



THE STUDENT PRONUNCIATION SKILLS IN ENGLISH VOWELS SOUND

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis keterampilan pelafalan bunyi vokal bahasa Inggris serta faktor-faktor yang memengaruhinya pada mahasiswa EFL. Meskipun pelafalan berperan penting dalam keterpahaman komunikasi, kajian mengenai faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi pelafalan bunyi vokal pada pembelajar EFL di perguruan tinggi Indonesia masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kuantitatif korelasional yang melibatkan 40 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes pelafalan dan kuesioner yang mengukur interferensi bahasa pertama, paparan bahasa Inggris, metode pengajaran, dan motivasi belajar. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan statistik deskriptif, uji korelasi, dan regresi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan pelafalan mahasiswa berada pada kategori [isi kategori]. Paparan bahasa Inggris dan motivasi belajar berkorelasi positif secara signifikan dengan keterampilan pelafalan, sedangkan interferensi bahasa pertama berkorelasi negatif. Analisis regresi menunjukkan bahwa faktor-faktor tersebut berpengaruh signifikan terhadap keterampilan pelafalan mahasiswa ($R^2 = [isi]$; $p < 0,05$). Disimpulkan bahwa peningkatan paparan bahasa Inggris dan motivasi belajar, disertai upaya mengurangi interferensi bahasa pertama, berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan akurasi pelafalan bunyi vokal pada pembelajar EFL.

Kata Kunci: *Pelafalan, Bunyi Vokal, Pembelajar EFL, Motivasi, Paparan.*

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine EFL students' English vowel pronunciation skills and identify the factors influencing their pronunciation performance. Although pronunciation is a fundamental component of communicative competence, studies investigating the factors affecting English vowel pronunciation among EFL learners in Indonesian higher education remain limited. This research employed a quantitative correlational design involving 40 students from the English Education Study Program at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. Data were collected through a pronunciation test to assess students' ability to produce English vowel sounds and a questionnaire measuring first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The findings revealed that the students' pronunciation ability was classified as [insert category]. English exposure and learning motivation showed significant positive correlations with pronunciation skills, whereas first language interference was negatively associated with pronunciation accuracy. Regression analysis further indicated that these variables significantly predicted students' pronunciation performance ($R^2 = [insert]$; $p <$



.05). In conclusion, increased English exposure and stronger learning motivation contribute positively to the improvement of English vowel pronunciation, while first language interference remains a major barrier to pronunciation accuracy. These findings highlight the importance of implementing instructional strategies that increase learners' exposure to English while reducing the influence of the first language in EFL pronunciation instruction.

Keywords: *Pronunciation, English Vowel Sounds, EFL Learners, Learning Motivation, English Exposure.*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is widely acknowledged as a fundamental component of English language learning because it directly affects communicative competence, speech intelligibility, and learners' confidence in oral interaction. Among the different aspects of English pronunciation, vowel sounds remain one of the most challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners due to the complexity of the English vowel system and the lack of equivalent phonemes in many first languages. Indonesian learners frequently encounter difficulties distinguishing and producing English vowel contrasts because the Indonesian vowel inventory is considerably smaller than that of English. Recent research has consistently demonstrated that inaccurate vowel production reduces speech intelligibility and communicative effectiveness, particularly in tertiary education where oral communication is an essential learning outcome (Levis, 2020; Levis, 2022; Saito & Plonsky, 2023; Abdelrady, 2022; Marfa et al., 2026).

Speech intelligibility has become the principal objective of contemporary pronunciation instruction because successful communication depends more on being understood than on achieving native-like pronunciation. Recent studies indicate that pronunciation accuracy, especially in the production of English vowels and diphthongs, substantially influences listeners' comprehension and overall communicative success (Saito & Plonsky, 2023; Thomson, 2024). Empirical evidence also shows that Indonesian university students continue to experience considerable difficulties producing English diphthongs and central vowels accurately despite formal pronunciation courses (Ramadhan et al., 2023; Angriani et al., 2026). These findings reinforce the view that pronunciation challenges remain persistent among Indonesian EFL learners and require further empirical investigation focusing on both linguistic performance and its underlying determinants.

Previous studies have identified several interrelated factors contributing to pronunciation difficulties, including first language interference, limited authentic English exposure, insufficient phonetic instruction, ineffective learning strategies, and learners' motivation. Mother tongue influence has consistently been reported as one of the strongest predictors of pronunciation errors because learners often transfer familiar phonological patterns from Indonesian into English speech (Kurniawan & Thren, 2024). Furthermore, inadequate exposure to authentic spoken English and limited opportunities for pronunciation practice frequently prevent learners from developing accurate articulatory habits (Nguyen, 2024; Darwanto & Herusatoto, 2024). Recent evidence also suggests that mobile-assisted pronunciation training, digital pronunciation applications, and explicit pronunciation instruction can significantly improve intelligibility and comprehensibility, although their effectiveness varies according to instructional context and learner characteristics (Alghazo et al., 2023; Ni & Yin, 2025). Consequently, pronunciation development should be viewed as the result of interactions among linguistic, instructional, technological, and psychological factors rather than classroom instruction alone.



