Getsempena English Education Journal (GEEJ)
Volume 11, Number 2, 2024 pp. 127-139
P-ISSN: 2355-004X E-ISSN: 2502-6801
Open Access: https://ejournal.bbg.ac.id/geej

A STUDY ON ACEHNESE EFL LEARNERS' PHONETICS: PRONUNCIATION ERRORS IN PRODUCING ENGLISH CONSONANT SOUNDS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received : Oct 01, 2024
Revised : Oct 17, 2024
Accepted : Nov 22, 2024
Available online : Nov 30, 2024

Keywords:
EFL learners, consonant sounds, pronunciation errors.

ABSTRAK

With its distinct phonetic features, the correct pronunciation of the English consonant sounds has particularly been a challenge for EFL students, resulting them making errors in their pronunciation. The present study attempts to identify errors made by non-native students of English, especially Acehnese, in pronouncing English consonant sounds. Besides, the perceived factors causing the errors were also explored in order to demystify the potential reasons for the pronunciation difficulties. Using the frame of qualitative study approach, the current study gained the data through vocabulary tests and interviews. Five EFL learners of English language department of Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh were selected as the participants of this study. The participants all represent Aceh Besar region only, to limit the findings, considering the possible effects of their mother tongue on their English pronunciation. The data were collected through vocabulary test and interview. This study found that the students experienced difficulties in producing the sounds [b], [d], [g], [v], [ʒ], [z], and [ʃ]. The data from the interview also reveal four perceived factors leading to the pronunciation errors including challenge in enunciating sounds with similar phonetical features, unawareness towards the correct pronunciations, mother tongue's impacts towards English pronunciation, and lack of practice. This study's findings contribute the field of EFL studies as correct pronunciation is emphasized in the mastery of the English language; thus, awareness on which sounds are difficult to pronounce and the factors causing the difficulties are essential for both EFL educators and learners.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning and its dynamics have been a vital issue in the world of research where numerous numbers of studies have been conducted in order to promote better ways to the mastery of English and effective solutions for challenges encountered in the process of the English teaching learning. One of the essential aspects in English learning, pronunciation, has long been an interest in the field of language research. Pronunciation is

defined as ways to produce words by involving proper articulations, emphasis and intonations (Dwiningrum, 2016). It is a complex system appearing to be simple since the system is quite abstract and unnoticed until they are learnt. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) suggest that what makes pronunciation complex is because it is more about cognitive concepts rather than physical. They also suggest that having good pronunciation is hard due to the variations of accents, styles and the differences in language sound system.

Despite its complexities, however, being able to pronounce vocabulary correctly is crucial in human oral interaction. Zielinski and Yates (2014) state that each sound produced by human creates meaning in communication; in which it suggests that correct pronunciation keeps conversation in tract. In the similar veins, Dimitrius and Mazarella (2002) also claim that inability to pronounce words right can result in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Furthermore, in language performance, Fraser (2001) argues that low quality of pronunciation owned by language users can entirely hide their excellent grammar. This means that learners with better pronunciation will have more opportunities to communicate naturally with native speakers and this is one of the promising paths to improvement in many aspects of the language.

For non-native speakers of English, one way to improve their pronunciation is by phonetically understanding the sounds or phonemes of the English language. Phonetic is a branch of linguistics concerned with three aspects which are sound production, sound transmission and sound reception (Ogden, 2009). The aspect focusing on sound production, so-called articulatory phonetics, constitutes the study of the articulations; which articulators are moved when producing particular phones (Ashby, 2011). By understanding this part of phonetics, ones could identify which part of speech organs are being active in particular sound productions. It also enables language users to enunciate one sound from another. Furthermore, Gharamah (2024) found that EFL students who are exposed with phonetics knowledge own better pronunciation ability and better skills in identifying and articulating English sounds, especially challenging ones. Phonetics provides insight for EFL learners regarding how to produce native-like English sounds.

In spite of the similarity between Indonesian and English orthography, Pallawa and Alam (2013) mention that the phonetic and phonology of the two languages are way too different. Phonetically, there are some consonant phonemes of English which does not exist in the Indonesian language. The sound /ð/ for example, is not part of Indonesian phonemes which it may become a phonetic struggle for Indonesian EFL learners to pronounce the sound correctly. Anjani et.al (2023) propose that Indonesian English

speakers cope with such a problem by adjusting the sound with their mother tongue accent, resulting in an Indonesian-accented English pronunciation. In some cases, the consonant pronunciation can be completely different from the English language and can lead to what is called as pronunciation errors (Pusfarani, et al., 2021).

