

ASSESSING STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION SKILLS AND HOW TO IMPROVE THEM

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Abstract

Phonetics and phonology, in one way or another, are related to pronunciation. Despite the still inconclusive research results on how much one's knowledge of phonetics and phonology will affect one's pronunciation, in teaching and learning contexts it is still considered relevant to assess students' spoken language abilities using the phonetic and phonological approach. This study was qualitative in nature and intended to collect information on the verbal language performance of two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers, each of whom speaks Indonesian and one local language.

Keywords: *assessment, pronunciation skills*

INTRODUCTION

Phonetics is concerned with the inventory and structure of the sounds of a language, how they are produced and perceived, as well as the physical properties they possess. Meanwhile, phonology deals with the patterns of produced sounds; that is, how they combine and affect each other, as well as the relations that exist among them (O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1989; Davenport & Hannahs, 2013). Both dealing with sounds of a language, these two subfields of linguistics are naturally judged to be interrelated in nature. Akmajian, Demers & Harnish (1985), for instance, regard the investigations of speech sounds' production and physical properties (i.e., articulatory and acoustic phonetics respectively) as a part of phonology (p. 99). Another scholar, Ohala (2004) argues that phonology and phonetics must be closely integrated into one another, regardless of the view whether they are considered separate disciplines or merely different stages in speech production. Finally, Blumstein (1991) also asserts that phonetics and phonology are inextricably connected, as both phonology and phonetics have a direct influence on one another.

As elaborated above, the fields of phonetics and phonology are interrelated to one another. Having established this construct, the discussion will now shift to an even wider extent, that is, to cover the question if the two subfields of linguistics are related to—or integrated within—a wider discipline. Here, one such discipline that has a strong correlation with phonetics and phonology is language teaching and learning—more especially, the teaching and learning of the pronunciation aspect of language. According to Hülshof (1908), studying phonetics is an initial step in mastering a foreign language. This is so said because phonetics offers a means by which one can develop good pronunciation. It can help students acquire greater accuracy in the enunciation of both their L1 and L2 (Hülshof, 1908) and develop their pronunciation by enhancing awareness of the relevant aspect of speeches (Oizi & Anatolevna, 2020; Yilmaz, 2014; Hülshof, 1908). In addition, it was also argued that the students can pronounce the words better if they have grasped the idea of what is actually meant by articulating and pronouncing (rather than blindly imitating their teachers).

Assuming that we follow Yilmaz (2014) and Pennington's (1998] opinions that phonology is beneficial to teaching and learning pronunciation, the discussion now turns to the wider problem of pronunciation teaching and learning. As stated in Wrembel (2001), the current pronunciation teaching and learning—pedagogy, to use Wrembel's term—is directed

towards embracing a communicative and holistic approach. Hence, according to Wrembel (2001), more teachers are starting to go beyond mere repetition, drilling, transcription practice, and recognition and discrimination task and focus more on fluency-based communicative activities. This view of pronunciation teaching is supported by Pennington and Rogerson-Revell (2019). This, however, is not the case in Indonesian contexts, where English pronunciation teaching and learning still apply traditional classroom techniques, the focus of which is still limited to mechanical activities in teaching pronunciation, as listed by Wrembel (2001) above and disregards fluency-based activities.

The communicative vs traditional approach to teaching pronunciation also affects how students' pronunciation is assessed. This concerns what aspects of pronunciation are included in the rubric of assessment and also how the assessment is undertaken. According to Pennington & Rogerson-Revell (2019), some measures of pronunciation are (1) Accuracy, Accentedness or Nativelikeness; (2) Fluency; (3) Intelligibility; (4) Comprehensibility; and (5) Perception. Here, certainly, which measures a teaching practitioner chooses to focus on will depend on his/her belief in language and also approach to pronunciation teaching, learning, and assessment (i.e., communicative vs traditional). For instance, one teacher might focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility, while disregarding accuracy or nativelikeness while others consider these two aspects of pronunciation very relevant. In this paper, we argue that the assessment of pronunciation should include both accuracy and fluency aspects as well as intelligibility approaches. Furthermore, in the teaching and learning contexts, assessment should not only be limited to findings students' errors but not less important is how to improve them.

In this paper, we present our analysis of the pronunciation and spoken language abilities of two different Participants with different language levels. The assessment has used multiple measures to assess pronunciation, which include intelligibility and comprehensibility, as well as accuracy. Following the analysis are the recommendations to improve each of the participants' spoken language abilities.

