

English Pronunciation Problems among Indonesian Students of English as a Foreign Language at University Level: A Descriptive Analysis

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A B S T R A C T

English pronunciation plays a crucial role in oral communication, particularly in EFL contexts where intelligibility determines communicative success. However, despite years of instruction, many Indonesian university students continue to experience difficulties in producing accurate English sounds. This study aims to analyze English pronunciation problems faced by fifth semester Indonesian EFL university students at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. A descriptive quantitative design was employed involving thirty students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a pronunciation test in the form of word list and sentence reading tasks and analyzed using frequency and percentage. The findings reveal that vowel-related errors were the most dominant, particularly in distinguishing long and short vowels, followed by consonant errors such as interdental fricatives and consonant cluster simplification. These difficulties are mainly influenced by first language interference and phonological differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English. The study highlights the need for explicit and systematic pronunciation instruction to improve students' spoken intelligibility.

Keywords: *English Pronunciation, Pronunciation Problems, Indonesian EFL Learners, University Students, Descriptive Study*

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INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a fundamental component of oral communication in English as a foreign language context. It plays a crucial role in ensuring intelligibility and successful interaction between speakers and listeners. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010), pronunciation competence influences how spoken messages are perceived and understood, often more significantly than grammatical accuracy. In EFL settings such as Indonesia, learners frequently experience communication breakdowns not because of limited vocabulary or grammar, but due to inaccurate pronunciation of English sounds. This condition highlights the importance of investigating pronunciation problems as a core issue in English language teaching at the tertiary level.

Despite its importance, (Sabbu et al., 2025; Idrus et al., 2025) considered that pronunciation has long been regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of English learning for EFL students. English pronunciation differs substantially from Indonesian phonological systems, particularly in terms of vowel inventory, consonant clusters, and sound length distinctions. According to (Agustine et al., 2022; Anindita & Munandar, 2025), Indonesian learners tend to rely heavily on their first language sound system when producing English sounds, a phenomenon commonly explained through the theory of first language interference. (Zakori et al., 2025) and (Ge et al., 2024) argue that learners' first language exerts a strong influence on second language phonological production, especially when the target language contains sounds that do not exist in the learners' native language. As a result, systematic pronunciation errors often occur and become fossilized if not addressed through

explicit instruction. This phenomenon is in line with the theory of first language interference proposed by Ellis (1994), which explains that learners tend to transfer phonological features from their first language when producing sounds in a second language, particularly when there are significant structural differences between the two languages.

From a linguistic perspective, English pronunciation is commonly divided into segmental and suprasegmental features. Segmental features refer to individual vowel and consonant sounds, while suprasegmental features include stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns. Several scholars emphasize that segmental errors are particularly problematic for EFL learners because they directly affect word recognition and meaning. (Huang, 2025), (Uzun, 2022), and (Alnafisah et al., 2022) explain that inaccurate vowel and consonant production may lead to misunderstandings even when the grammatical structure of an utterance is correct. In many EFL contexts, segmental features are often prioritized in research because they are more observable and directly linked to intelligibility compared to suprasegmental features. For Indonesian EFL learners, (Yulianti et al., 2025), (Sabdu et al., 2025), and (Ristati et al., 2024) found that difficulties frequently arise in producing English sounds such as long and short vowels, interdental fricatives, and consonant clusters, which are absent in the Indonesian language system. This difficulty is closely related to the phonological differences between Indonesian and English, where Indonesian has a simpler vowel system, lacks vowel length distinctions, and rarely uses consonant clusters, while English contains more complex phonemic variations.

Research on English pronunciation among Indonesian EFL learners consistently reports persistent pronunciation problems at various educational levels. (Rohmana et al., 2025), (Wafa & Khoiriyah, 2025), (Ni et al., 2024), and (Situmorang et al., 2023) noted that Indonesian learners often substitute unfamiliar English sounds with the closest equivalents from their native language, resulting in non-target-like pronunciation. For example, English vowel contrasts such as ship and sheep or full and fool are commonly produced without distinction by Indonesian learners. Similarly, sounds such as θ and δ are frequently replaced with t or d, which significantly affects intelligibility. These findings suggest that pronunciation problems among Indonesian learners are systematic rather than incidental, and therefore require careful analysis. Similar patterns have also been identified in other EFL contexts, where learners from different linguistic backgrounds experience difficulties in producing unfamiliar English sounds, although the specific error types vary depending on their first language systems.