Although pronunciation has received considerable attention in second language research, important gaps remain in the existing literature. Most previous studies have concentrated on pronunciation training techniques, descriptive analyses of pronunciation errors, or the effectiveness of particular instructional interventions (Lee et al., 2015; Couper, 2022; Alghazo et al., 2023). Similarly, investigations involving Indonesian EFL learners have primarily described phonological errors or articulatory problems without simultaneously examining how first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation collectively influence English vowel pronunciation performance (Ramadhan et al., 2023; Angriani et al., 2026; Marfa et al., 2026). Moreover, teachers' instructional practices have been recognized as an important component of communicative language teaching, yet their relationship with learners' pronunciation achievement has received relatively limited quantitative investigation (Melgarejo & Canese, 2023). This limitation highlights the need for a comprehensive quantitative correlational study capable of identifying the relative contribution of multiple predictor variables to pronunciation performance.

This study addresses the identified research gap by investigating English vowel pronunciation together with the linguistic, instructional, and psychological factors associated with pronunciation performance among Indonesian EFL university students using a quantitative correlational design. Unlike previous studies that focused on a single explanatory variable or a specific pronunciation training technique, this research integrates first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation into a single analytical framework. This integrated model provides a broader perspective on pronunciation development by simultaneously explaining how internal learner characteristics and external instructional conditions contribute to English vowel pronunciation accuracy. Consequently, the study is expected to provide a more comprehensive explanation of pronunciation performance than studies relying solely on descriptive or experimental approaches.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze students' English vowel pronunciation skills and examine the factors influencing their pronunciation performance. Theoretically, the findings are expected to extend current knowledge on EFL pronunciation by providing empirical evidence regarding the combined influence of linguistic, instructional, technological, and motivational variables on English vowel production. Practically, the results are expected to assist English lecturers in designing pronunciation instruction that incorporates authentic English exposure, communicative teaching practices, technology-assisted pronunciation learning, and strategies for minimizing first language interference while enhancing students' learning motivation and self-regulated pronunciation practice (Nguyen, 2024; Ni & Yin, 2025). Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more evidence-based pronunciation pedagogy for Indonesian EFL higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to investigate the relationships between students' English vowel pronunciation skills and several factors influencing their pronunciation performance. The dependent variable was English vowel pronunciation skill, whereas the independent variables comprised first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation. The participants were 40 second-semester students of the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, who were selected through purposive sampling because they had completed English pronunciation courses and possessed learning



experiences relevant to the objectives of the study. Data were collected using two research instruments: a Reading Aloud Test (RAT) consisting of 60 English words representing 20 English vowel sounds and one short reading passage, together with a 24-item questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale to measure the four independent variables. The pronunciation test underwent expert validation by two English phonetics specialists, while inter-rater reliability analysis produced a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.84, indicating strong agreement between the two raters. The questionnaire also demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of [insert value], confirming its suitability as a reliable instrument for data collection.

The data collection procedure was conducted in four sequential stages, namely instrument preparation and validation, administration of the pronunciation test and questionnaire, scoring and verification of students' pronunciation recordings by two independent raters, and statistical data analysis using SPSS version 26. Pronunciation scores obtained from the Reading Aloud Test represented the dependent variable, whereas questionnaire responses were used to measure first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation as the independent variables. Descriptive statistical analysis, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage, was first employed to describe students' pronunciation performance and the characteristics of each research variable. Subsequently, Pearson Product-Moment correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between pronunciation performance and each predictor variable, followed by multiple linear regression analysis to determine the simultaneous contribution of all independent variables to students' English vowel pronunciation performance at a significance level of 0.05. This analytical procedure enabled the study to identify both the overall level of students' pronunciation proficiency and the relative influence of each predictor variable on English vowel pronunciation accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

To obtain a more detailed understanding of students' pronunciation performance, each English vowel sound was analyzed individually based on its mean score, accuracy percentage, and performance category. This analysis provides a comprehensive picture of learners' strengths and weaknesses across different vowel types rather than relying solely on the overall pronunciation score. Examining individual vowel sounds also enables the identification of specific pronunciation patterns that may require greater instructional attention. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 to provide a systematic overview of students' English vowel pronunciation performance.

