguistic factors, including differences between English and learners' first language phonological systems, cause systematic pronunciation errors (Avery, 1992). Additionally, the inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation creates confusion, particularly because pronunciation often receives less classroom attention than grammar and vocabulary (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Moedjito, 2008). In the Indonesian EFL context specifically, where learners come from a language with relatively transparent orthography and different phonological patterns, these linguistic challenges become especially pronounced.

Slow learners students who process linguistic information at slower rates than peers face compounded pronunciation challenges. Hallahan et al. (2014) define slow learners as having limited phonological awareness and greater susceptibility to first language interference. Ellis (2008) further explains that slow learners' reduced capacity to distinguish sounds and produce accurate pronunciation is rooted in cognitive processing limitations.

From this linguistic and cognitive perspective, pronunciation difficulties in slow learners are not merely performance issues but reflect fundamental constraints in sound processing. When linguistic challenges of English pronunciation combine with cognitive processing limitations inherent in slow learners, the result is a qualitatively different and more persistent difficulty pattern than observed in regular learners.

From a sociocultural perspective, language development depends on responsive teacher support and appropriate scaffolding (Eun, 2016). In inclusive classrooms, where diverse learners study together, uniform instruction fails to address slow learners' needs, potentially widening learning gaps. Hallahan et al. (2014) emphasize that without differentiated teaching strategies, slow learners may face greater difficulties, particularly in tasks requiring auditory discrimination and phonological production. This observation suggests that the classroom environment itself can either mitigate or exacerbate pronunciation difficulties for vulnerable learners.

Previous studies have identified pronunciation error types (Gilakjani, 2012; Nurweni & Read, 1999) and factors such as limited practice and corrective feedback (Fraser, 2000). However, research on slow learners in inclusive classrooms remains scarce. This gap is significant because pronunciation difficulties in slow learners likely involve complex interactions among linguistic (L1 interference), cognitive (processing capacity), and affective (confidence)

factors not yet thoroughly documented. Most existing research has either focused on typical learners or has examined slow learners without specific attention to the inclusive classroom context where these learners must function alongside peers with different learning profiles.

This study explores these dimensions by investigating: *What pronunciation difficulties does a slow learner experience in mastering English vocabulary in an inclusive classroom, and what factors influence these difficulties?* The research contributes theoretically to pronunciation and inclusive education literature, and practically by offering English teachers' evidence-based insights for designing differentiated instruction.

The novelty lies in its specific focus on slow learners' pronunciation within inclusive classroom contexts, a relationship rarely examined in previous research. By examining the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and environmental factors in one case, this study aims to illuminate the complex nature of pronunciation difficulty in slow learners and provide direction for more targeted instructional approaches

2. Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore pronunciation difficulties in English vocabulary experienced by a slow learner in an inclusive elementary classroom. A qualitative case study was chosen to allow an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon in its real-life context using multiple data sources (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted in a third-grade inclusive classroom. The main participant was one slow learner selected through purposive sampling based on characteristics identified by the English teacher. One English teacher was also involved as a key informant to provide additional information regarding the student's learning process and pronunciation performance. The student participant was not interviewed directly because the study focused primarily on observable pronunciation performance and teacher interpretation during classroom interaction. In addition, the researcher considered the participant's limited verbal ability and emotional comfort during the research process.

Data were collected through non-participant classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted three times to directly observe pronunciation during vocabulary learning activities. Each observation session lasted approximately 60 minutes. A semi-structured interview with the English teacher was conducted to obtain information about student characteristics, pronunciation difficulties, and teaching strategies. Documentation of learning activities was used to support and validate the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The instruments used were observation sheets, interview guidelines, and documentation notes. The observation sheet focused on identifying pronunciation difficulties, while the interview guide explored factors influencing these difficulties from the teacher's perspective. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes data familiarization, coding, theme searching, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Observation, interview, and documentation data were analyzed and compared through triangulation to identify consistent pronunciation patterns and supporting classroom factors.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources and techniques. Dependability was maintained through consistent documentation of the research process. Confirmability was ensured by grounding findings in field data, while transferability was supported by providing a clear description of the research context.

