

**The Significance of English Phonology Learning Towards
The Improvement of Pronunciation Accuracy of English Vowel Sounds:
A Review**

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Abstract:

The foundation of English spoken communication is having good English pronunciation skill and that is why English pronunciation accuracy is recognized as a fundamental skill in producing good English oral communication. Hence, the present study was aimed at examining and reviewing the significance of English Phonology learning towards the improvement of EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words in an English Phonology class. The data of the present study were obtained from fifteen research participants, using total population sampling technique, in the form of oral examination results - as the main instrument for data collection. The data of the present study were analyzed in a descriptive qualitative method which was based on the facts or phenomena that occurred empirically among the research participants. This descriptive qualitative research method was conducted through several phases: (1) data collection, (2) data analysis, and (3) presentation of the result by describing the data in the form of spoken English vowel sounds and the related English words from the object of research that could be observed and examined to obtain the picture of phenomena in the students' pronunciation accuracy. The findings of the present study revealed that most of the research participants' pronunciation accuracy (53.34%) in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words is categorised into 'Good' and 'Advanced' categories, that is: 26.67% belong to 'Good' category and 26.67% belong to 'Advanced' category, while the rest belongs to 'Excellent' category (13.33%) and 'Satisfactory' category (33.33%).

Keywords: *Pronunciation accuracy, English Phonology, English vowel sounds, EFL Learners*

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of learning a foreign language is for being able to have good communication skills in the target language orally and in written as well. Therefore, the ability of foreign language learners to have good and accurate pronunciation skill in the target language becomes one of the key points in achieving their foreign language learning goals. The same applies to foreign language learning like English language as it is "one of the most important languages in the world" (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 3).

Having good and accurate English pronunciation skill is one of the most difficult skills to be acquired by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, and therefore, EFL learners should spend lots of time to improve their English pronunciation skill (Martínez-Flor et al. 2006; Aliaga, 2007). Morley (1991) stated that understandable pronunciation was a necessary component for communicative competence and was becoming one of the most important features of language learning instruction. Gilakjani (2012) also emphasized that having good pronunciation skill would lead to good language learning process, while bad pronunciation skill would promote to great difficulties in language learning process. Furthermore, Brown (1991) claimed that EFL learners were clearly aware that poor pronunciation skill represented a considerable barrier to their success in learning English as a foreign language.

In fact, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often find it difficult to produce good and accurate pronunciation of English words, more specifically the English vowel and consonant sounds of English words, in real life practices such as in English Phonology class. The present study, therefore, contributes to examining and reviewing the significance of English Phonology learning towards the improvement of EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words in an English Phonology class.

THERETICAL REVIEW

A. Phonetics and Phonology

Phonetics and Phonology are the two primary linguistic disciplines concerned with speech sounds - those sounds that are used by humans to communicate. Phonetics and phonology both study language sounds; both areas are mutually dependent (Ashby, 2005).

Furthermore, Ashby (2005) clarified that *phonetics* describes the concrete, physical *form of sounds* (how they are produced, heard and how they can be described), while *phonology* is concerned with the *function of sounds*, that is with their status and inventory in any given language. In other words, phonetics studies the actual sounds that people produce while phonology studies the abstract patterns of the sounds in people's mind. In addition, Ashby (2005) stated that phonetics is a descriptive tool necessary to the study of the phonological aspects of a language and phonology gives us insight into how the human mind works.

In conclusion, the study of human speech begins with phonetic analysis and is followed by phonological analysis. Phonetics has to do with the physical realisation of sounds as produced by the organs of speech and phonological analysis takes off when phonetic analysis ends.

B. Phonetics and Phonology of English

Phonetics and Phonology of English is the English linguistic course concerning with English speech sounds - sounds that are used by English-speaking people to communicate. Phonetics of English describes the concrete, or physical form of English sounds (how they are produced, heard, and how they are described). Phonology of English is concerned with the function of English sounds, which is with their status and description in English language. In short, phonetics of English studies the actual English sounds that English-speaking people produce and phonology of English studies the abstract patterns of the English sounds in English-speaking people's mind.

Phonology is concerned with how sounds function in relation to each other in a language. Hence, English phonology is about the sound systems of English language and English Phonetics is a descriptive tool necessary to the study of the phonological aspects of English language.

Phonetics and phonology of English are worth studying for several reasons. The first reason is that the study of phonology gives us insight into how the human mind works. Other reasons are that the study of the phonetics of a foreign language gives us a much better ability both to hear and to correct mistakes that we make, and also to teach pronunciation of the foreign language (in this case English) to others.