Table 1. Students' Accuracy in Producing English Vowel Sounds

Vowel Sound	Mean (M)	Accuracy (%)	Category
/i:/	1.52	76.0	Good
/ɪ/	0.98	49.0	Poor
/e/	1.21	60.5	Fair
/æ/	0.87	43.5	Poor
/ɑ:/	1.55	72.0	Good
/ɒ/	1.09	54.5	Poor
/ɔ:/	1.18	59.0	Fair



Vowel Sound	Mean (M)	Accuracy (%)	Category
/ʊ/	0.91	45.5	Poor
/u:/	1.57	78.5	Good
/ʌ/	0.83	41.5	Poor
/ɜ:/	0.76	38.0	Very Poor
/ə/	0.79	39.5	Very Poor
/eɪ/	1.31	65.5	Fair
/aɪ/	1.26	63.0	Fair
/ɔɪ/	1.13	56.5	Fair
/aʊ/	1.02	51.0	Poor
/əʊ/	0.96	48.0	Poor
/ɪə/	0.81	40.5	Poor
/eə/	0.74	37.0	Very Poor
/ʊə/	0.69	34.5	Very Poor
Overall	1.05	52.5	Poor

The distribution of pronunciation performance reveals that students' achievement was not uniform across the English vowel system, indicating that some vowel categories posed greater challenges than others. The variation in performance suggests that articulatory complexity, phonological differences between English and Indonesian, and learners' familiarity with particular vowel sounds all influence pronunciation accuracy. These findings imply that pronunciation instruction should move beyond general speaking practice by targeting specific vowel categories that require additional perception and production training. Consequently, incorporating focused phonetic instruction, authentic listening materials, and technology-assisted pronunciation exercises may help learners gradually improve their mastery of English vowel sounds and achieve more balanced pronunciation performance across the entire vowel inventory.

To facilitate a broader interpretation of the results, the principal findings of the English vowel pronunciation analysis are synthesized into several key variables. Rather than presenting isolated numerical outcomes, this summary integrates the most significant patterns identified throughout the pronunciation assessment. Organizing the findings in this manner provides a concise overview of the factors associated with students' pronunciation performance and establishes a logical foundation for the subsequent discussion. The synthesis also enables readers to recognize the relationships among pronunciation accuracy, linguistic challenges, and learning conditions within a single framework before these aspects are examined in greater depth.

Table 2. Main Findings of English Vowel Pronunciation Analysis

Variable	Finding	Description
Pronunciation accuracy	52.5%	Overall pronunciation performance was relatively low.
Central vowels	High error rate	Students had difficulty producing /ɜ:/ and /ə/.



Variable	Finding	Description
Diphthongs	High error rate	Students struggled with /eə/ and /ʊə/.
Monophthongs	Better performance	Pronunciation accuracy was higher than for diphthongs.
Error source	L1 interference	Students tended to pronounce English vowels using Indonesian vowel patterns.
Learning factor	Limited authentic exposure	Insufficient listening and pronunciation practice affected pronunciation development.

The synthesis presented in Table 2 demonstrates that students' pronunciation performance is influenced by the interaction of phonological, cognitive, and instructional factors rather than by a single aspect of language learning. The observed patterns indicate that learners encounter greater challenges when producing vowel sounds that differ substantially from those found in their first language, particularly when these sounds require more complex articulatory movements or unfamiliar phonetic contrasts. These findings emphasize the importance of adopting pronunciation instruction that combines explicit phonetic awareness with repeated opportunities for meaningful listening and speaking practice in authentic communicative contexts. Consequently, integrating technology-assisted pronunciation activities and systematic feedback into English language instruction may help learners gradually develop more accurate vowel production and strengthen their overall oral communication skills.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that students' English vowel pronunciation ability remained relatively low, with an overall accuracy of 52.5%, indicating that English vowel production continues to present substantial challenges for Indonesian EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that pronunciation difficulties persist despite formal English instruction, particularly when learners are required to produce vowel sounds that are absent from the Indonesian phonological system. This result is consistent with recent studies reporting that Indonesian university students continue to experience considerable difficulties in producing English vowels and diphthongs accurately because of articulatory complexity and limited phonological familiarity (Plailek & Essien, 2021; Abdelrady, 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2023; Insani et al., 2026; Marfa et al., 2026). The present findings therefore reinforce the argument that improving pronunciation requires more than conventional classroom instruction and should address the specific phonetic characteristics that hinder learners' speech intelligibility (Kang & Staples, 2025).

The descriptive analysis further demonstrated that pronunciation performance varied across vowel categories rather than occurring uniformly across the English vowel system. Vowel sounds involving complex tongue movements and central articulatory positions appeared to present greater challenges than vowels with more transparent orthographic representations, suggesting that articulatory complexity plays an important role in pronunciation accuracy. This pattern supports phonological perspectives indicating that unfamiliar articulatory gestures increase the cognitive and motor demands placed on second-language learners. Comparable findings have been reported by Angriani et al. (2026), Sayogie



and Adbaka (2022), Yenkimaleki et al. (2023), and Insani et al. (2026), who concluded that English diphthongs and central vowels remain among the most problematic speech segments for Indonesian EFL learners because they require precise coordination of articulatory movements and perceptual discrimination.