Ethical considerations were also observed by maintaining participant confidentiality and using all data only for academic purposes. Since this study focused on one slow learner in a specific inclusive classroom context, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all slow learners, but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

3. Result

Analysis of observation data, teacher interviews, and documentation revealed seven pronunciation difficulties experienced by the slow learner. These findings were grouped into three interconnected clusters: phonological difficulties (elision of final consonants, sound confusion, vowel errors, and difficulty with double consonants), orthographic-phonological difficulties (spelling-based pronunciation and letter confusion), and affective factors (lack of confidence).

3.1 Phonological Difficulties

The learner consistently omitted final consonants, resulting in incomplete phonological forms. The word "jump" /dʒʌmp/ was pronounced as /dʒʌm/, with the final /p/ sound omitted entirely. Similarly, "cold" /kəʊld/ was pronounced as /kəʊl/, while "bird" /bɜːrd/ became /bɜː/, indicating that the learner stopped the pronunciation before producing the final consonants. This pattern appeared consistently across all three observation sessions without noticeable improvement.

The teacher confirmed this pattern during the interview, stating that the learner rarely pronounced final consonants completely and often required individual correction that was difficult to provide during whole-class instruction. These findings suggest that final consonant omission had become a stable pronunciation pattern rather than a temporary error.

Observation data also showed consistent sound confusion through phoneme substitution. In the word “ship” /ʃɪp/, the learner pronounced it as /sɪp/, replacing /ʃ/ with /s/. Likewise, “thick” /θɪk/ became /tɪk/, while “zoo” /zu:/ was pronounced as /su:/. Even after teacher correction, the learner frequently repeated the same substitutions, indicating difficulty distinguishing the sounds auditorily.

The teacher explained that the learner often merged English sounds that seemed similar to him and struggled to recognize differences between unfamiliar phonemes despite repeated exposure. This finding suggests that the learner experienced limited auditory discrimination of English sounds rather than simply a lack of pronunciation practice.

Vowel errors were also found consistently throughout the observations. The learner pronounced “book” /bʊk/ as /bu:k/, lengthening the vowel sound, while “bed” /bɛd/ became /bɪd/. In the word “cat” /kæt/, the learner produced /kɛt/, replacing /æ/ with a more familiar vowel sound. These vowel substitutions recurred across observation sessions even though the vocabulary had been introduced previously in class. Documentation data further showed that the learner continued producing the same vowel errors despite repeated exposure and correction, indicating that the correct vowel patterns had not yet been fully internalized.

Difficulty with double consonants was reflected in the learner’s tendency to insert additional vowels within consonant clusters. The word “drink” /drɪŋk/ was pronounced as /dɛ.rɪŋk/ (“derink”), while “clap” /klæp/ became /kɛ.læp/ (“kelap”). Similarly, “grass” /græs/ was pronounced as /gɛ.ræs/ (“geras”). These insertions occurred naturally and repeatedly, suggesting that the learner unconsciously modified the syllable structure of English words to make them easier to pronounce.

The teacher also stated that the learner consistently inserted vowels between consecutive consonants and often seemed unaware that the additional sounds did not belong to the original word. Documentation further confirmed that consonant cluster materials had already been taught previously, yet the learner showed little improvement across sessions.

3.2 Orthographic-Phonological Difficulties

The learner also demonstrated strong dependence on spelling when pronouncing English vocabulary. Instead of recognizing words as unified sound patterns, the learner pronounced words letter by letter. For example, “sleep” /sli:p/ was pronounced as “es-el-i-pi,” while “rain” /rem/ became “ra-in.” Likewise, “boat” /bout/ was pronounced as “bo-at,” showing that the vowel combination “oa” was treated as separate sounds.

The teacher explained that the learner had developed a strong habit of reading words letter by letter and often failed to recognize that certain English letter combinations should be pronounced as one sound unit. This pattern continued even after repeated correction during classroom activities.

In addition, the learner showed confusion in connecting English letters and sounds accurately. The word “eat” /i:t/ was pronounced as “tai,” while “chair” /tʃeɪr/ became /kair/ because the learner interpreted “c” and “h” separately instead of recognizing “ch” as a single phoneme. Similarly, “phone” /fəʊn/ was pronounced as /pɒn/, indicating that the learner read “ph” as /p/ rather than /f/.