Studies have found that errors in pronouncing English phonetics are common phenomenon for non-native speakers. Komariah (2018) argues that EFL adolescences in Banjar encounter difficulties in producing several consonants and some English diphthongs. In line with that study, Situmeang and Lubis (2020) also claim that Padangsidimpuan EFL students experience barriers in producing dental fricative sounds / ð/ and / θ/. All nine participants of their study made errors in producing the two fricative sounds. Furthermore, not only Indonesian EFL students, Utami (2020) in her study analyzing pronunciation problems encountered by Chinese speakers also found that Chinese EFL speakers face problems in pronouncing English sounds. Her study proposes that Chinese speakers produced consonant clusters. They also are difficult to articulate /r/ and /l/ consonants, and to distinguish long and short vowels. In the similar vein, the findings of Ercan's study (2018) indicate that Turkish EFL learners have a serious problem in articulating several of English consonants such as /w/, /v/ / ð/ as well as some vowels and diphthongs like /ʊ/, /ɔ:/, /Əʊ/, and /aʊ/). All these studies agree that non-native speakers encounter problematic experience in articulating English phonemes.

Based on the revealed phenomenon, the current study also attempts to discover English phonemes found to be problematic for EFL learners, especially Acehnese EFL learners. The focus of the study is limited to the errors made in articulating consonant sounds only. Specifically, it aims at exploring the consonant sounds that pronounced erroneously by the participants and the factors underlying the pronunciation errors. Considering the impact of ones' mother tongue and the wide variations of Acehnese language (including phonetic variants), thus, only students whose mother tongue is Aceh Besar's Acehnese were selected as participants of this study. With that being done, the findings are limited to represent consonant barriers experienced by Aceh Besar EFL students only. Conducting analysis in this specific topic is essential since students' inability to produce correct phonetic sounds of English can impact the quality of their pronunciation; therefore, identifying the consonants difficult to articulate can be the first stage for fixing the errors in their pronunciation. In addition, by knowing this, EFL educators can highlight those difficult consonants in the process of their pronunciation

teaching; meanwhile, EFL students can have awareness about which English consonants they need to put more attention to during their learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study took place at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh and was conducted under the scope of qualitative research method. The data were gained by two instruments: pronunciation test and interview. The pronunciation was taken place to find the problematic consonant sounds whereas the interview was done to answer the factors causing the pronunciation errors. Both of the instruments were applied to five Acehnese EFL students serving as the participants of this study. They were selected by purposive sampling technique with two criteria which are: senior students of English Language Education Department of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh and their mother tongue is the Acehnese of Aceh Besar region. The two criteria are made based on the consideration of the participants' duration of being exposed with the English language at university environment and also based on the influence of the native language on the target language pronunciation, especially on the consonant sound articulations.

The pronunciation test was conducted by asking students to pronounce lists of vocabulary highlighting all 24 consonant phonemes of the English language. Each sound is represented in a pair of vocabulary in which one vocabulary positions the consonant sound in the onset of the syllable and the other vocabulary has consonant sound at the coda of the syllable. This was done in order to gain more valid findings considering that the position of a sound can affect its articulation. The test was done by using recorder on a smart phone where the participants record their vocabulary list pronunciation. Each vocabulary is pronounced twice by each participant. The list of vocabulary the students had to pronounce is provided in the following charts.

Table 1. *Vocabulary list of voiced consonant*

Number	Consonant sounds	At the beginning of the word	At the end
	[b]	Baby	Rob
	[d]	Dead	sad
	[g]	Grab	tag
	[v]	Voice	save
	[ð]	This	breathe
	[ʒ]	Pleasure	Massage
	[ʤ]	Judge	Edges
	[l]	Late	ball
	[r]	Red	far
	[j]	Union, yes	-

Number	Consonant sounds	At the beginning of the word	At the end
	[w]	Wait	raw
	[m]	Make	home
	[n]	Nine	mine
	[z]	Zoo	rose
	[ŋ]	Angry	Sing
	[p]	Pipe	lip
	[t]	Ten	tight
	[k]	Custom	Cake
	[f]	Fine	half
	[θ]	Think	breath
	[s]	Say	less
	[ʃ]	Ship	rush
	[tʃ]	Cheep	match
	[h]	How	-

As for the interview, it was done face-to-face by using semi-structured interview. The interview was done about a month after the pronunciation test since the questions of the interview were customized based on the respective errors made by each participant. It means that the interview questions were prepared after the results of pronunciation test were found.

