



Voicing Contrast Difficulties in Indonesian EFL Pronunciation

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Article Info	Abstract
Accepted: 2026-05-11 Revised: 2026-05-17 Accepted: 2026-06-24 Keywords: Indonesian EFL learners; pronunciation errors; segmental pronunciation; spoken intelligibility; voicing contrast DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10524 Corresponding authors: Reza Bakhrun Fidianto Pade rezabakhrun.2024@student.uny.ac.id Sekolah Pascasarjana, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Sleman, DI Yogyakarta	<i>Pronunciation remains an important issue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because unclear sound production may affect spoken intelligibility and learners' confidence in oral communication. This study investigates segmental pronunciation errors made by Indonesian EFL students in pronouncing English words, particularly voiced consonants. The study employed a descriptive qualitative design involving ten English Department students at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. The data were collected through students' recorded reading of an English text and supported by semi-structured interviews to explore the possible causes of the errors. The pronunciation data were analyzed by identifying, classifying, and interpreting the students' sound production based on pronunciation error categories, while the interview data was used to strengthen the interpretation of the findings. The results showed that the students frequently substituted voiced consonants with voiceless sounds, particularly /v/ with /f/, /d/ with /t/ or omission in final position, and /z/ with /s/. These errors indicate that voicing contrast remains challenging for Indonesian EFL learners because some voiced consonants are absent or differently distributed in Indonesian phonology. Such substitutions may affect intelligibility because they can make words sound less accurate or closer to other English words. The interview findings further revealed that unfamiliar vocabulary, limited pronunciation exposure, lack of practice, and difficulty distinguishing similar sounds contributed to the students' pronunciation errors. The study concludes that pronunciation instruction should give more explicit attention to segmental contrasts, especially voiced and voiceless consonants, to support clearer and more intelligible spoken English among Indonesian EFL learners.</i>

1. Introduction

Pronunciation remains an important concern in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it directly influences how clearly learners communicate in spoken interaction. Inaccurate pronunciation may lead to different interpretations between speakers and listeners, especially when the mispronounced sounds affect word meaning (Yulianti, Marhum, & Kamaruddin, 2025). In pronunciation studies, the goal of pronunciation learning is no longer limited to sounding like native speakers, but is increasingly directed toward achieving intelligible, comprehensible, and communicatively effective speech.

As globalization advances, oral English skills are increasingly essential not only for classroom performance but also for broader intercultural communication (Farhan, Dahnilsyah, & Novitri, 2025). Therefore, pronunciation instruction needs to help learners produce English sounds clearly enough to support meaning, reduce misunderstanding, and increase confidence in oral communication.

Pronunciation competence involves both segmental and suprasegmental features. Segmental features include individual sounds such as consonants and vowels, while suprasegmental features include stress, rhythm, and intonation (Ahmed, 2022; Arini, Dinata, S., & Lubis, 2024; Lubis, Lathifah, & Sakinah, 2025). Both aspects contribute to spoken clarity, but segmental errors remain important because inaccurate production of particular consonants or vowels may change how words are understood. Recent studies have also emphasized that learners' spoken competence depends on their ability to control both sound production and prosodic features in communication (Datau, 2025; Lutfiah, Alfrans, Saragih, Hasibuan, & Simanjuntak, 2025; Novika, 2025; Yulianawati, Khotimah, Merviarizky, & Putri, 2025).

For Indonesian EFL learners, English pronunciation can be challenging because English and Indonesian have different phonological systems. Some English sounds are absent, less frequent, or distributed differently in Indonesian (Ristati, Bahing, Haryani, Retsi, & Amalia, 2025; Widhiastuti, Arvianti, & Heriyanto, 2022). As a result, learners may substitute unfamiliar English sounds with sounds that are more familiar in their first language. This issue can be understood through the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which explains that differences between the first language and the target language may create learning difficulties (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957). In pronunciation learning, these differences may appear when learners transfer familiar sound patterns from Indonesian into English pronunciation.

One important phonological challenge is voicing contrast, especially when learners need to distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants. In English, sounds such as /v/, /d/, and /z/ carry important phonological distinctions. However, Indonesian learners may pronounce them as /f/, /t/, and /s/, especially when the sounds occur in unfamiliar words or final word positions (Hara, Siregar, Suhery, & Rangkuti, 2024). This pattern can also be understood through Interlanguage

Phonology, which views learners' pronunciation as a developing system influenced by both the first language and the target language (Barone, 2024). Therefore, errors such as /v/ pronounced as /f/, /d/ pronounced as /t/, and /z/ pronounced as /s/ should not be seen merely as isolated mistakes, but as systematic segmental production issues in learners' developing English pronunciation.