According to the teacher, the learner frequently produced pronunciations that did not match the written form of the word and appeared to have difficulty understanding the relationship between English letters and sounds. Observation and documentation data showed that these errors occurred repeatedly across learning sessions, suggesting that the learner’s grapheme-phoneme understanding remained limited.

3.3 Affective Factor

The learner also displayed hesitation and low confidence during pronunciation activities. During classroom observations, the learner often paused for a long time before attempting to pronounce unfamiliar vocabulary and frequently spoke in a very soft voice. When asked to read aloud in front of the class, the learner appeared tense and sometimes chose not to respond immediately. In contrast, the learner appeared slightly more relaxed when pronouncing vocabulary that had been repeated frequently in class.

The teacher described the learner as quiet and reluctant to speak voluntarily during English lessons, particularly when asked to pronounce new vocabulary in front of peers. These behaviors appeared consistently across all observation sessions, indicating that anxiety and lack of confidence had become barriers that limited the learner’s willingness to practice pronunciation openly in class.

Overall, these seven difficulties formed an interconnected system rather than separate pronunciation problems. The phonological difficulties reflected strong first language influence and limited phonological processing, while spelling-based pronunciation and letter confusion indicated limited understanding of English grapheme-phoneme relationships. At the same time, lack of confidence appeared to strengthen these difficulties by reducing the learner’s willingness to practice pronunciation openly.

Unlike regular learners whose pronunciation errors may gradually improve through exposure, the slow learner’s difficulties remained persistent because linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors interacted simultaneously throughout the learning process.

4. Discussion

The seven pronunciation difficulties identified in this study reflect the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors experienced by the slow learner in the inclusive classroom. These difficulties were not isolated from one another, but appeared simultaneously and continuously throughout classroom learning activities. The recurring patterns across observation sessions indicate that the learner's pronunciation problems were systematic and closely related to the learner's characteristics as a slow learner.

Several findings, including final consonant omission, sound confusion, vowel errors, and difficulty with consonant clusters, demonstrate strong influence from the learner's first language phonological system. The learner frequently simplified unfamiliar English sounds into forms that were easier to pronounce based on Indonesian phonological patterns. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) explain that learners often transfer first language sound patterns when producing unfamiliar English phonemes. Similar findings were reported by Khoirunnisa and Misnadin (2022), who found that Indonesian learners commonly omit final consonants such as /p/, /t/, and /d/.

Likewise, Anjani et al. (2023) found that Indonesian EFL learners often substitute unfamiliar consonants like /θ/ and /ʃ/ with sounds that are more familiar in Indonesian. In this study, these patterns appeared consistently across all observation sessions, suggesting that the learner relied heavily on familiar L1 sound structures when pronouncing English vocabulary.

The learner's vowel errors and difficulty with consonant clusters further support the influence of Indonesian phonological patterns on English pronunciation. English vowels were often simplified into more familiar Indonesian vowel sounds, while consonant clusters were modified through vowel insertion. Diah Dwi Lestari (2020) explains that Indonesian learners frequently experience vowel errors because English contains more complex vowel distinctions than Indonesian.

Similarly, Al Mafalees (2020) states that learners from consonant-vowel language backgrounds tend to insert vowels into unfamiliar consonant clusters as an adaptation strategy. In this study, these pronunciation patterns appeared automatically and repeatedly, indicating that the learner had difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar English sound structures.

However, the pronunciation difficulties found in this study cannot be explained by first language interference alone. The learner also showed limited phonological awareness and difficulty processing unfamiliar sounds, even after repeated teacher correction and modeling. Ellis (2008) explains that limited phonological awareness affects learners' ability to distinguish and reproduce foreign language sounds accurately.

This condition was clearly reflected in the learner's repeated sound substitutions and inability to consistently recognize differences between similar English phonemes. The learner often repeated the same pronunciation errors within the same session, suggesting that the phonological input had not been fully processed or retained. Mukhrizal et al. (2021) emphasize that learners with sound-processing limitations require explicit and structured phonological instruction because repeated exposure alone is often insufficient.

The persistence of these pronunciation patterns also reflects the learner's cognitive limitations as a slow learner. Hallahan et al. (2014) explain that slow learners generally require more repetition, structured guidance, and longer processing time to internalize new information effectively. In this study, pronunciation errors remained relatively unchanged across observation sessions despite repeated classroom exposure.

