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Learning English pronunciation: Articulating EFL students' voices on problems and strategies

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ABSTRACT

In mastering English language skills, the learning process matters in determining the goals, including learning pronunciation. So far, research on pronunciation has emphasized pronunciation rather than the process. Thus, this study aimed to investigate students' problems and techniques for dealing with problems in acquiring pronunciation. Six English Department students were voluntarily requested to participate in this study and discuss their perspectives. In data collection process, an in-depth interview was employed. The findings found that participants had difficulties distinguishing between sounds and words, encountered novel words, had low learning desires, dealt with varied accents, and experienced interference from their language. In the other sense, they applied some strategies such as increasing exposure to English, having expert guidance, and pursuing to have a severe problem. The results of this study will play a positive role in showing the barriers experienced by students when learning pronunciation. Thus, it is hoped that the teachers will be aware of these issues, so that teaching pronunciation will be more effective.

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1. Introduction

Pronunciation can be described as how a language, or a word is spoken. According to Gilakjani (2016), pronunciation plays a crucial in language instruction as the fundamental necessity of learners to achieve the goals in language teaching. In ELT, learners are not only expected to have the capability in specific points, but they also need to master several micro skills like pronunciation. In language acquisition and ELT, the position of pronunciation is often followed by vocabulary mastery. As a part of English learning, pronunciation, to some extent, put students in an inability condition to master certain contexts of pronunciation. For instance, Hago and Khan (2015) found that EFL students in Saudi find it difficult to deal with the consonants and consonant clusters in English pronunciation.

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Bardakci (2015) revealed that phonetic in English pronunciation became the barrier of mastering English pronunciation in Turkish's learners. In southeast Asia context, Sahatsathatsana (2017) found that Thai EFL learners' pronunciation were hindered by their phonetics' problem in English pronunciation.

Recognizing that learners will find some difficulties in learning pronunciation. They must be moved to figure out the solution to the pronunciation problem. Some scholars have already conducted some research to find out the strategies to tackle pronunciation problems. It has been proposed by Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) stated that pronunciation problems can be handled with four strategies which are drilling, expert direction, and serious practice. Those approaches grow into their first barrier to learning pronunciation. Besides, the lack of knowledge about pronunciation also plays a role in causing students' pronunciation problems. Consequently, the strategies concerned also turn out to be problem-solvers for the problem of learning pronunciation.

Moreover, as the researcher's intention to join the discussion of learning English, several prior research are presented to give nuance of current research in learning pronunciation. A research has been done by Ahmed (2017) revealed that the problem is because of many teaching difficulties, and when facing a problem, students need to be facilitated in fixing their pronunciation with some strategies. He also found that the factors of students' difficulty were found because there is no supporting system to enhance students' pronunciation skills. Therefore, he asserted, the presence of a language laboratory should exist in school.

The other previous study was done by Habibi (2016) that aimed to examine the segmental pronunciation problems solved by the advanced students in one of the state Islamic campuses in east java. This study applied a descriptive qualitative research design to describe how segmental English sounds are incorrectly pronounced. In gaining the data, ten students' research proposal examinations were taken as data. This research revealed that there were problems found in the way of pronouncing consonants and vowels in English. Furthermore, the participant solved the problems by replacing some sounds and removing some sounds. Meanwhile, the problem with diphthong also had been encountered by the participant by replaced with another diphthong. Additionally, Sholeh and Muhaji (2015) conducted a study investigating students' difficulties and their strategies to encounter the difficulties in one private university in Malang, East Java. The results were captured using a case study by pilling some difficulties first-year students face in one educational department that joined an integrated course. There was no specific number of participants. However, the result revealed that the problems faced by the participants were a distraction from the mother tongue, difficulties sounding the consonant and vowels, and differentiating the stress and unstress words.

By showing the previous study, this study provides new research on pronunciation problems and how to encounter the students. This research uses a descriptive qualitative to find and present the result. It is more profound than quantitative, that only shows numerical data. There is a specific number of participants who join this research, so it represents the result of this study. In addition, this research conducts in one of the English Language Education Departments, so the problem and the solution are more representative for future teachers.