Recent studies show that pronunciation errors among Indonesian EFL learners remain a relevant research issue. Novika (2025) found that segmental features such as /θ/, /ð/, /v/, and vowel length contrasts, along with suprasegmental aspects such as word stress and intonation, create challenges that may affect learners' speaking confidence and communicative engagement. Yulianawati et al. (2025) also reported that pronunciation problems are influenced by first language interference, limited phonetic awareness, and insufficient exposure to English pronunciation models. These findings indicate that pronunciation research is still necessary, particularly when it focuses on specific sound patterns and their implications for intelligibility and communicative effectiveness.

However, many pronunciation-error studies still describe learner errors in a broad way without focusing deeply on the phonological pattern behind the errors. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on voiced–voiceless consonant substitution in the production of /v/, /d/, and /z/. Based on this background, the present article aims to examine voicing contrast difficulties in the pronunciation of Indonesian EFL students.

This article is guided by two research questions: (1) What pronunciation errors are made by Indonesian EFL students in English words? and (2) What factors contribute to the students' pronunciation errors? The novelty of this article lies in its attempt to reframe pronunciation-error analysis from a general description of errors into a focused discussion of voiced–voiceless consonant substitution and its pedagogical implications for Indonesian EFL pronunciation instruction. By doing so, the study is expected to contribute to pronunciation teaching by highlighting the need for explicit attention to segmental voicing contrasts to support clearer and more intelligible spoken English.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine pronunciation errors made by Indonesian EFL students by identifying, classifying, and interpreting their spoken production. The participants were ten English Department students at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo who had passed the Speaking for General Communication course with a minimum grade of B+. They were selected because they had received basic speaking and pronunciation instruction and shared a similar academic background as Indonesian EFL learners. The data were collected through a reading-aloud task and semi-structured interviews.

The reading text was selected because it contained English words with irregular spelling–sound relationships and phonological targets relevant to the study, particularly voiced consonants such as /v/, /d/, and /z/, as well as sound sequences that could indicate cluster-related problems. The students’ voices were recorded, transcribed, and compared with IPA-based pronunciation references to identify inaccurate sound production. The errors were then classified based on Ramelan’s pronunciation-error categories, especially the different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features and clusters of sounds in English words.

The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify factors contributing to the errors, such as unfamiliar vocabulary, limited pronunciation exposure, lack of practice, and difficulty distinguishing similar sounds. To strengthen trustworthiness, the recorded data, IPA-based pronunciation references, error classifications, and interview responses were compared repeatedly to ensure consistency and support the interpretation of the students’ pronunciation errors.

3. Results

The Different Distributions of Sounds with Similar Phonetic Features

The first pronunciation problem found in the data were related to the different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features. This type of problem occurs when certain sounds exist in both the native language and the target language but differ in their distribution or position within words. In this study, this category became the most dominant pronunciation problem. The errors appeared in the production of /v/, /d/, and /z/. The participants tended to replace voiced consonants with voiceless consonants, especially when the target sounds occurred in unfamiliar words or in final word position.

Table 1. Types of Voicing Contrast Errors in Students’ Pronunciation

Target Sound	Error Pattern	Example Words	Expected Pronunciation	Students’ Production
/v/	/v/ pronounced as /f/	<i>verse, river, alive, seven</i>	/vɜːs/, /ˈrɪvə(r)/, /əˈlaɪv/, /ˈsevən/	/fɜːs/, /ˈrɪfə(r)/, /əˈlaɪf/, /ˈsefən/
/d/	/d/ pronounced as /t/ or omitted	<i>wind, blood, should, stowed</i>	/wɪnd/, /blʌd/, /ʃʊd/, /stəʊd/	/wɪn/ or /wɪnt/, /blʌt/, /ʃʊt/, /stəʊt/
/z/	/z/ pronounced as /s/	<i>does, busy, measles, leisure</i>	/dʌz/, /ˈbɪzi/, /ˈmiːzlz/, /ˈleɪzə(r)/	/dʌs/, /ˈbɪsi/, /ˈmiːsəls/, /ˈlesə(r)/

The first error in this category appeared in the pronunciation of /v/. The data showed that the students frequently pronounced /v/ as /f/. This error occurred in different word positions. For example, in initial position, the word *verse* was

pronounced as /fɜ:s/ instead of /vɜ:s/. In medial position, the word river was pronounced as /'rɪfə(r)/ instead of /'rɪvə(r)/. In final position, the word alive was pronounced as /ə'laɪf/ instead of /ə'laɪv/. This finding indicates that the students had difficulty maintaining the voiced quality of /v/ and tended to replace it with the voiceless sound /f/.