This suggests that the learner had trouble storing and applying new phonological patterns consistently during pronunciation activities. Therefore, the pronunciation difficulties observed in this study were influenced not only by linguistic transfer, but also by limitations in processing and retaining phonological information.

Besides phonological difficulties, the learner also experienced orthographic confusion reflected in spelling-based pronunciation and letter confusion. The learner frequently pronounced English words letter by letter and interpreted English letter combinations according to Indonesian reading patterns. This finding indicates that the learner relied heavily on written forms rather than recognizing words as unified sound patterns. Bassetti et al. (2022) explain that learners who have not mastered grapheme-phoneme correspondence tend to depend on orthographic forms during pronunciation.

Similarly, Andestopano and Datuk (2024) state that English spelling inconsistencies create challenges for Indonesian learners who are accustomed to more transparent orthographic systems. In this study, the learner's difficulty understanding English letter-sound relationships appeared to strengthen pronunciation errors, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary.

Another important finding was the learner's lack of confidence during pronunciation activities. The learner frequently hesitated, paused for long periods, and spoke very softly when asked to pronounce unfamiliar words. These behaviors indicate that pronunciation difficulties gradually developed into affective barriers that reduced the learner's willingness to participate orally in classroom interaction. Krashen (1982), through the Affective Filter Hypothesis, explains that anxiety and low self-confidence can interfere with language acquisition because learners become reluctant to engage actively in communication.

Similar findings were identified by Baran-Łucarz (2014), who found that pronunciation anxiety negatively affects learners' willingness to communicate in foreign language classrooms. In this study, the learner's silence and hesitation

appeared to be responses to repeated experiences of pronunciation difficulty during English lessons.

The inclusive classroom context also appeared to influence the learner's pronunciation development. Although the learner participated in the same classroom activities as other students, the instructional support observed during pronunciation practice remained relatively general and had not fully addressed the learner's specific learning needs. Eun (2016) emphasizes that inclusive classrooms require responsive and differentiated scaffolding to support learners with diverse characteristics effectively.

In this study, the limited individualized support may have reduced the learner's opportunity to practice pronunciation more confidently and receive intensive phonological guidance suited to the learner's pace and needs.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that pronunciation difficulties experienced by the slow learner were multidimensional and interconnected. Linguistic factors such as first language interference interacted with cognitive limitations in processing phonological information, while repeated pronunciation difficulties gradually contributed to affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence.

These interacting factors explain why the learner's pronunciation difficulties persisted across classroom sessions despite repeated exposure to English vocabulary. Therefore, pronunciation difficulties in slow learners should not be viewed simply as isolated pronunciation errors, but as broader learning challenges that require differentiated instruction, explicit phonological support, repeated guided practice, and supportive classroom environments.

This study also contributes to pronunciation and inclusive education research by providing a detailed qualitative description of how phonological, cognitive, orthographic, and affective factors interact simultaneously in shaping pronunciation difficulties among slow learners in inclusive EFL classrooms. Unlike previous studies that mainly focused on general EFL learners, this study highlights that pronunciation difficulties in slow learners involve more complex and interconnected challenges that require more responsive instructional approaches.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the pronunciation difficulties experienced by the slow learner in an inclusive classroom are multidimensional and interconnected across phonological, orthographic, cognitive, and affective aspects. The learner experienced seven pronunciation difficulties, namely elision of final consonants, sound confusion, vowel errors, difficulty with consonant clusters, spelling-based pronunciation, letter confusion, and lack of confidence. These difficulties were influenced by first language phonological interference, limited phonological awareness, cognitive limitations in processing English sounds, and affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence.

The findings indicate that pronunciation difficulties in slow learners cannot be addressed through uniform instruction because inclusive classrooms require differentiated and supportive teaching approaches. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to apply explicit pronunciation instruction, phonological awareness activities, IPA guidance, and constructive corrective feedback within supportive classroom environments. This study also contributes to limited research on slow learners in inclusive EFL classrooms by demonstrating that pronunciation difficulties involve interconnected linguistic, cognitive, and psychological dimensions.

However, since this study focused on one participant in a specific classroom context, the findings cannot be generalized broadly. Future studies are recommended to involve more participants and develop specific pronunciation intervention strategies for slow learners in inclusive educational settings.

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