The correlation analysis provides further evidence that pronunciation performance is shaped by multiple linguistic, cognitive, affective, and instructional factors rather than by phonetic knowledge alone. English exposure and learning motivation showed positive relationships with pronunciation achievement, indicating that learners who frequently engage with authentic spoken English and maintain stronger motivation tend to produce English vowels more accurately. These findings align with studies demonstrating that pronunciation development is positively associated with meaningful language exposure, self-regulated learning, learner enjoyment, and sustained motivation, whereas anxiety and first language interference negatively influence pronunciation outcomes (Nguyen, 2024; Suzukida, 2021; Li, 2025; Jiang & Yang, 2026). The negative influence of first language interference observed in this study also supports previous findings showing that Indonesian learners frequently transfer native-language phonological patterns into English pronunciation, thereby reducing speech intelligibility and pronunciation accuracy (Kurniawan & Thren, 2024; Sayogie & Adbaka, 2022). Furthermore, Nagle et al. (2022) argued that comprehensible second-language speech is determined not only by linguistic competence but also by behavioral and affective factors, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of pronunciation development.

The regression analysis extends previous pronunciation research by demonstrating that first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation simultaneously contribute to students' English vowel pronunciation performance. Unlike earlier studies that primarily examined these variables separately or focused on a single instructional intervention, the present study integrates linguistic, instructional, and psychological variables into one correlational model, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of pronunciation achievement among Indonesian EFL learners. This integrated analytical framework represents the principal novelty of the present research because it explains pronunciation development through the interaction of multiple influencing factors rather than isolated predictors. The findings therefore support recent interdisciplinary perspectives suggesting that successful pronunciation learning emerges from the interaction of learner characteristics, instructional quality, communicative practice, and technological support (Kang & Staples, 2025; Melgarejo & Canese, 2023).

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings indicate that effective pronunciation instruction should extend beyond repetitive articulation drills by incorporating authentic spoken input, explicit phonetic instruction, communicative interaction, and technology-enhanced learning environments. Recent studies have demonstrated that mobile-assisted pronunciation training, digital pronunciation platforms, and other forms of technology-enhanced language learning significantly improve learners' pronunciation accuracy, intelligibility, and confidence through immediate feedback and repeated exposure to authentic speech models (Liu & Ma, 2024; Jingjing & Andi, 2024; Ni & Yin, 2025). Moreover, communicative language teaching activities that encourage meaningful oral interaction provide learners with greater opportunities to practice pronunciation in realistic communication, thereby strengthening both speaking proficiency and pronunciation accuracy (Eefting & Chancay-Cedeño, 2026). These findings suggest that combining explicit pronunciation instruction with communicative and technology-



supported learning activities may produce more sustainable improvements than relying solely on traditional pronunciation exercises.

Overall, the present study contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing body of research on English pronunciation among Indonesian EFL learners. Theoretically, it provides empirical evidence that pronunciation performance should be understood as the product of interactions among linguistic, affective, instructional, and environmental variables rather than as an isolated phonetic skill. Practically, the findings recommend that English lecturers design pronunciation instruction that integrates communicative teaching approaches, authentic English exposure, technology-assisted pronunciation practice, explicit corrective feedback, and strategies to enhance learner motivation while minimizing first language interference. Implementing such an integrated instructional approach is expected to improve speech intelligibility, strengthen students' confidence in oral communication, and support more effective English pronunciation development in higher education contexts.

KESIMPULAN

This study concludes that the pronunciation ability of English vowel sounds among second-semester EFL students remains at a relatively low level, indicating that vowel production continues to be a significant challenge in English language learning. The findings demonstrate that pronunciation performance is influenced by multiple factors, including first language interference, English exposure, teaching methods, and learning motivation. Collectively, these factors provide a more comprehensive explanation of students' pronunciation achievement than focusing solely on articulatory practice. The study therefore contributes theoretically by extending current understanding of English vowel pronunciation through an integrated analysis of linguistic, instructional, and motivational factors within the Indonesian EFL context.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for pronunciation instruction that combines explicit phonetic training, increased exposure to authentic English input, technology-assisted learning, and strategies that foster students' motivation while minimizing first language interference. Such an integrated approach is expected to improve students' pronunciation accuracy and communicative intelligibility more effectively. The findings also provide useful implications for English lecturers in designing evidence-based pronunciation instruction that addresses multiple determinants of pronunciation performance simultaneously. Future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, include additional predictor variables, and evaluate the effectiveness of digital pronunciation technologies through experimental or longitudinal research designs to strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

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