In analysing the data, the records were firstly analysed manually by listening to each of the participants' pronunciation. Having been listened to for three times each (some can be more than thrice), the correctly pronounced consonant sounds were eliminated from the data and the consonant sounds pronounced erroneously were listed as the study's finding. They were all then classified as problematic consonants. Meanwhile, the interview data was analysed by following steps proposed by Creswell (2014) including compiling and preparing the data, reading and viewing all data to obtain general information, encoding the data and presenting it into certain categories, looking for patterns and themes, representing themes and reporting findings, and interpreting and discussing the meaning of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section focuses on mentioning the findings gained from the data analysis of pronunciation test and interview. The five participants are all labelled as P1, P2, …. P5.

Consonant sounds pronounced erroneously by the students.

The results of the pronunciation test indicate that the students encounter barriers in pronouncing certain consonant sounds, which are [b], [d], [g], [v], [ʒ], [z], and [ʃ]. The details of the findings are summarized in the chart below.

Table 2. List of consonant pronunciation errors made by the participants

No	The erroneously pronounced consonant	Lexical Item	Participants who make phonetic deviation
1	[b] pronounced as /p/	Rob	P3 & P5
2	[d] pronounced as /t/	Sad	P2, P3 & P5
3	[g] pronounced as /k/	Tag	P1, P2, P3 & P5
4	[v] pronounced as /f/	Voice	P3
		Save	P3 & P5
5	[ʒ] pronounced as /z/	Pleasure	P3, P4 & P5
		Massage	
6	[z] pronounced as /s/	Quizzes	P5
		Rose	P1, P3 & P5
7	[ʃ] pronounced as /z/	Rush	P3

The data indicate that out of 24 English phonemes, seven phonemes were articulated erroneously by the participants. The sounds /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/ and *[ʃ],* as shown in the chart, were articulated mistakenly when their positions are at the coda of the syllables. These sounds were articulated correctly when they were at the beginning of the syllable; however, when they are positioned at the coda of the syllable, most of the participants confused these sounds with the sounds whose phonetic features are close to them. The sounds that are confused are basically different in term of voicing only, For instance, the voiced bilabilal plosive /b/, when appearing in the end of syllable was pronounced as voiceless bilabial plosive /p/. The same case occurs to the phones /d/ and /g/ which were confused with their voicing pair: voiceless /t/ and /k/. Meanwhile, the sounds *[ʒ],* were wrongly pronounced both in the position of coda and onset. It seems that this sound is certainly challenging for Acehnese EFL students. Furthermore, the sounds /z/ was also pronounced wrong both as a coda and onset by EFL learners . Three participants confused the sound with voiceless /s/.

Factors underlying the errors of Consonant Pronunciation

The findings for this topic were gained from the interview. Four perceived factors were revealed as the causes leading to students' making errors in producing several consonants found in the pronunciation test.

Challenges in enunciating sounds with similar phonetical features.

Two participants, P1 and P3 expressed that they were having trouble enunciating certain consonant sounds due to their identical sounds. As mentioned by P1 below:

> "I have difficulty distinguishing between the letters 'g' and 'k' because their sounds are almost similar, especially when they are in the same word, particularly at the end of the word, such as in the word 'tag'.".

In line with P1, P3 also stated that:

> For me, the consonants that are difficult for me to pronounce are "z" and "v" because they are similar to other consonant sounds. For instance, the sound of "z" in 'rose' is similar to the sound of "s", and the sound of "voice" is pronounced as "f".

The two responses suggest that they faced problems in differentiating similar consonant sounds within words. Consequently, this lack of distinction causes hesitancy in their pronunciation and leads to errors in producing the correct consonant sound. As previously mentioned, the problem majorly lies in distinguishing voiced and voiceless sounds with similar place and manner of articulations.

Unawareness towards the correct pronunciation

Another factor perceived by the students as the reason of their pronunciation error was their unawareness towards the right pronunciation of the sounds. They said that they mispronounce the ounds without even realizing the errors. One of the perception was expressed by P2 stating that:

> "I basically don't know if I'm pronouncing the consonant sounds correctly or not, as I don't fully understand the phonetics of these sounds."

In the similar vein, P5 added:

> "I frequently make mistakes when pronouncing consonant sounds, but I am not aware of them. It is only when I am with a friend who reminds me that I realize I made a mistake in pronouncing the consonant sound."

The participants comment above show that it seems common for English non-native speakers to not knowing the right pronunciation of English certain sounds. Both of the participants agreed that their mistakes were the results of their unfamiliarity with the correct pronunciations of the sounds.