METHODS

The participants of this study were one male and one female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers. The male one (identified as Participant 1) was a senior high school student with Sasak and Indonesian language background whereas the female one (identified as Participant 2) was a university graduate with Balinese and Indonesian language background. The data on the Participants' spoken language abilities were collected using two different instruments: (semi-structured) interviews and reading aloud. The interviews were intended to get the participants to produce language which was then later analyzed to observe their overall performance: the intelligibility and comprehensibility of their speech and the 'correctness' of their speech at both segmental and suprasegmental levels. Meanwhile, the reading-aloud strategy was specifically targeted to observe the Participants' current language perception, that is, whether it is L1 or L2-influenced. Both recordings of the verbal data were then transcribed for analysis. Phonemic transcriptions were used where relevant categories of errors were identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following pronunciation analysis is divided into 3 (three) different sub-categories, each of which addresses and analyzes both Participants': (1) intelligibility and comprehensibility; (2) 'correctness' at the segmental level; and (3) 'correctness' at the suprasegmental/prosody level. This analysis will be then followed by an analysis of possible causes of the errors. The end part of the paper proposes some suggestions regarding what aspect(s) of the Participant's language ability can be improved, and how they can be improved.

Pronunciation Analysis

Intelligibility and comprehensibility

According to Pennington & Rogerson-Revell (2019), intelligibility refers to the extent to which a speaker's utterance is actually understood by the listener, while comprehensibility refers to how difficult (or easy) the speech is understood. Here, since the two are mainly concerned about the 'understandability' of the speaker's utterance, the accent and minor pronunciation errors would be disregarded as long as the words of the speech are understandable. As a basis for the Intelligibility and comprehensibility assessment for both Participants, parts of the interviews are provided below:

Table 1: Transcription for Participant 1's Interview

Interviewer	:	How was your first day like?
Participant 1	:	It sucks. <i>Laugh.</i>
Interviewer	:	Can you tell me why it sucked?
Participant 1	:	Because err... my interview err... I I I didn't know err... that I call—I called to do test back then, so I was late to come to err... test, so yeah, my first day was suck, because I was late to do test.
Interviewer	:	If you have the chance, would you change your job?
Participant 1	:	If I had the chance, would you change your job...yeah
Interviewer	:	Why?
Participant 1	:	Because err.. of course err.. I want to um... work with the good salary. With a good salary. I think it's obvi—obvi—oblivious, okay, because err... I have—I have a debt to pay.
Interviewer	:	Do you plan to continue with your job in the future?
Participant 1	:	Hmmmm.. <i>speaks Bahasa.</i> It depends on err... my career. <i>Laugh.</i> My future career. Because err... I...I...err...I study right now in Master of Science Education, so maybe in the future I will err... change my job to become a lecturer.
Interviewer	:	So, if you were offered to be a lecturer, which one would you choose? (current job or lecturer)
Participant 1	:	I will choose the lecture because err... it's—it's the first dream, okay? The first dream. <i>Laugh.</i> The first—my—the first job that I want to ...
Interviewer	:	To have?
Participant 1	:	Yeah, I want to have. Yes.
Interviewer	:	Anything else you want to speak out? About your job?
Participant 1	:	Well, umm... I like my job. But not... <i>laugh</i> ...I really like my job. But if I offered um maybe job that umm... prospective career for ... of of of of course to my career, I will not hesitated to take that poss...umm...chance to umm...of course for the better future, you know. <i>Laugh.</i> For better future. So that's it.

Table 2: Transcription for Participant 2's Interview

Interviewer	:	Do you usually have the same routine every day?
Participant 2	:	Yes. I have err...a same routine every day
Interviewer	:	What is your daily routine?
Participant 2	:	My daily routine is...my daily routine is err... I make it err... when I wake up in the morning, err... after that I make err...tea, and I...and...I washing my face ...and I eat the bre—I eat bread err...

Interviewer	:	For breakfast?
Participant 2	:	I eat bread for the breakfast.
Interviewer	:	Is your routine the same as when you were a child?
Participant 2	:	The same! I won't change my daily routine cause it's so... <i>udah kebiasaan, gitu.</i>
Interviewer	:	Do you think having a routine is important?
Participant 2	:	My opinion is err...maybe is a really ... maybe is penting. Maybe my opinion is um maybe important about daily routine um people is ...different.

