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## PROBLEMATIC ENGLISH SEGMENTAL SOUNDS: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

Difficulty in producing natural English sounds by Indonesian learners of English is due to the divergence in manner of producing the sounds in English and Indonesia and resulted in unnatural pronunciation of the English sounds. This research addresses the issue of English sound production with special attention to segmental sounds produced by Indonesian learners of English. Descriptive method was used to explain the data collected from picture description task and interview. The study was divided into two: 1) an in-depth phonetic analysis of the students' sounds production in terms of place of articulation, manner of articulation and distinctive features for the production of English consonant sounds, and openness of mouth, tongue elevation, position of tongue elevation, lips' shapes, and length of vocalization for the production of the English vowel sounds and 2) detailed explanation about the contributory factors to the production of segmental sounds quality in terms of unnatural performance and unnatural competence. The findings of this research denoted that the most to least frequent problematic sounds produced by the student occur in [ð] voiced dental fricative (38.15%) for consonant sound and [æ] Lax Low Front Unrounded (38.46%) for vowel sound. The most potential influential factors to the problematic English sounds production are the learners' mother language interference and the less practice of speaking English. Both are indicators of unnatural performance.

### I. Introduction

A number of foreign languages are learnt in Indonesia such as English, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, etc. The learning and teaching of English at school have

been regulated in the Act of The Republic of Indonesia on National Education System No. 020/2003, Article 37 that English is the only foreign language which is taught and learned as compulsory subject from primary school level to university level. The need for learning English has been increasingly recognized during recent years, in which English has brought great advantages to education because it provides the students with access to global information and knowledge of science and technology. Therefore, it is intensively used as an instructional language in many formal and non-formal educational institutions (Andi, K., & Arafah, B. 2017).

In university level, the government has stipulated that the University curriculum in Indonesia consists of core and institutional curricula (Decree of Minister of National Education NO. 045 / U / 2002). The curriculum of the Bachelor Degree (Strata 1) program ranges from 40-80% of the total number of credits from a study program. The core curriculum is set nationally by the Minister of National Education, while the institutional curriculum is determined by each university. UIN Alauddin Makassar is one of the Universities in Indonesia whose English subject must be learnt by the students according to Institutional curriculum. Yassi, A. H. and Kaharuddin (2018) state the existence of English in institutional curriculum is stated in the decree No. 045/U/2002, paragraph 2, article 10 specifying that institutional curriculum could include Indonesian, English Basic Natural Science, Philosophy of science, physical education, etc. In the university, the teaching of English is distinguished as a general course for non-English students and English as a major. As a general course, English is one of skills to develop in the field of non-English study provided for two semesters. As a major course for the students of English Education Department, the students are fed English lessons in depth. Three aspects are given: 1) the aspect of science concerning with the application of linguistics as the scientific way of studying language, both language in general and language in particular (Bahar, A. K. 2013), 2) the aspect of methodology concerning the method in teaching English, and 3) the aspect of skill divided into listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The subjects of this study are those who are studying English as a major which are here called as Indonesian learners of English (ILE).

There are two interesting facts about the ILE at the university level namely: *the first*, they have been studying English since elementary school and *the second*, they have even studied linguistics and phonetics in depth at the department of English education. However, they still find it problematic to produce English segmental sounds correctly (Kaharuddin & Djuwairiah A. 2018). It is a universal phenomenon that many university students are still unable to make English sounds correctly even if they have been learning English for so many years (Kaharuddin, A. 2018). This inability negatively affects not only their English pronunciation skill, but also their oral communication skill (Hasyim, M., Nursidah, & Hasjim, M. 2019, ). In this regard, Saito, K. (2011) asserts that one of primary goals in teaching English is to help learners to acquire comprehensible pronunciation. For example, some Indonesian learners of English are likely to pronounce the initial sound [θ] in the word thank [θæŋk] as tank [tæŋk]. It causes misunderstanding because *thank* is different from *tank*, and both these words have different meanings. The situation often makes them unable to interact socially with native English speakers by the reason of their unnatural English pronunciation. Besides, Indonesian learners of English usually find English words that end with /l/ and /p/ serially, such in words *help* and *pulp*, but those words are never found in Indonesian. Most of them cannot pronounce these words properly and often insert a vowel so that the words are pronounced /helep/ and /pulep/. Consequently, the deviation causes a communication breakdown as well (Jenkins, J. 2002).

