

Students' Difficulties in Learning English Phonology among Fourth Semester Students of the English Education Department

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Abstract. *English phonology is an important subject in the English Education Department because it helps students understand the sound system of the English language. Through the study of phonology, students learn about speech sounds, phonetic symbols, stress, and intonation. However, many students still encounter difficulties in learning English phonology due to the complexity of its concepts and the differences between English and their first language. This study aims to identify the difficulties experienced by fourth-semester students of the English Education Department in learning English phonology and to explore the factors that contribute to those difficulties. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The participants are fourth-semester students of the English Education Department who have taken phonology-related courses. Data are collected through questionnaires and interviews to obtain information about students' learning experiences. The findings are expected to show that students face difficulties in understanding phonetic transcription, distinguishing English speech sounds, applying stress and intonation patterns, and pronouncing unfamiliar sounds. In addition, factors such as limited practice, lack of confidence, and first-language influence may contribute to these difficulties. The results of this study are expected to provide useful information for lecturers and students in improving the teaching and learning process of English phonology.*

Keywords: *English phonology, learning difficulties, English Education students, phonetic transcription, pronunciation*

Abstrak. Fonologi bahasa Inggris merupakan salah satu mata kuliah penting di Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris karena membantu mahasiswa memahami sistem bunyi dalam bahasa Inggris. Melalui pembelajaran fonologi, mahasiswa mempelajari bunyi ujaran, simbol fonetik, tekanan (stress), dan intonasi. Namun, banyak mahasiswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam mempelajari fonologi bahasa Inggris karena kompleksitas konsep-konsepnya serta perbedaan antara bahasa Inggris dan bahasa pertama mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang dialami oleh mahasiswa semester empat Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris dalam mempelajari fonologi bahasa Inggris serta mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan kesulitan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Partisipan penelitian adalah mahasiswa semester empat Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang telah menempuh mata kuliah yang berkaitan dengan fonologi. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner dan wawancara untuk memperoleh informasi mengenai pengalaman belajar mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian diharapkan menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami transkripsi fonetik, membedakan bunyi ujaran bahasa Inggris,

menerapkan pola tekanan dan intonasi, serta mengucapkan bunyi-bunyi yang tidak familiar. Selain itu, faktor-faktor seperti kurangnya latihan, rendahnya kepercayaan diri, dan pengaruh bahasa pertama dapat berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan-kesulitan tersebut. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan informasi yang bermanfaat bagi dosen dan mahasiswa dalam meningkatkan proses pembelajaran dan pengajaran fonologi bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: fonologi bahasa Inggris, kesulitan belajar, mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, transkripsi fonetik, pelafalan.

1. BACKGROUND

English has become one of the most important languages in the world and is widely used in education, technology, science, and international communication. As a result, the ability to use English effectively is increasingly important for university students, especially those majoring in English Education. Learning English involves mastering various language components, such as grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition to these components, pronunciation is also an essential aspect of language learning because it affects how messages are conveyed and understood. Accurate pronunciation helps learners communicate more clearly and confidently. For this reason, English Education students are expected to develop a good understanding of English pronunciation throughout their academic studies. One of the subjects that supports this development is English phonology. Therefore, learning phonology is considered an important part of English language education.

Phonology is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of speech sounds and sound patterns in a language. Through phonology, students learn how sounds are produced, organized, and distinguished from one another. The study of English phonology includes several important topics, such as consonants, vowels, phonemes, phonetic transcription, stress, rhythm, and intonation. These elements help students understand the structure of spoken English and improve their awareness of pronunciation. A good understanding of phonology can support students in producing speech more accurately and recognizing differences between similar sounds. Furthermore, phonology provides a foundation for developing effective speaking and listening skills. Since English contains many sounds that differ from those found in Indonesian, phonology becomes an important subject for English Education students.

Therefore, students are expected to master phonological concepts as part of their language learning process.