At the university level, pronunciation problems remain evident despite learners' prolonged exposure to English instruction. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching practices in higher education. (Algethami & Al Kamli, 2025), and (De & Muras, 2025) argue that pronunciation instruction is often marginalized in EFL classrooms, with teachers prioritizing grammar and vocabulary over phonological accuracy. Consequently, university students may develop sufficient receptive skills but continue to struggle with accurate oral production. This situation is particularly concerning for English education students and other EFL university students who are expected to demonstrate oral proficiency in academic and professional contexts.

Several empirical studies have documented pronunciation problems among EFL university students in Indonesia. (Andikatama & Sujarwati, 2023) and (Sukatun et al., 2023) revealed that Indonesian university students exhibited limited phonological awareness particularly in distinguishing English vowel sounds. More recent studies by (Yusuf et al., 2024) found that Indonesian EFL students experienced significant difficulties in pronouncing final consonants and consonant clusters, which often resulted in reduced intelligibility. Similarly, research conducted by (Lubis et al., 2025), and (Ristati et al., 2024) reported that mispronunciation of English vowels and fricative consonants was a dominant issue among university students, even after years of formal English instruction. When compared to findings from other EFL contexts, these results show both similarities and differences. While pronunciation difficulties are common across EFL learners globally, Indonesian students tend

to exhibit more challenges in segmental features due to the structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English.

In addition to linguistic factors, learners' pronunciation problems are also influenced by instructional and affective factors. (Noori & Asir, 2024) emphasized that limited exposure to authentic spoken English and lack of corrective feedback contribute to persistent pronunciation errors. In many Indonesian EFL classrooms, pronunciation practice is restricted to repetition drills without sufficient explanation of articulatory features (Fitriana & Agustian, 2025). As a result, students may imitate sounds inaccurately without understanding how those sounds are physically produced. This instructional gap reinforces the need for descriptive studies that map students' actual pronunciation problems as a basis for pedagogical improvement.

Although numerous studies have examined pronunciation issues among Indonesian EFL learners, many of them focus on specific sounds or instructional interventions. There is still a need for descriptive research that provides a comprehensive overview of pronunciation problems encountered by EFL university students in real classroom contexts. Such analysis is essential for identifying dominant error patterns and determining which pronunciation features require greater instructional attention. A descriptive approach allows researchers to present empirical evidence of learners' pronunciation difficulties without attempting to measure treatment effects, making it particularly suitable for classroom-based research. In addition, limited studies have specifically explored pronunciation problems in regional universities, which may have different learning environments compared to more urban institutions, highlighting the need for context specific investigation.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze English pronunciation problems among Indonesian EFL university students through a descriptive analysis. By examining students' pronunciation performance, this research seeks to identify the types of pronunciation problems commonly encountered and determine which pronunciation features pose the greatest difficulty. This study differs from previous research by providing a more comprehensive analysis of multiple segmental features within a specific regional university context, thereby offering a clearer picture of pronunciation challenges faced by EFL learners. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the existing literature on EFL pronunciation and provide practical insights for English lecturers in designing more effective pronunciation instruction at the university level.

METHOD

Respondents

The respondents of this study were Indonesian EFL university students from Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, a public university located in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The participants were fifth semester students enrolled in an English-related program and had completed several speaking and pronunciation-related courses. The selection of fifth semester students was considered appropriate because they had sufficient exposure to English instruction while still demonstrating observable pronunciation problems. Purposive sampling was employed to select the respondents who met these criteria. A total of thirty students participated in this study, consisting of both male and female students aged between nineteen and twenty three years. Of the total participants, 18 were female students and 12 were male students. In terms of English proficiency, the participants were generally at an intermediate level, as indicated by their academic performance in previous English courses and their ability to engage in classroom communication.

All respondents shared Indonesian as their first language and used English primarily in academic contexts. Prior to data collection, the students were informed about the objectives of the study and their participation was voluntary. They were assured that the data collected would be used solely for research purposes and would not affect their academic evaluation. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality and informed consent.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was an English pronunciation test designed to elicit students' pronunciation performance. The test was administered in the form of a reading aloud task consisting of a list of English words and short sentences. The test items represented English segmental pronunciation features that are commonly problematic for Indonesian EFL learners, including vowel sounds, consonant sounds, and word-final consonants.

The pronunciation test was developed based on phonetic and pronunciation principles proposed by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) and Ladefoged (2001). To ensure content validity, the test items were reviewed by an English lecturer with expertise in pronunciation and phonology. The students' oral production was recorded using a digital audio recorder to allow repeated listening and accurate identification of pronunciation errors during the analysis stage.