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the level of Intelligibility and comprehensibility of Participants 1 and 2's speeches differ quite significantly. Despite still having to use fillers, Participant 1 managed to produce pretty comprehensible longer stretches of speech in most parts. His speech is generally intelligible and it is not really difficult to understand, even though it exhibited many grammatical errors. This is quite different from Participant 2's speech, whereby the intelligibility and comprehensibility are certainly lower. For Participant 2, the speech is significantly harder to understand (comprehensibility), and hence its intelligibility mostly depends on the listener's (i.e., the interviewer's) L1 background knowledge.

Segmental level

For the segmental level, the discussion will focus on the analysis of individual speech sounds produced by the Participants. The data for this part mainly use the data from the reading-aloud strategy, but repetitive errors found in the transcript of the interviews (if any) will also be added. Below are the data for Participants 1 and 2's speeches (note that not all data are included, only some of the erroneous pronunciation):

Table 3. Some Segmental Errors in Participant 1's pronunciation

Word	Correct Pronunciation	Informant 1's Errors
Thick	[θɪk]	[tik]
Paint	[peɪnt]	[peɪn]
Neighbor	[ˈneɪbər]	[ˈneɪgbər]
Brush	[brʌʃ]	[brʌs]
Painted	[ˈpeɪntəd]	[ˈpeɪn]
Repainted	[riˈpeɪntəd]	[riˈpeɪn]
Beige	[beɪʒ]	[beɪg]
Unlocked	[ənˈlɒkt]	[ənˈlɒk]
Influence	[ˈɪnfluəns]	[ˈɪnfluən]
Tenant	[ˈtɛnənt]	[ˈtɪnənt]
Swept	[swɛpt]	[swɛp]
Individuality	[ɪnˌdɪvɪdʒuˈælɪti]	[ɪnˌdɪvɪduˈælɪti]
Struggles	[ˈstrʌɡəlz]	[ˈstrʌgəl]
Embrace	[ɛmˈbreɪs]	[ɛmˈbres]
Appearance	[əˈpiərəns]	[əˈpriərəns]
Placated	[pləɪkeɪtɪd]	[pləɪstɪd]
Voices	[ˈvɔɪsɪz]	[ˈvɔɪsə]
t-shirts	[ti-ʃɜrts]	[ti-ʃɜrt]

As seen from the table above (and also from the whole recording), it appears that Participant 1 mostly struggles in pronouncing the suffix -ed after past forms. Here, Participant 1 almost always omitted the sounds altogether, resulting in a non-past form. In regards to the

mispronouncing of the segments, however, the Participants make several erroneous pronunciations, which include:

[1] θ → t

[2] ʃ → s

Here, as noticed, the two sounds that Participant 1 most often pronounced incorrectly are [θ] and [ʃ]. This is most likely caused by an influence from his L1, Indonesian. As Indonesian doesn't have [θ] and [ʃ] in its speech inventory, it is highly likely that Participant 1 automatically switched the unfamiliar speech segment to the one found in his L1.

In addition to the erroneous pronunciation mentioned above, the Participant also often mispronounces the letter 'g', as found in 'neighbor' and 'beige'. He also often struggles with pronouncing longer words (i.e., words with 3 (three) or more syllables). Here, it is assumed that the errors for the pronunciation of g letters is caused by the fact that unlike Indonesian, English is not a phonetic language. That is, English words are pronounced differently from how they are written (Yilmaz, 2014). Thus, as Participant 1's linguistic background is Indonesian, plus the fact that he is not exposed to enough English inputs, he then struggles to pronounce some words.

Table 4. Some Segmental Errors in Participant 2's pronunciation

Word	Correct Pronunciation	Informat 1's Errors
Cloud	[klaʊd]	[klod]
Wall	[wɔl]	[wel]
against	[ə'geɪnst]	[ə'gɛɪnəs]
Loud	[laʊd]	[loud]
gravel	['grævəl]	['krævəl]
Cursing	['kɜrsɪŋ]	['kursɪŋ]
Blind	[blaɪnd]	[blɪn]
Neighbor	['neɪbər]	['neɪbor], ['neɪgbor]
Knock	[nɒk]	[knɒk]
Answer	[ænsər]	[ænswər]
Slimy texture	['slɪmi 'tekstʃər]	['slɪmi 'tekstur]
Pound	[paʊnd]	[pon]
Socket	['sɒkət]	['sukit]
Small	[smɔl]	[smɑɪl]
Breath	[brɛθ]	[brɛd]
Mannerism	['mænə,rɪzəmz]	['mænə,rɪmz]
Dislikes	[dɪ'slaɪks]	[dɪ'slaɪkəs]
tough	[tʌf]	[tau]