Acknowledging the importance of producing proper English segmental sounds features to gain comprehensible pronunciation for Indonesian learners of English (ILE), the current research examines what English segmental sounds are found to be problematic for ILE. The findings on the problematic segmental sounds have shown the patterns of English segmental variation which are different from those of native English speakers. This fact is also acknowledged as ‘accentedness’ or the EFL learners’ different accent from that of the L1 community (Hong, H., Kim, S., & Chung, M. 2014). In pedagogical context, the ‘accentedness’ should be prioritized to be taught by English teachers in EFL classrooms to help the ILE to acquire comprehensible pronunciation for effective communication (Piske, T., MacKay, I. R., & Flege, J. E. 2001) because the ‘accentedness’ shows not only sound variation (Hong, H., Kim, S., & Chung, M. 2014), but also sound deviation which potentially causes comprehensibility problem (Saito, K. 2011, Evans, B. G., & Alshangiti, W. 2018, Kaharuddin., & Hasyim, M. 2020). Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2005) are of the opinion that having a good pronunciation of a language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility.

## II. Literature Review

The study of English segmental sounds belongs to Phonetics as discipline concerned with describing how sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived (Hamann and Schmitz, 2005). There have been many studies carried out concerning these issues. Let’s take those conducted in Indonesia. Hadi (2015) analyzed students’ difficulty in pronouncing English segmental phonemes, particularly in pronunciation class context. The research respondents were ten students of English Department of Al Hikmah Teacher Institute which has accomplished pronunciation practice course. This study was qualitative research. The data were collected by observation, interviews and recording. Students’ recording was analyzed to get the data why they faced difficulties in producing several English segmental phonemes. The research finding was that the differences in segmental phonemes between English and Indonesian cause the students difficult to pronounce several English segmental phonemes. This research did not give explanation in depth about what the students’ difficulties are and why the difficulties occur.

Chaira (2014) studied the interference of the first language in pronouncing the English segmental sounds. The research was conducted in Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School Banda Aceh and focused on investigating the Interlingua errors the students produced as the result of the interference and finding the solutions to avoid the Interlingua errors through the methods applied by their teachers. She applied a subsequent process method by collecting the data on the field, selecting the required samples, classifying into the sound classification, comparing the samples from English pronunciation using phonetic transcription, analyzing the data using phonological theories. The mispronounced sounds resulted from the interference of the mother language are [ph], [th], [kh], [f] for grapheme “ph”, [v], [θ], [ð], [z] for grapheme “s”, [ʃ], [ks] for grapheme “x”, [i: ], [u: ], [æ], and [e]. Therefore, teachers are recommended to apply Audio-lingual Method, Phonetic Method, pronunciation drill, Behaviorist Learning Theories (sound imitating), and Phonic-based Approach to improve the pronunciation of the consonant and vowel sounds. Through this language research, the teachers will definitely recognize of how to sound all English consonant and vowel sounds correctly. Therefore, they are recommended to implement the given methods to have their students correctly pronounce the sounds in order to avoid the intralingua errors caused by the interference of their L1.

Risdianto (2017) conducted a phonological analysis on the English consonants of Sundanese EFL speakers. The respondents of the research were the students of Islamic Education Department of State Institute for Islamic Studies Salatiga. It was a descriptive qualitative study focused on the description of English consonants systems spoken by the speakers of Sundanese backgrounds. This implied that the speakers of particular regional backgrounds speak unique and idiosyncratic native languages. This study provided a description on the students' consonants production of English as Foreign Language (EFL) speakers with Sundanese native language in an experimental phonetic method. The research result was that the EFL Sundanese students made 262 errors. The greatest errors were mispronouncing the minimal pairs of /f/ and /v/, /s/ and /θ/ and /ð/ and /z/. The misuse of the sound "p" instead of "b" is common error for Sundanese since there is not distinction between the sound "f", "v" and "p" in Sundanese phonological system.