The second error appeared in the pronunciation of /d/. Unlike /v/, the errors in /d/ mostly occurred in final position. The students tended to pronounce final /d/ as /t/ or omit the sound completely. For example, the word wind was pronounced as /wɪn/ or /wɪnt/ instead of /wɪnd/. The word blood was pronounced as /blʌt/, while should was pronounced as /ʃʊt/. This shows that final voiced consonants were difficult for the students to produce clearly. The difficulty was not only related to the sound itself, but also to the position of the sound at the end of the word.

The third error appeared in the pronunciation of /z/. The data showed that the students frequently pronounced /z/ as /s/. For example, the word does was pronounced as /dʌs/ instead of /dʌz/, and the word busy was pronounced as /'bɪsi/ instead of /'bɪzi/. Similar errors were also found in words such as measles, topsails, aisles, exiles, similes, and reviles. This finding indicates that the students tended to devoice /z/ and replace it with /s/. Therefore, the errors in /v/, /d/, and /z/ show a similar pattern, namely the replacement of voiced consonants with voiceless consonants.

Table 2. Distribution of Pronunciation Error Categories

Pronunciation Category	Error Pattern	Participants Affected	Percentage	Interpretation
Different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features	/v/ → /f/	10 of 10	100%	Dominant error
Different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features	/d/ → /t/ or omission	10 of 10	100%	Dominant error, especially in final position
Different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features	/z/ → /s/	10 of 10	100%	Dominant error

Pronunciation Category	Error Pattern	Participants Affected	Percentage	Interpretation
A cluster of sounds in some English words	No significant error found	0 of 10	0%	Not a dominant error category

The distribution shows that all participants produced errors in the category of different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features. The errors consistently appeared in the production of /v/, /d/, and /z/. Among these errors, /d/ showed a clearer positional pattern because it mostly occurred in final word position, while /v/ and /z/ appeared in various word positions. This comparison suggests that final-position voiced consonants created a particular challenge for the participants, while voiced fricatives also caused difficulty when the learners relied on more familiar voiceless sounds.

A Cluster of Sounds in Some English Words

The second category analyzed in this study was a cluster of sounds in some English words. This type of pronunciation problem occurs when sounds that are familiar in both languages become difficult because they appear together in a cluster or sequence. In the original study, this category was included because the reading text contained several English words with sound clusters. However, the data showed that the participants did not produce significant pronunciation errors that could be classified under this category.

This finding indicates that consonant clusters were not the main pronunciation problem for the participants in this study. Although consonant clusters are often considered difficult for Indonesian EFL learners, the students in this study were able to pronounce the cluster sounds without producing errors that were strong enough to be categorized as a dominant finding. This may be because the participants were English Department students who had already received speaking and pronunciation instruction. Therefore, the main pronunciation problem found in the data were not sound clustering, but the production of voiced consonants, especially /v/, /d/, and /z/.

Summary of Pronunciation Errors

Overall, the results show that the students' pronunciation errors were mainly found in the category of different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features. The most dominant errors involved the substitution of voiced consonants with voiceless consonants. The sound /v/ was pronounced as /f/, /d/ was pronounced as /t/ or omitted in final position, and /z/ was pronounced as /s/.

Meanwhile, the category of a cluster of sounds in some English words did not appear as a major error category in the data. These findings are consistent with the findings, which reported that all participants produced errors in /v/, /d/, and /z/, while no significant data were found for the cluster-sound category.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that the participants' pronunciation errors were mainly found in the category of different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features. The most dominant errors appeared in the production of /v/, /d/, and /z/, in which voiced consonants were frequently replaced by their voiceless counterparts. The sound /v/ was pronounced as /f/, /d/ was pronounced as /t/ or omitted in final position, and /z/ was pronounced as /s/. This pattern suggests that the errors were not random but systematically related to voicing contrast difficulty. From the perspective of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, this difficulty may occur because learners tend to transfer familiar sound patterns from their first language when producing sounds in the target language (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957). In this case, the participants appeared to rely on more familiar voiceless consonants when they had difficulty maintaining voicing in English consonants.