Procedures

The data collection procedure was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher prepared the pronunciation test by selecting words and sentences that aligned with the research objectives. The respondents were then briefed on the test instructions and informed about the procedure of the task. They were instructed to read the words and sentences clearly at a natural speaking pace without receiving any pronunciation modeling prior to the test.

During the data collection session, each respondent performed the reading task individually in a quiet room to minimize background noise and ensure clear audio recording. The researcher did not provide corrective feedback during the test in order to capture the students' natural pronunciation performance. All pronunciation recordings were labeled and organized systematically to facilitate accurate data analysis.

Data analysis

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach, focusing on the identification and frequency analysis of pronunciation errors produced by the participants. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. The recorded pronunciation data were carefully listened to and transcribed where necessary to identify deviations from standard English pronunciation. Each instance of mispronunciation was classified based on the type of segmental feature, including vowel errors and consonant errors. The classification process was guided by standard English phonological descriptions.

The frequency of each pronunciation error was calculated to identify the most common pronunciation problems encountered by the respondents. The results were presented in the form of frequencies and percentages to provide a clear overview of the distribution of pronunciation errors. This descriptive analysis enabled the researcher to identify dominant pronunciation problem areas without making inferential generalizations beyond the participants involved in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Types of English Pronunciation Problems Encountered by Indonesian EFL University Students

Table 1. Types of English Pronunciation Problems

No	Type of Pronunciation Problem	Frequency (Students)	Percentage (%)
1	Vowel sounds	26	86.7
2	Consonant sounds	22	73.3
3	Word-final consonants	20	66.7
4	Consonant clusters	18	60.0

Table 1 presents the types of English pronunciation problems encountered by Indonesian EFL university students. The data indicate that vowel pronunciation problems were the most dominant, experienced by 26 out of 30 students or 86.7 percent of the respondents. This finding suggests that vowel sounds pose a significant challenge for EFL learners, particularly when vowel distinctions are not present in their first language.

Consonant pronunciation problems were also prevalent, with 22 students or 73.3 percent demonstrating difficulty in producing English consonant sounds accurately. Problems related to word-final consonants were identified in 20 students, accounting for 66.7 percent, while consonant cluster problems were found in 18 students or 60 percent of the respondents. These results indicate that English segmental features that differ from Indonesian phonology tend to result in systematic pronunciation problems.

Detailed Distribution of Pronunciation Errors by Category

Table 2. Distribution of Pronunciation Errors by Category

No	Error Category	Frequency (Students)	Percentage (%)
1	Vowel errors	39	41.1
2	Consonant errors	33	34.7
3	Consonants cluster errors	23	24.2
	Total	95	100

Table 2 provides a more detailed classification of pronunciation errors based on segmental categories. Vowel errors accounted for the highest proportion with 39 cases or 41.1 percent of the total errors. This confirms that vowel production is the most problematic area for the respondents.

Consonant errors were identified in 33 cases or 34.7 percent, while consonant cluster errors accounted for 23 cases or 24.2 percent. The distribution shows that although consonant-related errors are also significant, vowel-related errors remain the most dominant. This pattern indicates that pronunciation difficulties are concentrated in specific phonological areas rather than being randomly distributed.

English Pronunciation Features That Pose the Greatest Difficulty for Students

Table 3. Most Problematic English Pronunciation Features

No	Pronunciation Feature	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Long and short vowel distinction	24	80,0
2	Interdental fricatives (θ, ð)	23	76,7
3	Final consonant deletion	20	66,7
4	Consonant cluster simplification	18	60,0
5	Diphthong pronunciation	15	50,0

As shown in Table 3, the distinction between long and short vowel sounds was identified as the most problematic pronunciation feature. A total of 24 students or 80 percent of the respondents experienced difficulty in producing vowel length contrasts accurately. This difficulty often resulted in minimal pair confusion and reduced intelligibility in spoken English.

Interdental fricatives were the second most challenging feature, with 23 students or 76.7 percent mispronouncing these sounds. The students commonly substituted interdental fricatives with alveolar stops, indicating limited familiarity with the required articulatory mechanisms. Final consonant deletion and consonant cluster simplification were also frequently observed, reflecting learners' tendency to simplify complex English sound structures.