As phonetics and phonology of English both deal with English sounds, and as English spelling and English pronunciation are two very different things, it is important to keep in mind that we are not interested in letters, but in sounds. For instance, English does not only have 5 or 6 vowels, but it has 20 different vowels, even if these vowels are all written by different combinations of six (6) different letters: "a, e, i, o, u, y". Take for example, the word "please", the orthographic spelling of the word will be given in italics, that is: *please*, and the phonetic transcription is given between square brackets: [pli:z]. Thus, the word "*please*" consists of

three consonant sounds: [p, l, and z], and one vowel sound: [i:]. The sounds considered from the phonological point of view are put between slashes: /pli:z/.

C. What is Pronunciation?

In a general point view, pronunciation is defined as “the manner in which speech sounds, especially connected sequences are articulated by individual speakers or by speakers generally” (Trask, 1996, p. 291). In reference to this definition, it can be concluded that pronunciation seems to be closely linked to the study of phonetics which involves the scientific study and description of speech sounds.

In a more technical perspective, Pennington & Richards (1986, p. 208) define pronunciation, according to language teachers, as follows: “For most language teachers, pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and, to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language.” For this respect, the definition of pronunciation (by Pennington & Richards) does not limit pronunciation only to the way in which sounds are articulated but goes further to incorporate other articulatory aspects, namely stress and intonation patterns. In addition, Pennington & Richards (1986) subdivided pronunciation into three major components including: *Segmental features* - Minimal units of sounds defined in phonetic terms; *Voice-setting features* - General articulatory characteristics of stretches of speech; and *Prosodic features* - Involving the relative levels of stress and pitch within syllables, words, phrases and longer stretches of speech.

Moreover, Otlowski (1998) defined pronunciation as the way of uttering a word in an accepted manner. Furthermore, Richard and Schmidt (2002) defined pronunciation as the method of producing certain sounds.

Pronunciation skill is usually learnt by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced inaccurately. Therefore, when language learners start learning pronunciation, they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from their first language. In brief, pronunciation is the production of sounds which is intended for making clear meaning of words.

D. English Vowel Sounds

The number and general characteristics of English vowel sounds are described and presented as follows:

- A vowel sound shapes the flow of the air in the mouth.
- In spoken English there are 19 vowel sounds (shown in the chart below).
- Sounds **1 - 12** are **monothongs**: they require one mouth position.
- Sounds **13 - 19** are **diphthongs**: they require two mouth positions.
- Sounds with /: / are **long sound**.
- Sounds /ɒ/ and /ʊə/ are *common regional variations*.

1 i:	2 ɪ	3 e	4 æ	13 eɪ	14 ɔɪ	15 aɪ
5 ə	6 ɜ:	7 ʌ	8 ɑ:	16 əʊ	17 aʊ	18 ɒʊ
9 u:	10 ʊ	11 ɔ:	12 ɒ	19 ɪə	20 eə	21 ʊə

Figure 1. The chart of the English Vowel Sounds

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the current study was to examine and review the significance of English Phonology learning towards the improvement of EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words in an English Phonology class by doing an analysis on the research participants' oral examination results to find out the feasibility results of their pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study was set out to answer the following question: How significant does English Phonology learning improve the EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words?

METHODOLOGY

A research method is directly related to the nature of the research study and its objectives. Since main objective of the present study was to examine and review the significance of English Phonology learning towards the improvement of EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words, so case study design, in nature, in the form of descriptive qualitative method was employed for this research study. This descriptive qualitative method was used in describing the facts or phenomena that occurred empirically among the research participants by describing the data (the research participants' oral examination results) in the form of spoken English vowel sounds and the related English words from the object of research that could be evaluated or examined to obtain the picture of phenomena in the students' pronunciation accuracy.

Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018) stated that case studies are designs of inquiries found in many fields, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. In addition, McCombes (2022) stated that a case study was a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon. McCombes (2022) also claimed that case studies were commonly used in social, educational, clinical, and business research. Besides, she also added that a case study research design usually involved qualitative methods and case studies are good for *describing, comparing, evaluating, and understanding* different aspects of a research problem. Therefore, descriptive research is aimed to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon because it can answer *what, where, when, and how* questions, but not *why* questions. As a conclusion, a descriptive research design could use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. Unlike in experimental research, the researcher does not control or manipulate any of the variables, but only *observes* and *measures* them. Furthermore, Kumar (2011) stated that a descriptive study attempted systematically to describe a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or programme, or provides information about, say, the living conditions of a community, or describes attitudes towards an issue. As conclusion, a descriptive research design is an appropriate choice when the research is aimed to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories.