Despite its importance, many students still experience difficulties in learning English phonology. Some students find it challenging to understand phonetic symbols and phonetic transcription, while others struggle to distinguish certain English sounds. Difficulties may also occur when students are required to apply stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation correctly. In many cases, students can understand theoretical explanations but face challenges when applying them in practice. The complexity of English sound systems often makes phonology one of the most demanding subjects in the English Education curriculum. These difficulties may reduce students' confidence and affect their performance in phonology-related activities. As a result, some students need additional support and practice to improve their understanding of phonological concepts. Understanding these difficulties is important in order to improve the learning process.

Several factors may contribute to students' difficulties in learning English phonology. One common factor is the influence of the students' first language, which may differ significantly from English in terms of sound systems and pronunciation patterns. Students often transfer pronunciation habits from their native language when learning English, leading to errors and confusion. Another factor is limited exposure to authentic English pronunciation in daily life. Students who rarely interact with native or proficient English speakers may have fewer opportunities to practice and improve their phonological skills. In addition, the large number of phonetic symbols and phonological rules can be difficult for students to remember and apply. Learning motivation, confidence, and individual learning differences may also influence students' success in understanding phonology. Therefore, students' difficulties cannot be attributed to a single factor but rather to a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

Fourth-semester students of the English Education Department were selected as the focus of this study because they have already been introduced to phonology-related courses and are expected to possess basic knowledge of English sound systems. However, many students still report difficulties in understanding and applying phonological concepts during their studies. Investigating these difficulties is important

because it can provide valuable information about students' learning needs and challenges. The findings may also help lecturers identify areas that require greater attention in the teaching process. Furthermore, understanding the factors that contribute to students' difficulties can support the development of more effective learning strategies and classroom activities. Based on these considerations, this study aims to identify the difficulties experienced by fourth-semester students of the English Education Department in learning English phonology and to explore the factors that contribute to those difficulties.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

a. English Phonology

Phonology is a branch of linguistics that studies the sound system of a language and the rules governing how sounds function within that language. According to Roach (2009), phonology is concerned with the organization of speech sounds and the way these sounds are used to distinguish meaning. In English language learning, phonology helps learners understand how sounds are produced, perceived, and patterned.

English phonology covers several important aspects, including consonants, vowels, phonemes, syllables, stress, rhythm, and intonation. These elements contribute significantly to learners' ability to communicate effectively. Therefore, a good understanding of English phonology is essential for English Education students because it supports the development of accurate pronunciation and effective communication skills (Roach, 2009).

b. Learning Difficulties in English Phonology

Learning difficulties refer to challenges or obstacles that hinder students from achieving optimal learning outcomes. In the context of English phonology, learning difficulties involve problems in understanding phonological concepts and applying them in actual pronunciation.

According to Abdulwahid (2023), many EFL students experience difficulties in phonetics and phonology due to the complexity of English sound systems and the differences between English and their native languages. Similarly, Tupamahu and Gaspersz (2024) found that students often struggle with phonetic transcription, sound

discrimination, and pronunciation accuracy. These difficulties may negatively affect students' confidence and oral communication performance.

Consequently, identifying students' learning difficulties is important for improving instructional strategies and facilitating more effective phonology learning.

c. Pronunciation and Phonological Competence

Pronunciation is the way sounds are articulated and produced in spoken language. It is an essential component of communicative competence because clear pronunciation helps speakers convey meaning effectively. Kenworthy (1987) states that pronunciation plays a significant role in intelligibility and successful communication.

Meanwhile, phonological competence refers to an individual's ability to understand and use the sound system of a language appropriately. According to Crystal (2008), phonological competence includes the ability to recognize phonemes, apply stress and intonation patterns, and distinguish between similar sounds.

For English Education students, phonological competence is particularly important because it supports both speaking and listening skills. Students with strong phonological competence are generally more confident and effective communicators.

d. International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system of phonetic symbols designed to represent speech sounds accurately and consistently across languages. The IPA was developed by the International Phonetic Association to provide a standardized method of transcribing pronunciation.

According to Roach (2009), phonetic transcription helps learners understand the pronunciation of words regardless of their spelling. Since English spelling and pronunciation often differ significantly, IPA serves as an important tool for language learners.

