



Student Difficulties in English Language Pronunciation: A Qualitative Study of Tenth-Grade Students at Senior High School

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Abstract

The object of this study is to investigate the student difficulties in pronunciation of student MAN 2 Model Medan. The research design used qualitative research with observation and interviews as data collection techniques, the participants in this study were tenth-grade students, namely Rara, Mutia, and Faika. The results showed that the students encountered various challenges, including difficulties in differentiating similar sounds for example live vs. leave, see vs. sea, incorrect use of stress and intonation, and lack of fluency caused by low confidence. These problems were influenced by first language interference, limited phonological awareness, and psychological barriers such as nervousness and fear of making mistakes. The study also found that pronunciation instruction was rarely prioritized in the classroom, as English lessons focused more on grammar and vocabulary. Although some students attempted to overcome their problems through independent practice, such as using YouTube, these efforts were not consistent. This research suggests that teachers should implement more student-centered approaches to teaching pronunciation. Regular practice, constructive feedback, and supportive learning environments are needed to help students build confidence, reduce anxiety, and improve their ability to communicate effectively in English.

Keywords: *pronunciation, student difficulty, phonological awareness, confidence, English learning*

Introduction

Pronunciation is one of the essential aspects of mastering the English language, as it plays a crucial role in ensuring effective communication. Learners who have good grammar and vocabulary may still experience communication barriers if their pronunciation is not understood by listeners. According to Burns

and Claire (2003), good pronunciation is necessary to achieve three primary goals: intelligibility (producing recognizable English sound patterns), comprehensibility (being easily understood), and interpretability (delivering clear meaning and intention). The difficulty in learning to pronounce a foreign language is not merely physical or technical but more cognitive in nature. As Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) explain, the core challenge lies in how learners mentally process and categorize the sounds of the target language, which differ from the sound patterns they have internalized in childhood through their first language (L1).

Thus, pronunciation problems often stem from conceptual differences in how sounds are perceived and produced. One of the primary causes of mispronunciation is interference from the learner's native language. Hassan (2014) found that learners tend to substitute English sounds that do not exist in their first language with the closest similar sounds they are familiar with, such as replacing /θ/ with /s/, /ð/ with /z/, or /p/ with /b/. This issue is also prevalent among Indonesian learners since Bahasa Indonesia is a syllable-timed language, while English is stress-timed, causing difficulty in adapting to English speech rhythm (Hodgetts, 2020 in Kosasih, 2021).

Another contributing factor is the lack of phonological awareness, or the learner's ability to distinguish and identify sounds such as vowels, consonants, diphthongs, and triphthongs. Without a clear understanding of how to articulate these sounds, learners struggle with accurate pronunciation (Hişmanoğlu, 2011 in Kosasih, 2021). Errors occur not only at the segmental level (individual sounds) but also at the suprasegmental level, which includes word stress, intonation, and rhythm. Munro and Derwing (1999) argue that errors in suprasegmental features have a greater impact on intelligibility than simple phonetic errors. Psychological factors also play a significant role.

Students often feel embarrassed, anxious, or insecure when attempting to pronounce English words, especially when influenced by their local accent. These affective factors hinder their willingness to practice and improve (Lasabuda, 2017). Moreover, many teachers do not give adequate attention to pronunciation in the classroom. Harmer (2001, in Ahmad, 2019) notes that this neglect is due to limited time, lack of suitable teaching materials, or the belief that pronunciation is too difficult and unengaging for students. There is also a disconnect between students' and teachers' perceptions. Derwing and Rossiter (2002) found that students generally regard pronunciation as an important component of English learning, while many teachers view it as less important or too difficult to teach (cited in Toçi, 2020).

This misalignment can be a barrier to achieving optimal pronunciation competence among learners. Motivation and corrective feedback are also critical factors. Dörnyei & Csizer (1998) emphasize that without strong motivation, even capable learners will struggle to make long-term progress in pronunciation. Additionally, feedback from teachers is essential to help learners become aware of

their mistakes and correct them accordingly (Kosasih, 2021). Based on the above theories, it can be concluded that pronunciation difficulties among university students are influenced by a combination of linguistic factors (sound system differences), cognitive aspects (conceptualizing unfamiliar sounds), psychological elements (shyness, anxiety), and pedagogical shortcomings (limited pronunciation instruction). A comprehensive approach is therefore necessary to understand and address these challenges effectively.