Overall Patterns of Pronunciation Errors among Fifth Semester Students

Table 4. Overall Distribution of Pronunciation Errors

Error Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Vowel-related errors	39	41,1
Consonant-related errors	33	34,7
Word-final consonant errors	23	24,2
Total Errors	95	100

Table 4 presents the overall distribution of pronunciation errors identified in this study. A total of 95 pronunciation errors were recorded from the respondents' pronunciation performance. Vowel-related errors accounted for the highest proportion, with 39 cases or 41.1 percent of the total errors. This finding reinforces the earlier result that vowel pronunciation is the most problematic area for Indonesian EFL university students.

Consonant related errors constituted 33 cases or 34.7 percent, while word-final consonant errors accounted for 23 cases or 24.2 percent. When compared with the previous tables, this overall distribution confirms the consistency of pronunciation error patterns across different categories of analysis. The distribution of errors indicates that pronunciation

problems among fifth semester students are not isolated but show systematic patterns across respondents. These recurring error patterns suggest the influence of shared linguistic background and learning experience among the students.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that English pronunciation difficulties among fifth semester students are primarily related to segmental features, particularly vowel sounds and certain consonants. The high frequency of vowel-related errors supports the view that English vowel distinctions pose significant challenges for EFL learners whose first language lacks similar phonemic contrasts. (Ladefoged, 2001) explains that English vowels require precise control of tongue position and vowel length, which are not phonemically distinctive in Indonesian. This structural difference contributes to persistent mispronunciation, as Indonesian has a relatively limited vowel inventory compared to English. Similar findings have been reported by (Yulianti et al., 2025), (Yusuf et al., 2024), and (Andikatama & Sujarwati, 2023), confirming that vowel production remains a major difficulty among Indonesian EFL learners at the tertiary level.

Consonant pronunciation problems, particularly interdental fricatives and word-final consonants, were also evident in the findings. These difficulties can be explained through first language interference theory, which suggests that learners tend to substitute unfamiliar target language sounds with the closest equivalents from their native language (Ellis, 1994). Since interdental fricatives do not exist in the Indonesian phonological system, students frequently replaced them with alveolar sounds. In addition, the tendency to delete or simplify word-final consonants reflects Indonesian phonotactic constraints, where complex consonant endings are rare. Previous studies by (Wafa & Khoiriyah, 2025) and (Sabbu et al., 2025) reported similar consonant substitution and deletion patterns among Indonesian EFL learners. When compared to other EFL contexts, similar substitution patterns are also found, although the specific sounds affected may vary depending on learners' first language backgrounds.

The persistence of these pronunciation problems among fifth semester students suggests the possibility of fossilization, where incorrect pronunciation forms become stabilized due to limited corrective feedback and insufficient pronunciation-focused instruction. (Selinker, 1972) interlanguage theory explains that fossilized errors often remain despite increased exposure to the target language. This finding aligns with (Algethami & Al Kamli, 2025), (Abdelreheem, 2025), Metruk (2025), and Tiwari (2024), who argue that pronunciation is often underemphasized in EFL classrooms. From a pedagogical perspective, these findings imply that pronunciation instruction should not be limited to repetition drills but should include explicit teaching of articulatory features, contrastive analysis between English and Bahasa Indonesia, and continuous corrective feedback. Therefore, this study reinforces the need for more systematic and targeted pronunciation instruction to improve students' intelligibility and communicative competence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that fifth-semester Indonesian EFL university students at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka still experience considerable difficulties in English pronunciation, particularly in producing vowel sounds, certain consonants, and word-final consonant clusters. These challenges are largely influenced by differences between Indonesian and English phonological systems, as well as limited phonemic awareness of English segmental features. Despite years of formal English instruction, students continue to exhibit recurring pronunciation errors that may hinder spoken intelligibility in both academic and communicative contexts. The findings suggest that these errors are not merely developmental but may reflect fossilization caused by insufficient explicit pronunciation instruction and limited corrective feedback. Theoretically, this study reinforces the role of first language interference and phonological differences in shaping learners' pronunciation, emphasizing the need to treat pronunciation as a core component of speaking instruction rather than a supplementary skill. Practically, it highlights the importance of incorporating

explicit teaching of problematic sounds, contrastive phonological analysis, focused pronunciation practice, phonetic awareness training, and continuous feedback in EFL classrooms. Although limited by a small sample size of thirty students, a focus on segmental features, and data from a single institution, the study provides valuable empirical insights for lecturers and curriculum designers in similar contexts. Future research is recommended to include larger and more diverse samples, examine suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation, and investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions in improving English pronunciation proficiency.

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