However, many EFL learners find IPA difficult to master because it involves numerous unfamiliar symbols. Tupamahu and Gaspersz (2024) reported that students often face challenges in recognizing and interpreting phonetic symbols, which affects their ability to pronounce words correctly.

e. First Language Interference in Learning English Phonology

First language interference, also known as language transfer, occurs when learners apply linguistic features from their native language to a second language. According to Selinker (1972), language transfer is a common phenomenon in second language acquisition.

In pronunciation learning, first-language interference often occurs when learners encounter English sounds that do not exist in their native language. Anjani et al. (2023) found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently have difficulties producing English consonants such as /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, and /ʒ/ because these sounds are absent from Indonesian phonology.

Similarly, Rahmawati (2023) reported that learners tend to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with more familiar sounds from their first language. As a result, pronunciation errors frequently occur and may affect communication effectiveness.

f. Factors Affecting Students' Difficulties in Learning English Phonology

Students' difficulties in learning English phonology are influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

1) Linguistic Factors

Linguistic factors are related to the language system itself. Abdelreheem (2023) explains that differences between English and learners' native languages often lead to pronunciation difficulties. Students may struggle to recognize and produce unfamiliar English sounds due to the absence of equivalent sounds in their first language.

Another linguistic factor is the complexity of English pronunciation rules, including stress patterns, intonation, and phonetic variations.

2) Non-Linguistic Factors

Non-linguistic factors include motivation, confidence, learning environment, and exposure to English. Novika (2024) states that students' attitudes and perceptions toward pronunciation learning influence their success in mastering English phonology.

Moreover, limited opportunities for pronunciation practice can hinder students'

phonological development. Niu, Chen, and Wu (2023) emphasize that continuous exposure to authentic English input and regular pronunciation practice are crucial for improving phonological competence. Lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes may also discourage students from participating actively in pronunciation activities.

Therefore, both linguistic and non-linguistic factors contribute to students' difficulties in learning English phonology.

g. Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the assumption that fourth-semester students of the English Education Department experience difficulties in learning English phonology. These difficulties are manifested in problems related to pronunciation, phonetic transcription, sound discrimination, stress, and intonation.

The difficulties are influenced by linguistic factors, such as first-language interference and unfamiliar English sounds, as well as non-linguistic factors, including limited practice, lack of confidence, and insufficient exposure to authentic English pronunciation. These factors affect students' phonological competence and pronunciation performance.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the difficulties encountered by students in learning English phonology and to explore the factors contributing to those difficulties. The findings are expected to provide useful insights for improving the teaching and learning of English phonology.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a survey and direct interview method to investigate the difficulties experienced by fourth-semester students in learning English phonology. The participants of this study are fourth-semester students of the English Education Department. Data are collected through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire is used to identify the common difficulties encountered by students, such as pronunciation problems, understanding phonetic symbols, distinguishing English sounds, and applying phonological rules. Meanwhile, direct interviews are

conducted with selected participants to obtain deeper information about their learning experiences, challenges, and strategies in learning English phonology. The survey data are analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, while the interview data are analyzed qualitatively by identifying recurring themes and patterns. By combining survey and interview methods, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties in learning English phonology.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that fourth-semester students of the English Education Department experienced several difficulties in learning English phonology. Based on the survey results, the majority of students reported difficulties in pronouncing certain English sounds that do not exist in their native language, particularly the sounds

/θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, and /ʒ/. Many students also struggled to distinguish between similar sounds, such as /i:/ and /ɪ/ or /æ/ and /e/. In addition, understanding and using phonetic symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was identified as one of the major challenges faced by the students.

The interview data supported these findings. Most participants stated that they lacked sufficient practice in pronunciation and often felt uncertain when reading phonetic transcriptions. Some students mentioned that differences between English spelling and pronunciation made learning phonology more difficult. Others reported that limited exposure to native English speakers and authentic listening materials hindered their ability to recognize and produce English sounds accurately.

Furthermore, the results indicated that students' difficulties were influenced by several factors, including interference from their first language, limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of confidence in speaking English, and insufficient opportunities for pronunciation practice outside the classroom. Despite these challenges, many students expressed positive attitudes toward learning English phonology and believed that regular practice, listening activities, and the use of pronunciation applications could help improve their phonological competence.