Pronunciation is a key part of learning English, especially in speaking. If words are not pronounced correctly, it can lead to misunderstandings in communication. As Srakaew (2021) explained, mispronouncing even a single word can completely change the meaning of a sentence and cause communication breakdowns. In reality, many students at the MAN/SMA level struggle with English pronunciation due to several reasons, such as the influence of their first language (mother tongue), lack of speaking practice, and limited focus on pronunciation by teachers during English lessons. Although pronunciation is very important, it often gets less attention in the classroom compared to other skills like grammar or vocabulary. Teachers usually emphasize grammar rules and vocabulary memorization, while pronunciation is seen as secondary.

However, as Arifah and Budiastuti (2022) pointed out, even students with excellent grammar may not be understood if their pronunciation is poor. On the other hand, a student with good pronunciation can still communicate effectively, even if their grammar isn't perfect. This shows how pronunciation is the foundation of spoken English and shouldn't be underestimated. Most previous studies on pronunciation difficulties have focused on university students, especially those in English education programs. For example, the study by Ammar et al. (2022) examined second-semester university students who had already taken pronunciation courses. Also, many studies have used a teacher centered approach, focusing more on teaching techniques than on the learner's own experiences.

This leaves a gap in research, especially at the high school level. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by focusing specifically on MAN/SMA students and using a learner centered perspective that explores student's real struggles with English pronunciation. Common pronunciation problems among Indonesian students include difficulties pronouncing sounds like /θ/, /ð/, /v/, and diphthongs such as [aʊ], [aɪ], and [oʊ]. These sounds don't exist in Bahasa Indonesia or local languages like Banjarese or Minang. As noted by Donal (2016) and Amalia (2023), students often replace or skip these sounds because they aren't familiar with them. Moreover, some students have learned incorrect pronunciation from the start, forming bad habits that are difficult to fix later on (these are known as fossilized errors).

The purpose of this study is to identify the types of pronunciation difficulties experienced by MAN/SMA students, to find out what causes these problems such as the influence of their first language, limited practice opportunities, and lack of

pronunciation focused teaching and to explore how these difficulties affect students' ability to communicate in English. This research is expected to be useful in several ways. For teachers, it can serve as a reminder to pay more attention to teaching pronunciation in class. For students, it can help them recognize and improve their weaknesses in speaking. And for future researchers, this study can be a reference for further studies on English pronunciation problems at the senior high school level. By understanding these challenges more clearly, we can help make English learning at the high school level more effective, engaging, and meaningful.

Pronunciation is a crucial part of English language skills, especially in spoken communication. Clear and accurate pronunciation helps speakers convey their intended message effectively to listeners. According to Hornby (1987), pronunciation refers to how words are spoken in a language. Seidlhofer (2001) adds that pronunciation is the process of producing and understanding the significant sounds of a language in order to convey meaning during communication. In other words, pronunciation is not only about saying a word correctly, but also involves using intonation, stress, rhythm, and voice quality to ensure clarity of speech. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, pronunciation plays a major role in communication success. Harmer (2001) emphasizes that the meaning of a sentence can be affected by the way it is pronounced.

A mispronounced word can lead to misunderstandings. Yates and Zelinski (2014) also highlight that pronunciation involves both segmental aspects (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental aspects such as intonation, stress, and rhythm all of which contribute to how clearly a speaker is understood. However, pronunciation is considered one of the most difficult aspects for EFL learners, including Indonesian students. Many learners face challenges when pronouncing certain English sounds because their first language (L1) has a different phonological system. For example, in Bahasa Indonesia, most letters are pronounced exactly as they are written.

In contrast, English does not have a consistent relationship between spelling and sound. Words like *tough*, *though*, and *through* are spelled similarly but pronounced very differently, often confusing students. Donal (2016) found that Indonesian students struggle to pronounce diphthongs like [aʊ], [eɪ], [aɪ], as well as consonants such as /θ/, /ð/, and /v/, since these sounds do not exist in their native language. Amalia (2023) similarly noted that students often have trouble distinguishing between voiced and voiceless consonants and tend to insert extra vowels when dealing with consonant clusters (e.g., *asked*, *clothes*).