Guntari (2013) did a research on Sundanese students' production of English dental fricative consonant sounds. The respondents were Sundanese students of Universitas Gadjah Mada. It was intended to investigate the level of acceptability and to find out the possible factors which influence their production of these dental fricative consonant sounds. 700 sentences containing the four dental fricative consonants were obtained and used as the data of the research. The students' production of the four consonants was then assessed by a native speaker of English for their acceptability. The results of this research showed that the acceptability level as judged by the informant of the students' production of the dental fricative sounds was low, only 13.80% on average. The highest acceptability was in the sound [f] with 45.56%. The second highest acceptability was in the sound [v] which is scored 5%. It was then followed by the sound [θ] with score 2.78%, and the sound [ð] with 1.88%. In general, the production of the dental fricative sounds produced by Sundanese students is judged as not clear by the native speaker.

The previous findings above denoted similarity and difference with this research. The similarity of this research and previous studies is that they are analyzing the English segmental sounds either the consonant or the vowel sounds. The difference is that the first previous study focused only on the students' difficulty in producing English segmental sound, the second previous study focused on the inference students in English Segmental Sounds, and the third and four previous studies focused only on the consonant sounds. However, those previous studies are considered having correlation with this research that the findings of this research are expected to contribute insights to the discussion of segmental sounds in American English that the foreign learners of English may produce.

### **III. Research Methodology**

This research used qualitative descriptive method to analyze the segmental sounds produced by the students of English Education Department in academic year 2015 at the faculty of education and teacher training of UIN Alauddin Makassar. Ten students who were purposively selected, participated in this study. They were selected by referring to their English proficiency levels which were determined based on their TOEFL PBT (Paper Base Test) scores. The data were collected by Pre-recording directions, picture description tasks to know the specific sounds commonly felt problematic by the learners. Besides, Recording, Transcribing and questionnaire were also used as research instruments to know the causal factors for producing the problematic English segmental sounds. The causal factors are determined by adapting the theory of Nsakla (1995) as indicated in table 1.

Table 1. The causal factors of problematic sounds production

The Causal Factors	Indicator
Unnatural Performance	Lack of motivation to learn phonetic
	Lack of memory
	Mother tongue interference
	Sleep of the tongue
	Less practice
Unnatural Competence	Unfamiliar with the sound
	Unknown how to pronounce
	Lack of knowledge

The data were analyzed by using the procedures of four systematic steps: collection (collected the data by recording the students' speaking and transcribed into International Phonetic Alphabet), identification (identifying the data whether natural or unnatural sounds based on International Phonetic Alphabet), classification (calculating the incorrect sound frequency), and explanation (explaining and discussing the causal factor of unnatural sounds produced by the students  $P = x \ 100\%$ ) (Kaharuddin, and Ismail 2017).

#### IV. Findings and Discussions

##### 1. Problematic English segmental production

This research addressed the issue of American English (AE) sound production with special attention to segmental sounds produced by students of English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar. In the data collection, there are one thousand and forty four (1044) words speech produced by ten (10) respondents, from whom the consonant and vowel sounds were analyzed. Problematic segmental sounds occurred not only in consonant but also in vowel sounds of American English (AE). This study revealed 443 problematic consonant sounds and 351 problematic vowel sounds. The problematic sounds are classified per category in terms of place of articulation, manner of articulation as well as distinctive features for the production of English consonant sounds. On the other hand, openness of the mouth, tongue elevation, position of tongue elevation, lips' shapes, as well as length of vocalization were used as parameters for the production of English vowel sounds. The problematic sounds' frequency was calculated by percentages and put it into the table as shown in the following table 2.

Table 4. Percentages of the Students' Production of Consonant Sounds

No	Sound category	Total unnatural sound	Percentage
1	[p] voiceless bilabial stop	-	-
2	[b] voiced bilabial stop	-	-
3	[m] voiceless bilabial nasal	-	-
4	[f] voiceless labiodentals fricative	-	-
5	[v] voiced labiodentals fricative	60	13.54 %
6	[θ] voiceless dental fricative	10	2.26
7	[ð] voiced dental fricative	169	38.15%
8	[t] voiceless alveolar stop	25	5.64%
9	[d] voiced alveolar stop	-	-
10	[n] voiced alveolar nasal	-	-
11	[l] voiced alveolar lateral	1	0.23
12	[s] voiceless alveolar fricative	-	-
13	[z] voiced alveolar fricative	91	20.54%