Mother tongue's impacts towards English pronunciation,

This issue was mentioned by several participants who highlighted the challenges they encountered in accurately pronouncing consonant sounds due to the fact that English is not their native language. One of the participants, P1 argued that the reason of his mispronunciation is because of his first language, making him speaking English with Indonesian accent. This argument is supported by P2 who shared the similar perception as follow:

> "I personally attribute my difficulty in correctly pronouncing consonant sounds to the accent or dialect of my region. I find that my regional accent or dialect often hinders my ability to properly enunciate consonant sounds in English."

In line with P1 and P2, P5 also said that:

> "I often struggle with my English pronunciation due to my regional accent or dialect. I was born and raised in Aceh Besar, where the local language has a thick accent. This makes it challenging for me to correctly pronounce English words, as my accent can sometimes make them sound unusual."

The participants of this study agreed that the role of native tongue has so much influence on their English pronunciation, including English consonant pronunciations. Besides, they also believe that their English accent is very much accented with their local language which is in this case is Aceh Besar's Acehnese.

Lack of Practice

The last factor contributing to students' pronunciation errors in English was identified as the lack of practice, particularly in improving their ability to pronounce consonant sounds accurately. Students admitted during the interviews that they did not have enough opportunities to practice their pronunciation skills, which resulted in difficulty in producing certain consonant sounds. Two participants, P2 and P3, claimed that the reason of their errors in certain consonant sounds are on account of their lack of practicing the English pronunciation. P2 stated that:

> "I think the reason for my pronunciation errors or difficulties may be due to a lack of practice. I didn't get enough opportunities to practice speaking English, especially in terms of pronouncing consonant sounds accurately."

A similar statement made by P3 said that::

> "In my opinion, one of the reasons for my pronunciation errors or difficulties in English is the lack of practice in pronouncing certain consonant sounds such as "th" and "sh," which may require different lip or tongue placement. To improve my pronunciation skills, I believe it is important to practice regularly and seek guidance from teachers or language experts."

As phonetic is a very specific aspect of sounds in language, thus, meticulously practicing this aspect seems to be neglected in the process of the English learning. Both educators and learners of EFL usually give more concerns on general pronunciations\or even solely inserting teaching pronunciation in speaking skills activities instead of truly allocate time to improve the phonetic quality of students. Therefore, it is very logical for EFL learners to have low chances for practicing the English sounds or phonemes.

Discussion

By examining and analyzing the participants' pronunciation performances, this research sheds light on the specific challenges and areas of improvement related to consonant sound pronunciation. The results of the pronunciation test revealed that the students encountered challenges with seven consonants which are /b/. /d/, /g/, /v/, /ʒ/, /z/, and /ʃ]/. The interesting thing to notice is that these sounds, except for [v] and [ʒ], all exist in the Indonesian phonemes. It is a different perspective for EFL educators and learners to notice that the phonemes [/b/. /d/, /g/, /z/, and /ʃ/ are problematic for Acehnese EFL students when these sounds are positioned as the coda of the syllables. Meanwhile, for the sounds /v/ and /ʒ/, these findings are similar to the study's results of Anjani et.al. (2023) suggesting that these two sounds should be highlighted in the pronunciation of Indonesian EFL students' teaching learning process. The challenge of these two sounds for Acehnese learners is rather reasonable as these two sounds don not exist in the Indonesian and Acehnese phonemes. This is also interesting to notice that this study does not find the sound /θ/ challenging for Acehnese English speakers. It is irrelevant with other studies' findings on Indonesian EFL speakers which propose that articulating /θ/ sound is difficult for Indonesian since this sound is absent in the Indonesian phonemes (Anjani et al., 2023, and Komariah, 2018). The absence of the sound /θ/ in this research's finding might be because of this sound exists in Arabic language, where for Acehnese students who are majorly Muslims, the Arabic language is familiar to them on account of their exposure to them through the Quran.

Besides identifying the challenging consonant sounds, this study also explores the potential factors underlying the errors in producing certain consonants. There are perceived factors found including challenges in enunciating sounds with similar phonetical features, unawareness towards the correct pronunciations, mother tongue's impacts towards English pronunciation, and lack of and practice. Regarding the difficulty in distinguishing similar consonant sounds, students expressed their struggle with

differentiating between consonant sounds that have similar articulation points or sound qualities. This suggests that the ability to perceive and produce distinct sounds poses a challenge for some learners. To support the findings of this study, previous research conducted by Ammar, Hartono, and Angraini (2022) underscored the challenge of distinguishing similar consonant sounds encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Their study specifically identified [v], [θ], and [ð] as problematic consonant sounds. Notably, students struggled with differentiating between [v] and [f], as these sounds are closely related and exhibit subtle distinctions.