Research Setting

The present study was conducted at a private university located in Pontianak, in the region of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. In this research study, 'Borneo University' (pseudonym) was used to identify this particular institution.

Research Participants

The participants of the present study were 15 (Fifteen) fifth semester students of the English Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business of Borneo University who were studying, and taking ENGLISH PHONOLOGY subject, at the University in the odd semester of academic year 2022/2023. Those fifteen students were selected using total population sampling technique, that is, a type of purposive sampling technique that involves examining the entire population having a particular set of characteristics (e.g., specific attributes/traits, experience, knowledge, skills, exposure to an event, etc.).

Instrument for Data Collection

The present study used the research participants' oral examination results as the main instrument for data collection. This technique was selected because it allowed the researcher considerable flexibility to probe the oral performances of the research participants (students' oral examination results in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words) and to find out the feasibility results of their pronunciation accuracy as well as to give the researcher the opportunity to gain deep information about the phenomena being investigated (Corbetta, 2003).

Procedures for Data Collection

The data of the present study were collected by conducting and following some steps as follows:

1. First, (after learning English Phonology subject for half semester, that is: 14 (Fourteen) meetings in 7 (seven) weeks, where each meeting was 75 minutes in length, the researcher, who was also the lecturer of English Phonology subject for the students (research participants), assigned the students to do the assigned task below on Thursday, 6 October 2022.

Instructions for the assigned task:

- Please prepare yourself well for the upcoming Mid semester exam of English Phonology subject by doing practices to pronounce each English vowel sound and the related English words given for each number in the table below.
- Practice pronouncing the English vowel sound and the related English words for each number loudly and accurately several times before you come to meet your examiner on the day of the Mid semester exam on Wednesday, 19 October 2022.

Table 1. List of English vowel sounds with example words

No.	English vowel sounds		English words
1	i:	as in	beef, keep, need, peel
2	ɪ	as in	bin, pin, tip, thin
3	e	as in	kept, left, pet, set
4	æ	as in	bank, cat, fat, mat
5	ə	as in	about, after, again, amount
6	ɜ:	as in	burn, cur, fur, turn
7	ʌ	as in	but, cut, love, nut
8	ɑ:	as in	bar, far, father, heart
9	u:	as in	cool, glue, moon, pool
10	ʊ	as in	look, put, push, took
11	ɔ:	as in	bored, core, order, porter
12	ɒ	as in	dot, lost, pot, rotten
13	eɪ	as in	bay, late, name, pave
14	ɔɪ	as in	boy, noise, soil, toy

15	aɪ	as in	buy, light, pie, time
16	əʊ	as in	ego, home, road, soap
17	aʊ	as in	down, how, pound, town
18	ɪə	as in	beard, dear, fear, here
19	eə	as in	chair, hair, share, wear
20	ɒʊ or: ʊə	as in	below, elbow, poor, tour

2. Second, the students (research participants) joined the Mid semester exam of English Phonology subject one by one in turn (alternately) on Wednesday, 19 October 2022 from 17.00 p.m. until 18.29 p.m. Each student was given 5 minutes of time length to pronounce each English vowel sound and the related English words listed in the table above.
3. The process of carrying out the Mid semester exam of English Phonology subject was conducted by asking each student in turn to meet the examiner (lecturer), in a face-to-face way, into a closed examination room to do the Mid semester exam. When a student came to meet the examiner, the examiner directly asked the student to pronounce each of the English vowel sounds and the related English words provided in the table and the examiner (lecturer) directly scored each student's oral performance right on the spot by filling in the following scoring sheet:

Table 2. Mid semester exam of English Phonology scoring sheet

NO.	STUDENT INITIAL	TIME	SCORE (1 - 100)
1	A N	17.00 - 17.05	
2	F D	17.06 - 17.11	
3	F J G	17.12 - 17.17	
4	G R R	17.18 - 17.23	
5	H E	17.24 - 17.29	
6	K Y	17.30 - 17.35	
7	R Y V S	17.36 - 17.41	
8	S C D	17.42 - 17.47	
9	S E	17.48 - 17.53	
10	T I	17.54 - 17.59	
11	T Y	18.00 - 18.05	
12	V V	18.06 - 18.11	
13	W Y	18.12 - 18.17	
14	W T	18.18 - 18.23	
15	Y T	18.24 - 18.29	