14	[dʒ] voiced palatal affricative	3	9.68%
15	[tʃ] voiceless palatal affricative	64	14.44%
16	[j] voiceless palatal glide	-	-
17	[ʃ] voiceless palate-alveolar fricative	18	4.06 %
18	[ʒ] voiced palate-alveolar fricative	1	0.23 %
19	[r] voiced palate-alveolar glide	-	-
20	[k] voiceless velar stop	-	-
21	[g] voiceless velar stop	-	-
22	[ŋ] voiced velar nasal	-	-
23	[h] voiceless glottal fricative	-	-
24	[w] voiced labiovelar glide	1	0.23%
TOTAL		430	100

Source: Primary Data Processing

The table above indicated that the highest unnatural sound of AE consonant sounds made by the students was the sound [ð]. This sound is pronounced [d], such as the word ‘the’ is pronounced as [de] instead of [ðə]. The word ‘with’ should be pronounced as [wɪ ð] but the students pronounced it [wɪ t]. In the sound [d], the students changed the manner and place of articulation of the sound from dental and fricative to alveolar and stop. In the sound [t], the students also changed the distinctive feature, the manner and place of articulation of the sound from voiced dental fricative to voiceless alveolar stop. The second highest unnatural sound made by the students is the sound [z]. To make this particular sound appropriate, we needed to pay attention to specific sound production. Based on the activity of vocal cord or distinctive Features, it was a voiced sound, it was alveolar based on the place of articulation and it was fricative based on the manner of articulation. This sound was found in Indonesian sounds but it was rarely used and mostly found in initial sound, therefore the students get difficulties when uttering the sound in final position of words. Moreover, sound [z] commonly produced as [s]. The position that the students substituted the sound [z] with [s] occurred in two position; medial and final. The substitution in medial position occurred in the words ‘enthusiasm’ [ɪ n' θuzi, æzə m] and it was pronounced as [an' tuzi, asə m]. In the final position happened in the words ‘raise’ [reɪ z], applause [ə' plɔ z], because [brɪ' kə z] and memorize [mɛ mə , rai z]. They were pronounced as [rai s], [ə' plaus], [brɪ' kaus], and [' mɛ mo, rai s]. This was because the sound [z] and [s] had similarity between manner and place of articulation, but the distinction only on the state of vocal cord; the sound [z] is voiced and the sound [s] was voiceless. This was also because the Indonesian students are used to pronounce the word the same as the written of it. The third highest unnatural sound was [tʃ]. This sound was voiceless based on the activity of vocal cord, palatal based on the place of articulation and affricative based the manner of articulation. The substitutions of the sound [tʃ] are [c] and [s]. For example, the word ‘choose’ is pronounced [cu z] instead of [tʃ uz], ‘picture’ is pronounced [' pɪ kcə r] instead of [' pɪ ktʃ ə r] and ‘question’ be [' kwɛ ssə n] instead of [' kwɛ stʃ ə n].

The phonetic analysis of students’ sounds production refers to the place of articulation, manner of articulation as well as distinctive features for production of consonant sounds and openness of the mouth, tongue elevation, position of tongue elevation, lips’ shapes, as well as length of vocalization for vowel sounds. Based on the findings, the students of English Education Department produced some unnatural consonant. The unnatural consonant sound production is felt as problematic consonant sounds. The problematic sounds are [v], [θ], [ð], [z], [tʃ], [ʃ], [t], [dʒ], [ʒ], [l] and [w]. Beside consonants, the production

of unnatural vowel sounds are [æ], [ou], [ɑ], [eɪ], [ə], [ɔ], [ʌ], [ɛ], [ɪ], [au]. Similarly, Nilawati (2008) also revealed the error consonant omission: [t], [d], and [k], the error consonant selection [v], [θ], [ð], [z], and [ʒ], the errors vowel selection [ɔ], [æ], [ɛ], and [ɑ], and [ə], and the errors of diphthong selection [ou], eə], [ə u] and [eɪ]. The differences with this research are the production of the unnatural sounds of [l], [w], [tʃ], [ʃ] for consonants and [ʌ] for vowels. Furthermore, Amalia (2010) found some errors in pronouncing the nasals sound /ŋ/, fricative sound /ʒ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /ʃ/, affricative sound /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, long vowels /i:/, /ɜ:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/ and /ɑ:/, and also short vowels /ɪ/, /eɪ/, /æ/, /ə/, /ʌ/, and /ʊ/.

The result of this research indicated the student had difficulties in pronouncing some English consonantal sounds that do not exist in Indonesian sound system, even those consonantal sounds which seem similar to some Indonesian sounds. They have differences in distinctive features, manner and place of articulation.