Another major factor that contributes to pronunciation difficulties is limited listening and speaking practice. Arifah and Budiastuti (2022) reported that many students are not exposed to native speaker pronunciation and are therefore unaware of how words should actually be pronounced. This lack of exposure often

results in repeated pronunciation errors, even after years of English learning. The same study also revealed that poor pronunciation can lower students' confidence and hinder their ability to express themselves clearly in spoken English. Additionally, ineffective teaching practices and curriculum limitations worsen the problem. Pronunciation is often treated as a minor component in English lessons. Gilbert (2010) described pronunciation as the "orphan" of language teaching frequently overlooked and under-taught in classrooms.

In many Indonesian schools, including at the senior high school level, pronunciation is only taught briefly and not given much assessment or practice time. Internal and external factors influence students' pronunciation difficulties. Internal factors include lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and incorrect pronunciation habits learned from peers or teachers. External factors include limited teacher knowledge in phonetics and overemphasis on grammar instruction. A study by Ammar et al. (2022) found that students commonly mispronounced sounds like [θ], [ð], and [v], as well as diphthongs such as [eɪ] and [oʊ], because these were not explicitly taught. Many students had also developed incorrect pronunciation patterns early on and continued using them throughout their learning process.

Considering all these findings, it can be concluded that pronunciation is a vital skill in English language learning that directly affects speaking fluency and listener comprehension. However, it remains a major challenge for students. To address this issue, teaching approaches must focus more on practical pronunciation training using audio-visual aids, regular phonetic drills, and techniques that emphasize sound recognition rather than rote memorization. Improving the way pronunciation is taught especially at the high school level can help students become more confident and effective English speakers.

Method

This study uses qualitative research this design to describe and explain in detail the difficulties faced by students in pronouncing English. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore participants real experiences and perspectives. As Creswell (2007) points out, qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning from participants points of view, using approaches such as case study, narrative, or ethnography. In this research, qualitative data analysis involves an interpretative approach. The researcher looks for meaning in the data, and uses narrative analysis methods related to the data collected. The researcher relied on this method to help classify and interpretation in pronunciation errors, the factors causing those errors, and the psychological in internal or external influences behind them. This process, help the researcher building an understanding of student's pronunciation difficulties and how these challenges impact their English learning.

The participants of this study were tenth-grade students at MAN 2 Model Medan. The sample of this participant was selected using the purposive sampling because it was chosen intentionally based on the purpose of research and had characteristics that were relevant to the research. In addition, there are two reasons why the researcher chose tenth grade student as participant, firstly they had already been introduced to English pronunciation and secondly, they showed interest in learning and practicing English. Therefore, they are suitable to be the source of data in this study.

The data collection techniques used in this study were observations and interviews. Observations were conducted to write students verbal behavior during English speaking activities, especially when they struggled with difficult words. Meanwhile, interviews were carried out with selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions of pronunciation difficulties. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, which allowed the students to share their challenges in pronunciation English.

Results

Based on the analysis, three main types of student's pronunciation difficulties were found at Man 2 Model Medan:

1. Difficulty in Differentiating Similar Sounds

This difficulty was identified from students' inability to distinguish between words with similar pronunciation. This can be seen from the result student stated during the interview said: "It is difficult for me to differentiate words like live and leave, or see and sea." (Student interview, Faika). This shows that students still lack phonological awareness when dealing with minimal pairs.

2. Difficulty in Stress and Intonation

Another difficulty lies in the incorrect use of stress and intonation. The observation revealed that students often pronounced words monotonously, without applying the correct stress pattern. This can be seen from the result student stated during the interview said: "I often feel confused about how to put the right stress when speaking English." (Student interview, Rara). This indicates that suprasegmental features remain a challenge for many learners.

3. Difficulty in Fluency and Confidence

The findings also showed that students experienced psychological barriers when pronouncing English words. Some of them admitted that they lacked confidence and were afraid of making mistakes. This can be seen from the result student stated during the interview said: "I feel nervous when I have to speak

English, because I am afraid of pronouncing words incorrectly.” (Student interview, Mutia). This demonstrates that low self-confidence strongly influences their ability to practice pronunciation effectively.