Overall, the study found that pronunciation of unfamiliar sounds, mastery of IPA

symbols, and differentiation of similar English sounds were the most significant difficulties encountered by fourth-semester students in learning English phonology. These findings suggest that lecturers should provide more practical pronunciation exercises, interactive learning activities, and exposure to authentic English audio materials to help students overcome their phonological challenges.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that fourth-semester students of the English Education Department still face various difficulties in learning English phonology. The most common difficulties were related to the pronunciation of unfamiliar English sounds, the understanding of phonetic symbols, and the ability to distinguish between similar sounds. These findings suggest that English phonology remains a challenging subject for students, even after several semesters of studying English.

One possible explanation for these difficulties is the influence of the students' first language. Since some English sounds, such as /θ/ and /ð/, do not exist in Indonesian or local languages, students tend to substitute them with more familiar sounds. As a result, pronunciation errors frequently occur during speaking activities. This finding supports the idea that first-language interference plays a significant role in second-language pronunciation learning.

Another important issue identified in this study is students' limited understanding of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Many participants reported difficulties in recognizing and interpreting phonetic transcriptions. This may be because students are more accustomed to learning vocabulary through conventional spelling rather than phonetic symbols. Consequently, they often struggle to pronounce unfamiliar words correctly when relying on phonetic transcriptions.

The interview results also revealed that a lack of practice contributes to students' phonological difficulties. Most participants stated that they rarely practice pronunciation outside the classroom and have limited opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers. Without regular exposure to authentic English input, students may find it difficult to develop accurate pronunciation and listening skills. Therefore, consistent practice and exposure to English audio materials are essential for improving phonological competence.

Furthermore, psychological factors such as low confidence and fear of making mistakes were found to affect students' performance in learning English phonology. Some students hesitated to practice speaking because they were worried about being judged by their classmates. This lack of confidence may prevent students from actively participating in pronunciation activities and hinder their progress.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that students' difficulties in learning English phonology are caused by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. To address these challenges, lecturers should provide more pronunciation-focused activities, increase the use of authentic listening materials, encourage the use of pronunciation applications, and create a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable practicing English. Through these efforts, students can gradually improve their phonological awareness and pronunciation skills.

5. KESIMPULAN DAN SARAN

Based on the results and discussion of this study, it can be concluded that fourth-semester students of the English Education Department encounter a variety of difficulties in learning English phonology. The findings show that the most common challenges include pronouncing English sounds that are not found in their native language, understanding and interpreting phonetic symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and distinguishing between similar English sounds. These difficulties affect students' ability to pronounce words accurately and communicate effectively in English.

The study also reveals that several factors contribute to these difficulties. First-language interference is one of the major factors, as students often transfer the sound patterns of their native language into English pronunciation. In addition, limited opportunities to practice pronunciation, insufficient exposure to authentic English audio materials, and a lack of confidence when speaking English further hinder students' phonological development. The interview findings indicate that many students feel uncertain about their pronunciation and are afraid of making mistakes, which reduces their participation in speaking activities.

Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that students are aware of the

importance of English phonology in developing their overall language proficiency. Most students expressed a willingness to improve their pronunciation skills through continuous practice, listening exercises, and the use of technology-based learning resources. This positive attitude can serve as a strong foundation for improving their phonological competence.

Therefore, it is recommended that lecturers provide more interactive and practical phonology instruction, including pronunciation drills, listening activities, phonetic transcription exercises, and opportunities for students to practice speaking in a supportive environment. The integration of multimedia resources and pronunciation applications may also help students improve their understanding of English sounds and phonological patterns. By addressing the difficulties identified in this study, students can develop better pronunciation skills, enhance their confidence in speaking English, and achieve greater success in their language learning process.

In conclusion, learning English phonology remains a significant challenge for fourth-semester students; however, with appropriate teaching strategies, regular practice, and adequate learning support, these difficulties can be gradually overcome, leading to improved English pronunciation and communication skills.

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