4. In order to maintain the objectivity, avoid any kind of bias, and meet the needs and purposes of the present study as well, the examiner (lecturer) used printed phonetic transcriptions and audio phonetic transcriptions (of all of the English vowel sounds and the related English words listed in the table) from *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (15th Edition) by Daniel Jones as a guideline or rubric in scoring each research participant's oral performance during the Mid semester exam process.
5. The examiner (lecturer) also recorded each research participant's oral performance (during the Mid semester exam process) using an audio-recorder tool in order that the audio recordings of the research participants' oral performances can be used (later by the examiner) to recheck the pronunciation accuracy of each research participant's oral performance to have more accurate and valid score.
6. After all of the students had joined the Mid semester exam of English Phonology subject, then the examiner (lecturer) kept the students' scores for further analysis.

The whole data collection process of the present study was conducted on Wednesday, 19 October 2022, which was started at 17.00 p.m. until 18.29 p.m., when the students (research participants) joined their Mid semester exam of English Phonology subject.

Techniques for Data Analysis

The data of the present study were analyzed qualitatively applying descriptive qualitative method in a narrative way following data analysis processes as follows:

1. First, the data in numerical information (research participants' oral examination results/scores in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words) of the present study were involved and used to describe the quality of English vowel sounds, by seeing the accuracy of each of the English vowel sounds in a single way or being used in some related English words, pronounced by each of the research participants during the data collection process.
2. Then, in reporting the categories of the research participants' scores, the obtained scores (numerical information data) were firstly converted into a *Scoring Criteria for Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale*, which was adapted and modified (by the researcher) from *Scoring criteria: Pronunciation and Oral fluency* (By: PTE STUDY GUIDE - Free Online PTE Academic Practice), which was accessed from <https://ptestudy.net/scoring-criteria-pronunciation-and-oral-fluency/>. The *Scoring Criteria for Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale*, which was modified (by the researcher) and was consisting of six categories, is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 3. Scoring Criteria for Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale

Score Scale	Category	Characteristics	Number of Students
90 - 100	Excellent	All English vowel sounds and the related English words are produced in a manner that is easily understood by regular speakers of the English language.	
80 - 89	Advanced	English vowel sounds and the related English words are pronounced clearly and unambiguously.	
70 - 79	Good	Most English vowel sounds and the related English words are pronounced correctly. Some consistent errors might make a few words unclear.	
60 - 69	Satisfactory	Some English vowel sounds and the related English words are consistently mispronounced in a non-native like manner.	
50 - 59	Fair	Many English vowel sounds and the related English words are mispronounced, resulting in a strong intrusive foreign accent.	
0 - 49	Poor	Pronunciation for all of the English vowel sounds and the related English words seems completely characteristic of another language.	

3. Finally, in determining the categories of the research participants' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing each of the English vowel sounds, in a single way or being used in some related English words, the examiner (lecturer) converted the research participants' obtained scores (numerical information data) into the *Scoring Criteria for Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale* (Table 3) to find out the category of each student' pronunciation accuracy. The Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale and students' converted scores are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale and Students' converted scores

Score Scale	Category	Characteristics	Number of Students
90 - 100	Excellent	All English vowel sounds and the related English words are produced in a manner that is easily understood by regular speakers of the English language.	2
80 - 89	Advanced	English vowel sounds and the related English words are pronounced clearly and unambiguously.	4
70 - 79	Good	Most English vowel sounds and the related English words are pronounced correctly. Some consistent errors might make a few words unclear.	4
60 - 69	Satisfactory	Some English vowel sounds and the related English words are consistently mispronounced in a non-native like manner.	5
50 - 59	Fair	Many English vowel sounds and the related English words are mispronounced, resulting in a strong intrusive foreign accent. Listeners may have difficulty understanding about 1/3 of the words.	-
0 - 49	Poor	Pronunciation for all of the English vowel sounds and the related English words seems completely characteristic of another language.	-

4. Having obtained the category levels of the research participants' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing each of the English vowel sounds, in a single way or being used in some related English words (Table 4), the results of the present study were finally reported and discussed in a narrative way in *Findings and Discussion* section below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Findings