Just as the intelligibility and comprehensibility of Participant 2 are worse than that of Participant 1, more segmental errors are also discovered for Participant 1. However, similar to Participant 1's errors, Participant 2 errors also form a pattern. That is, most of her errors were caused by vowels and consonant clusters:

[3] [aʊ] → [o]

[4] [ɔ] → [e]

[5] [aʊ] → [oo]

[6] [ɜ] → [u]

[7] [aɪ] → [i]

[8] [wɔl] → [wel]

[9] [nst] → [nəs]

[10] [nsər] → [nswər]

[11] [rɪzəmz] → [rɪmz]

[12] [ks] → [kəs]

Just as the segmental errors of Participant 1 are caused by the influence from his L1, it is also suggested that Participant 2's erroneous pronunciation is also caused by her linked perception to her L1. As Indonesian are phonetic language, Participant 1's L1 perception then guided her to pronounce the words as they are written, and not as how they are supposed to be pronounced.

Suprasegmental level

The discussion on suprasegmental errors made by Participants 1 and 2 will target external properties of the speech sounds, that is, stress, pitch (i.e., tone and intonation), loudness, and length (O'Grady and Dobrovolsky, 1989). However, the errors discussed under this subheading will only surround erroneous stress placement and intonation.

Participant 1

Participant 1 generally didn't pay attention to any word stress. In some of the words, the stress was misplaced—or omitted altogether. Nevertheless, the Participant had the correct intonation most of the time, with only some minor errors in some sentences (mostly found in reading-aloud data)

Participant 2

Similar to Participant 1, Participant 2 also rarely paid attention to the word stress. In most of the data from the reading-aloud strategy, the stress was misplaced. However, this occurred less frequently during interviews (though it should be noted that the Participant produced only a limited amount of speech in interviews, which should be somewhat considered). In addition to the stress, Participant 2 also surprisingly produced a few intonation errors during the interview.

Suggestions For Improvement

Participant 1

Based on the analysis conducted on Participant 1, it appears that Participant 1 at the very least has already acquired adequate background knowledge of English. Here are some suggestions that might be helpful for his improvement include:

(1) Drilling

Recalling the fact that one error found in Participant 1's pronunciation is regarding the pronouncing of suffix -ed for past forms and the substitution of [θ] and [ʃ] sounds with [t] and [s] sounds, it will be highly helpful for Participant 1 to receive drilling on this matter, in order to practice his pronunciation of the past forms and the θ] and [ʃ] sounds. Drilling here can also use tongue-twisters in order to get the Participant used to the subtle different pronunciation of some English words. Here, another activity that can be used is sound-matching, in which the Participant is provided with some forms of verbs (or words), and he is obliged to choose which verb form he had listened to, or the sound [θ] and [ʃ] he has listened to.

(2) Communication-based activities

After analyzing Participant 1's spoken language ability, it is concluded that the Participant already possesses background knowledge—competence—in English. This is because even though the Participant sometimes struggled in forming his speech, he seems to fully understand what the interviewer was saying. Hence, it appears that the problem lies in his lack of practice in speaking the language. Therefore, it is highly suggested that Participant 1 is asked to engage in a communication-based activity, in which he can practice his spoken and communicative skills, thus resulting in an improvement.

Participant 2

Based on the analysis above, it appears that Participant 2 is actually paying attention to her speech production in general (as seen from how her intonations are mostly free from errors). However, this enthusiasm for speaking English is not supported by adequate English input. Considering her errors as well as this condition, some suggestions that might be suitable for her improvement should include **adding more language input**. Here, since the focus is on pronunciation, the input that should be added must be in the form of spoken language. It can source from videos, movies, or songs. Here, it might be better to provide the transcription of the spoken language. First, this will ensure that Participant 2 is well aware that English is a non-phonetic language whose pronunciation differs from its spellings. In addition to these, it might also be helpful to incorporate a language-learning application that can help speed this process. One of the applications that can be used is **Duolingo**. Duolingo provides a variety of exercises which focus on pronunciations, such as word-sound matching (i.e., the users are asked to choose a word based on an audio) and pronunciation practice (i.e., the users are asked to pronounce some words, which will then be assessed). Its application is also highly suitable for a beginner yet enthusiastic English learner, such as Participant 2..

CONCLUSION

In teaching and learning pronunciation, it is considered important to get adequate data on students' spoken language abilities. This will provide us with data on students' overall language abilities as well as aspect(s) of spoken language which still need improvement. Despite its complex process and procedures, this strategy can be a valid source of information for deciding what to focus on in future teaching and learning activities (content) as well as how to do it (methods and strategies).

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