The substitution of /v/ with /f/ shows that the learners' problem was not mainly related to articulatory placement, but to the ability to maintain voicing. The sounds /v/ and /f/ are both labiodental fricatives, meaning that they are produced with similar lip and teeth positions (Kafryawan & Zulihi, 2023). However, they differ in voicing because /v/ requires vocal cord vibration while /f/ does not. When the participants pronounced words such as *verse*, *river*, *alive*, and *seven* with /f/, they were able to approximate the place and manner of articulation, but they did not consistently produce the voiced feature. This finding supports the idea that segmental production issues among EFL learners may involve fine phonological distinctions rather than complete inability to pronounce a sound (Yulianti et al., 2025).

The pronunciation of /d/ showed a more specific positional pattern. Unlike /v/, which occurred in several word positions, the /d/ errors mostly appeared in final position. The participants often pronounced final /d/ as /t/ or omitted it completely, as seen in words such as *wind*, *blood*, *should*, and *stowed*. This finding indicates that final-position voiced consonants were especially difficult because learners had to maintain voicing at the end of a word. In Indonesian phonological patterns, final voiced stops are less commonly maintained as fully voiced sounds (Hara et al., 2024). Therefore, when the participants encountered English words ending in /d/, they tended to devoice the sound or delete it. This pattern is important because final consonant accuracy can influence word clarity and may create confusion between words such as *wind* and *win*.

A similar pattern appeared in the production of /z/. The participants frequently pronounced /z/ as /s/ in words such as *does*, *busy*, *measles*, and *leisure*. Since /z/ and /s/ share the same place and manner of articulation but differ in voicing, this error again demonstrates difficulty in controlling voiced consonant production. The replacement of /z/ with /s/ may reduce spoken accuracy and intelligibility, especially when the mispronounced sound occurs in words where voicing carries grammatical or lexical meaning. For instance, pronouncing *does* as /dʌs/ may make the word sound less accurate and potentially disrupt listeners' understanding in spoken interaction.

These findings can also be understood through Interlanguage Theory since the participants' pronunciation reflects a developing linguistic system influenced by both Indonesian and English. Their errors were not merely accidental mistakes, but repeated patterns that showed how learners reorganized English sounds using familiar phonological resources (Wael, Hartanti, Ohorella, & Keliwawa, 2025). In this sense, the substitutions of /v/ with /f/, /d/ with /t/, and /z/ with /s/ represent systematic interlanguage forms. This reinforces the idea that pronunciation errors should be analyzed not only as incorrect production, but also as evidence of learners' developing phonological knowledge.

The interview results provide further explanation for the pronunciation errors. Many participants stated that the difficult words were unfamiliar, rarely heard, or rarely used in daily communication. This suggests that limited exposure played an important role in the errors since learners do not know how a word sounds, they may rely heavily on spelling (Abdalla & Mohammed, 2025; Azizah, Isnani, Rambe, & Lubis, 2026; Putri et al., 2023). This is problematic in English because the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is often inconsistent. As a result, unfamiliar vocabulary may increase the possibility of pronunciation errors, particularly when the words contain sounds that are absent or differently distributed in the learners' first language.

Limited pronunciation practice also contributed to the errors where some participants explained that they rarely practiced pronouncing new or difficult words. Pronunciation learning requires repeated exposure and articulatory training because learners need to develop both awareness and physical control of target sounds (Hindeme, Egounleti, Kottin, & Dossavi, 2025; Khan & Farooq, 2026). Without sufficient practice, learners may know the expected pronunciation but still fail to produce it accurately in speech. The repeated replacement of /v/, /d/, and /z/ with /f/, /t/, and /s/ shows that the participants needed more focused practice in producing voiced consonants.

Another important factor is the difficulty in distinguishing similar sounds. The pairs /v/-/f/, /d/-/t/, and /z/-/s/ are similar in articulation but different in voicing. If learners cannot clearly hear the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds, they may also struggle to produce them accurately (Azizah et al., 2026; Lutfiah et al., 2025). Therefore, pronunciation instruction should not only focus on

production, but also on perception. Learners need to be trained to notice and hear sound contrasts before they can consistently apply them in spoken communication.