## 2. Causal factors to problematic segmental sounds production

Regarding the causal factors to the production of segmental sounds, this study found that the unnatural sound production occurred potentially when the learners speak English because of mother tongue interference and less practice. The finding is in line with what Hartina (2018) found when investigating factors; affecting the pronunciation quality of Makassar learners of English. According to her, the most dominant factor affecting the learners' pronunciation is mother tongue interference. The learners belong to Makassar ethnic group that the sound system of Makassar language interferes the learners' pronunciation quality as they speak English. This fact indicate that the learners encounter difficulties in making natural English pronunciation due to different sound system existing in both languages, in which the most frequently used language i.e. Bugis Bone language, will interfere the less frequently used language i.e. English language (Arafah, B., & Kaharuddin, 2019, Hasyim, M., Kuswarini, P., & Kaharuddin. 2020) Similarly, Hadi (2015) found that the differences segmental phonemes between English and Indonesian made the students difficult to pronounce several English segmental phonemes appropriately (Arafah, B., Thayyib, M., Kaharuddin, & Sahib, H. 2020). The students' mother tongue caused the problematic segmental sound productions as one of the respondent commented "my habit in recognizing and pronouncing Indonesian alphabet influenced my pronunciation when making English sounds" and another respondent stated "English is not my first language and rarely used it in my social interactions". The respondents' statements above show that the problematic sounds productions occurred when English consonant sounds system are different from those in Indonesian. Therefore, almost students changed the English segmental sounds into Indonesian segmental sounds which are considered easier to make and a bit compatible to English existing segmental sounds.

Less practice in speaking English particularly in producing proper pronunciation of English sounds is another factor making the students to produce some problematic English segmental sounds. They only study and practice English in the classrooms and few practices done after the class. In this regard, a respondent commented "The factor is less practice speaking in English; it has made my way of producing English sounds improper". Another student also commented "I rarely practice speaking English and I don't really know about the rules of producing English sounds appropriately". To support this finding, Nilawati (2008) stated that there are at least three causal factors making the Indonesian learners of English to produce the fossilized phonetic errors, namely: Firstly, the students apply the phonological rules of their mother tongue to those of the target language. Secondly, the students are insufficiency

in English mastery which can be seen in their low proficiency, lack of acculturation, mother tongue transfer, and inability to give output or corrective feedback (Kaharuddin, Hikmawati, Arafah, B. 2019). Thirdly, the complexity of the English itself often causes the students to get confused (Kaharuddin, A. 2019).

In addition, Syafei (1988) also stated that the phonological system of English is quite difficult for Indonesian learners of English for two main reasons, i.e. First, the irregular spelling of English words which is considered problematic to ILE. Second, the difficulties are due to inference (negative transfer from Indonesian to target language (English)). The ILE are unable to make English sounds naturally because most students just memorize how to pronounce English words, with a few efforts to have knowledge of how to pronounce English phonemes correctly (Kaharuddin, K. 2016, Bahar, A. K., & Latif, I. 2019). Besides, less practice producing English sounds correctly also becomes one contributing factor to the production problematic English sounds (Kaharuddin, N. 2014, Arafah, B., Jamulia. J., & Kaharuddin. 2020)).

## V. Conclusion

In a nut shell, the results of this study indicate that the Indonesian learners of English are facing problem in making English consonants and vowel sounds naturally and this fact is then known as problematic sounds. The identified problematic segmental sounds are [ð], [z], [tʃ], [v], [t], [ʃ], [θ], [dʒ], [l], [ʒ], [w] for consonant sounds and [æ], [ə], [ɪ], [ɑ], [ɛ], [eɪ], [ɔ], [ʌ], [oʊ], [aʊ] for vowel sounds. In response to the fact, this study also reveals that the tendency of producing the problematic segmental sounds occurs due to two main causal factors, i.e. unnatural performance factor and unnatural competence factor (Nsakla 1995). Each factor has indicators. The indicators of unnatural performance in this research are lack of motivation, lack of memory, mother tongue interference, slip of the tongue, as well as less practice speaking English. The indicators of unnatural competence are unfamiliar with the English sounds, unable to pronounce English sounds naturally due to lack knowledge of English phonetic and phonological rules. Among the two causal factor, this study emphasizes that the most influential factor affecting the production of the problematic segmental sounds is the unnatural performance.

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