The distinction between these sounds is significant because they represent different phonemes in English, as highlighted by Reed and Levis (2019). However, the findings revealed that some students were unable to distinguish between these sounds, even contradicting established phonetic theories. This aligns with the research conducted by Gustina, Sutarsyah, and Sudirman (2015), who found similar difficulties among elementary students, suggesting that the pronunciation skills of English Education students were comparable to those of younger learners. This highlights the importance of addressing the lack of understanding of IPA symbols and pronunciation instruction in previous semesters, particularly in the IEC: Pronunciation class, as it perpetuates habits that hinder accurate pronunciation despite being prospective educators.

Another factor contributing to the pronunciation errors was the unawareness of the correct pronunciation. The interviews revealed that some students were mispronouncing consonant sounds without realizing their errors. This lack of self-awareness emphasizes the importance of providing explicit feedback and guidance to help students recognize and correct their pronunciation mistakes. Motair and Moehamed (2022) conducted a similar study examining English pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners in Yemen. The research's results indicate that the participants encountered challenges in pronouncing specific consonant sounds. Additionally, it was observed that participants tended to insert vowel sounds within English syllables to separate clusters. The study's implications for pedagogy highlight the pronunciation problems faced by Yemeni EFL learners, attributing them to factors such as interference from their mother tongue and a lack of awareness of the Phonotactic constraints in the English language. These findings emphasize the need for targeted instructional approaches that address these specific difficulties faced by EFL learners.

Being a foreign language for the students, English exposure to the Acehnese students is rather limited since the language is not really common for the society. The

interviews highlighted the challenges faced by participants who indicated that English not being their native language affected their pronunciation. This factor suggests that the influence of their native languages phonetic system might interfere with their ability to produce accurate English consonant sounds. Indonesian learners often encounter difficulties in learning English, especially when it comes to pronunciation. From childhood, they become accustomed to speaking their mother tongue, making language learning, whether it is their native language or a foreign one, a matter of habitual information (Simarmata & Pardede, 2019). Consequently, learners gradually shape their utterances to match the speech patterns of the language they are acquiring. This process is influenced by the movements of their speech organs, which have been trained to produce the specific speech sounds of their native language. According to Kelly (2006), speech sounds are acquired differently depending on the language environment. For instance, a child raised in an English-speaking environment will develop English phonemes, while a child in a French-speaking environment will acquire a distinct set of sounds.

Research by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2020) emphasizes the importance of integrating explicit instruction and practice opportunities that enhance learners' knowledge of the phonetic features and mechanisms involved in English pronunciation. The lack of practice emerged as a significant factor contributing to pronunciation errors. Students admitted during the interviews that they did not have sufficient opportunities to practice their pronunciation skills, particularly in relation to consonant sounds. This finding emphasizes the importance of incorporating regular and targeted pronunciation practice activities into the curriculum to enhance students' ability to accurately produce consonant sounds.

On the same boat, the research by Han and Kang (2017) found that insufficient practice opportunities directly impacted students' ability to produce accurate consonant sounds in English. Similarly, Zhang and Rahimi (2018) highlighted the correlation between the frequency of pronunciation practice and improvement in learners' pronunciation skills. These studies emphasizes the need for regular and targeted pronunciation practice activities in the curriculum to enhance students' proficiency in accurately producing consonant sounds. By providing ample practice opportunities, educators can help students develop muscle memory and refine their articulatory skills, leading to improved pronunciation accuracy and fluency. Incorporating pronunciation practice into classroom activities, such as role-playing exercises, repetition drills, and

interactive speaking tasks, can effectively address the issue of inadequate practice and contribute to enhanced pronunciation abilities.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study serves as the first step of Acehnese pronunciation improvement in regards to phonetics. Highlighting the identification of problematic English consonant sounds, this study found that there are seven English consonants sounds challenging to articulate for Acehnese students which are /b/. /d/, /g/, /v/, /ʒ/, /z/, and /ʃ/. In addition, this study also explores potential factors perceived by the students contributing in their inabilities to pronounce the sounds accurately. The perceived factors are challenges in enunciating sounds with similar phonetical features, unawareness towards the correct pronunciations, mother tongue's impacts towards English pronunciation, and lack of and practice. Identifying the difficult sounds as well as understanding the likely factors causing the difficulties, it is expected that these findings can assist both English educators and learners, especially those from Aceh, in their pronunciation improvement both in teaching and learning process.

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