In general, the results of observation and interviews revealed several common problems among students. Many students found it difficult to differentiate words with similar sounds, such as live and leave or see and sea. Most of them also struggled with intonation and word stress, which made their speech sound monotonous and less natural. Furthermore, a number of students admitted that they often felt insecure and lacked confidence when speaking English, as they were afraid of making mistakes. In addition, some students found it difficult to combine grammar patterns, such as S + V1, with correct pronunciation simultaneously.

Despite these challenges, the findings also indicated that some students had attempted to overcome their difficulties by using alternative learning resources. For instance, they practiced pronunciation through applications such as YouTube or self-practice at home, although their consistency in doing so varied. Most importantly, the students showed an awareness that pronunciation is an essential aspect of English communication. However, it was also revealed that some of them had not yet received specific lessons on pronunciation before this research, and they expressed a need for more focused pronunciation practice in future learning sessions.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that students at MAN 2 Model Medan encounter multiple difficulties in English pronunciation, which can be categorized into segmental and suprasegmental aspects. Segmentally, the students such as Rara, Mutia, and Faika struggled to differentiate between sounds that appear similar, for example live and leave or see and sea. These problems are consistent with Gilakjani and Ahmadi’s (2011) argument that the main difficulty in learning pronunciation lies not only in producing sounds but also in how learners mentally process and categorize unfamiliar phonemes that differ from their first language.

At the suprasegmental level, most students demonstrated difficulties in stress and intonation patterns. Their speech often sounded monotonous, with incorrect word stress, which reduced comprehensibility. This problem is common among Indonesian learners, whose first language is syllable-timed, making it difficult to adapt to the stress-timed rhythm of English (Hodgetts, 2020, in Kosasih, 2021). These findings suggest that first language interference plays a strong role in shaping students’ errors.

Another key finding is related to psychological factors. Students frequently expressed nervousness and lack of confidence, which made them hesitant to pronounce words or speak fluently. This emotional barrier was evident in Faika’s experience, who reported feeling less confident during oral practice. Such challenges resonate with Lasabuda’s (2017) study, which identified anxiety and

embarrassment as major obstacles that limit learners' willingness to improve pronunciation.

Furthermore, the interviews showed that students were aware of the importance of pronunciation and some attempted to overcome their difficulties by using alternative learning strategies, such as practicing with YouTube. However, these efforts were inconsistent, and most students still lacked adequate formal instruction in pronunciation. This aligns with Gilbert's (2010) observation that pronunciation is often treated as the "orphan" of language teaching, receiving less attention compared to grammar and vocabulary.

Overall, the discussion confirms that pronunciation problems among high school students are caused by a combination of linguistic interference, lack of phonological awareness, and psychological barriers. To address these challenges, pronunciation instruction needs to be integrated more systematically into the classroom, with regular practice, constructive feedback, and the use of engaging media to encourage student confidence and participation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that students at MAN 2 Model Medan, represented by participants such as Rara, Mutia, and Faika, face various difficulties in English pronunciation. These challenges are mainly found in differentiating similar sounds (e.g., live vs. leave, see vs. sea), applying correct word stress and intonation, and maintaining fluency due to low confidence. The findings show that pronunciation problems are not only caused by linguistic and technical factors, such as first language interference and lack of phonological awareness, but also by psychological barriers, including nervousness and fear of making mistakes.

Furthermore, the lack of focused pronunciation instruction in the classroom contributes to these difficulties, as students reported that English lessons tend to emphasize grammar and vocabulary rather than speaking practice. Although some students attempted independent learning strategies, such as practicing through YouTube, their efforts were inconsistent and insufficient to overcome their challenges. Therefore, it can be concluded that pronunciation teaching should be given more attention in English classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to integrate systematic pronunciation practice, provide constructive feedback, and create a supportive learning environment that reduces student's anxiety and builds their confidence. With proper guidance and consistent practice, students will be able to improve their pronunciation, enhance their fluency, and communicate more effectively in English.

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