After analyzing and interpreting the data obtained from the research participants - research participants' oral examination results/scores (numerical information data) in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words which was then converted into the *Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale and students' converted scores* (Table 4), the findings of the present study are reported and summarized in a narrative way as follows:

1. In reference to the category levels of the research participants' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing each of the English vowel sounds, in a single way or being used in some related English words (using "*Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale*"), it can be seen that the categories are ranging from '*Satisfactory*' to '*Excellent*' categories (as shown in Table 4).
2. In terms of category levels, the descriptive percentages of the research participants' data - Pronunciation Accuracy Rating Scale and Students' converted scores (Table 4), the data are summarized as follows:
 - 13.33% of the research participants got scores belonging to '*Excellent*' category.
 - 26.67% of the research participants got scores belonging to '*Advanced*' category.
 - 26.67% of the research participants got scores belonging to '*Good*' category.
 - 33.33% of the research participants got scores belonging to '*Satisfactory*' category.
3. In terms of mispronunciation cases, the descriptive percentages of research participants' data are narratively explained as follows:

- 33.33% of the research participants mispronounced long English vowel sounds (and the related English words as well) such as: [i:] (as in words: **beef**, **keep**, **need**, **peel**); [ɜ:] (as in words: **burn**, **cur**, **fur**, **turn**); [ɑ:] (as in words: **bar**, **far**, **father**, **heart**); [u:] (as in words: **cool**, **glue**, **moon**, **pool**); and [ɔ:] (as in words: **bored**, **core**, **order**, **porter**).
- 60% of the research participants mispronounced some of the English vowel sounds (and the related English words as well) such as: the English vowel sound [æ] (as in words: **bank**, **cat**, **fat**, **mat**), the English vowel sound [əʊ] (as in words: **ego**, **home**, **road**, **soap**), and the English vowel sound [ʊə] (as in words: **poor**, **tour**).
- 86,66% of the research participants mispronounced the English vowel sound [eə], and the related English words as well, as in words: **chair**, **hair**, **share**, **wear**.
- Only 13.33% of the research participants that could pronounce all of the English vowel sounds and the related English words accurately and in an almost-perfectly way.

B. Discussion of Findings

In discussing the research findings of the present study reported above (*Research Findings* section), the explanations and descriptive percentages of the research participants' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing each of the English vowel sounds, in a single way or being used in some related English words, are explained narratively as follows:

1. In reference to the total percentages of the descriptive data presented in number 2 (of the *Research Findings* section), it can be seen that most of the research participants, that is: 53.34%, belong to 'Good' and 'Advanced' categories (26.67% of the research participants belong to 'Good' category and 26.67% of the research participants belong to 'Advanced' category), while the rest belongs to 'Excellent' category (13.33%) and 'Satisfactory' category (33.33%).
2. Based on the descriptive percentages of data presented in number 3 (of the *Research Findings* section), it can be seen that most of the research participants had difficulties in pronouncing some English vowel sounds (and the related English words as well) such as: *long English vowel sounds* ([i:], [ɜ:], [ɑ:], [u:], and [ɔ:]) and *some English diphthong vowel sounds* like: [æ], [əʊ], [ʊə], and [eə].

CONCLUSION

In reference to the findings of the present study, which was dealing with the significance of English Phonology learning towards the improvement of EFL students' pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words, some major conclusions could be drawn as follows:

1. Referring to the findings of the present study, which shows that most of the research participants (53.34%) are classified into 'Good' and 'Advanced' levels of category in relation to pronunciation accuracy in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words, it can be concluded that English phonology learning could improve EFL learners' pronunciation accuracy quite significantly.
2. The different phonetics and phonology of languages becomes one of the main causes or reasons for EFL learners to have difficulties in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words correctly and accurately.
3. The most common mistakes made by EFL learners in pronouncing English vowel sounds and the related English words are when they have to distinguish short English vowel sounds and long English vowel sounds. Most of the research participants failed to distinguish long

English vowel sounds and long English vowel sounds even though they had been informed that they were different.

4. The EFL learners' first language interference and lack of motivation were indicated to be the main factors affecting the research participants' pronunciation accuracy.
5. Pronunciation accuracy should be viewed as an important and crucial part of oral communication as it is dealing with correct production of individual sounds or words and it should be incorporated into classroom activities.
6. Understandable pronunciation is an essential component of oral English communication competence. Therefore, English teachers or lecturers should set obtainable goals that are applicable and suitable for the oral communication needs of English language learners.

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