The findings are also relevant to intelligibility-based pronunciation teaching. In the context of English as a Lingua Franca, the goal of pronunciation instruction is not to make learners sound like native speakers, but to help them speak clearly and effectively in communication (Caleffi, 2023; Ikhsan & Panjaitan, 2025; Salsavira, Aulia, Siregar, & Lubis, 2025). From this perspective, the errors found in this study are important because voiced-voiceless substitutions may affect word clarity. Although not every pronunciation error causes misunderstanding, repeated errors in voicing contrast can reduce comprehensibility, especially in academic or formal speaking contexts. Therefore, pronunciation teaching should focus on sound features that have potential effects on intelligibility.

Interestingly, the category of a cluster of sounds in some English words did not appear as a major error category. This finding suggests that consonant clusters were not the main difficulty for the participants, even though they are often considered challenging for Indonesian EFL learners. One possible explanation is that the participants were English Department students who had passed a speaking course, so they may have had enough exposure to English sound clusters. However, their ability to handle consonant clusters did not mean that they had fully mastered English segmental pronunciation. The data showed that their main difficulty was more specific: producing voiced consonants accurately.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that pronunciation instruction should be more diagnostic and focused. Teachers should not assume that all pronunciation features are equally difficult for learners. In this study, voicing contrasts were more problematic than consonant clusters. Therefore, classroom activities should give more explicit attention to voiced and voiceless consonant pairs. Teachers can use minimal-pair exercises such as fan-van, sip-zip, and bet-bed to help learners notice the difference between sounds. Listening discrimination activities can also be used before production practice so that learners first develop awareness of the contrast.

In addition, technology-assisted pronunciation learning may support students' independent practice. Online dictionaries with audio models, speech recording tools, pronunciation applications, and automatic speech recognition tools can help learners compare their pronunciation with target models. These tools may also reduce pronunciation anxiety because students can practice repeatedly before speaking in front of others. Since pronunciation problems may affect learner confidence, teachers need to create supportive classroom practices where correction is given constructively, and learners are encouraged to improve gradually.

Overall, the findings confirm that the participants' pronunciation errors were systematic and meaningful. The dominant pattern involved voiced consonants becoming voiceless consonants, especially /v/ to /f/, /d/ to /t/ or omission, and

/z/ to /s/. These errors indicate that voicing contrast remains a relevant issue in Indonesian EFL pronunciation learning. The interview findings further show that unfamiliar vocabulary, limited exposure, lack of practice, and difficulty distinguishing similar sounds contributed to the errors. Therefore, pronunciation instruction should move beyond general correction and focus more explicitly on segmental features that affect spoken clarity, intelligibility, and learner confidence.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that the pronunciation errors made by the students were mainly found in the category of the different distributions of sounds with similar phonetic features. The most dominant errors appeared in the production of the voiced consonants /v/, /d/, and /z/. The students frequently pronounced /v/ as /f/, /d/ as /t/ or omitted it in final position, and /z/ as /s/. These errors indicate that the students had difficulty maintaining voicing when producing certain English consonants. Therefore, the main pronunciation problem found in this study was not merely incorrect pronunciation of individual words, but a consistent pattern of voiced–voiceless substitution.

The findings also show that a cluster of sounds in some English words did not appear as a significant error category in the data. This means that, although consonant clusters were considered as one possible pronunciation problem, they were not the dominant difficulty experienced by the participants in this study. The students' main difficulty was more clearly related to producing voiced consonants accurately, especially in unfamiliar words and final word positions.

The interview results further indicate that the pronunciation errors were influenced by several factors, including unfamiliar vocabulary, limited exposure to English pronunciation, lack of pronunciation practice, and difficulty distinguishing similar sounds. However, the findings of this study should not be generalized to all Indonesian EFL learners because the participants were limited to ten English Department students from one university. The study also focused only on selected segmental sounds and did not examine other pronunciation aspects such as vowels, word stress, intonation, or connected speech.

Based on the findings, English teachers and lecturers are suggested to give more explicit attention to voiced and voiceless consonant contrasts in pronunciation instruction. Sounds such as /v/ and /f/, /d/ and /t/, and /z/ and /s/ should be practiced through listening discrimination, minimal-pair exercises, reading aloud, and guided pronunciation correction. Students also need more exposure to unfamiliar English words so that they do not rely only on spelling when pronouncing words.

For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct studies with a larger number of participants and different proficiency levels to obtain broader findings. Further research may also examine other pronunciation features, such as vowel sounds, consonant clusters, stress, intonation, or connected speech. In addition,

future studies may investigate the effectiveness of specific pronunciation teaching strategies in helping Indonesian EFL learners improve their production of voiced consonants.

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