Furthermore, even though there are myriad research on pronunciation, the focus tends to be on the pronunciaiton (see Bardakci, 2017; Sahatsathatsana, 2017; Shak et al., 2016; Sholeh & Muhaji,

2015). At the same time, the process of learning pronunciation seems neglected. Indeed, learning plays matter in pronunciation and second language acquisition. Thus, the researcher believes there is a need to enrich the exploration of pronunciation problems during the learning phase. The findings can then show the students' barriers while learning pronunciation. Therefore, this research aims at exploring the problems during learning pronunciation and the strategies to tackle problems by voicing English department students' pronunciation learning experiences.

Method

To investigate students' experiences in learning pronunciation, a descriptive qualitative was employed. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), a descriptive qualitative research design will be able to give and facilitate the researcher about participants' life experience and their thought as well. This was also in line with the researcher's need that participants' life experiences can be captured so that from their responses, the researcher could synthesize their problem and strategy in learning pronunciation.

A total of six final year students from an English Language Education Department from a private university took part in this research. The number of participants was chosen based on Marshall et al. (2013), which mentioned that the number of participants in the qualitative research would be in the range of 6-50 participants and as few as 3 per case for comparative case studies. By choosing six participants, sufficient data would be gained to explore and find out their process when learning pronunciation. Lastly, the names of the participants were pseudonyms becoming *Abey, Boni, Clyde, Donita, Eger, and Flanita*. The pseudonym process was chosen to maintain the response from each participant.

In gaining the data, the researcher used the interview method. By using the interview method, the researcher could gain in-depth information about participants' life experiences and their strategies for learning pronunciation. According to Cohen et al. (2011), the interview is a tool for collecting and gathering the data, which involves multi-sensory channels, like speaking, non-verbal, verbal, and heard. Furthermore, the interview process used an open-ended question. By using an open-ended interview, the participants were free to answer the question because the participants were able to answer based on their feeling, thought, and there was no limitation for the participants in the interview. Cohen et al. (2011) stated that open-ended questions would provide the interviewee the freedom to reply to the content without any restrictions. Therefore, the participants answered the questions based on their perceptions, so the researcher got the participants' deeper and more detailed information.

When the researcher had got the data, the next step was analyzing the data from the participants. There were three steps of analyzing data that the researcher did in this research: transcribing, member checking, and coding. The first step was transcribing the recording data during the interview process between the researcher and participants. The next step was member checking. After transcribing the interview recording file and getting the written form, the researcher gave the result back to the participants to check whether the transcription was based on the interview process or not. Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that member checking is used to examine the accuracy of the qualitative

data by giving back the data to the participant whether the data is accurate or not. After the member checking, there were no issues in transcribing results. Thus, the transcripts could be proceeded to the following process, data analysis. The last step of analyzing data was coding. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) stated that "Coding enables the researcher to search and retrieve the data in terms of those items that bear the same code." (p. 559). In this process, the research tried to find out the keyword from the participants' responses.

Last but not least, in maintaining the validity of the data used in this research, the researcher did two ways to keep the trustworthiness. First, member checking was done to check the validity of data from the participants. The researcher also did a peer evaluation in which the researcher invited third parties to check and skim the result. By doing those two steps, it is expected that the data used in this research can give the reader an understanding and sense of belief about this research's findings.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Problems faced in learning pronunciation

Differentiating words' sounds became the biggest problem that occurred by the participant. Moreover, the participants felt that English has unique features in which some words have the same sound but different written forms. This problem was noticed as the biggest problem faced by the participant. This problem was found in Abey, Clyde, and Donita. They argued that they find it difficult to differentiate the sound from some English words. Moreover, they also argued that the English word has a similar voice even though the word's written form is different. As expressed by Clyde and Donita stated:

"When I find two words with a similar way to pronounce, but they have a different written form, it puts me in a confusion in which one is true to be sounded" (Donita's Excerpt).

Additionally, Boni added:

"You may know that Sheet and Shit are almost have same sound, I need more time to recognize it" (Boni's Excerpt)

From the statements above, it can be assumed that the similar sound of English words makes participants confused when learning pronunciation. However, from the researcher point of view, these findings were unique because most participants had a problem differentiating the sound, not differentiating the way to pronounce it. Furthermore, by finding these problems, it can be assumed that the biggest problem in learning pronunciation is differentiating the word's sound. This result is in line with the Simarmata and Pardede (2019), who found that pronouncing English consonants and vowels may hinder the process of learners acquiring the skill in English learning. In addition, Utami (2020) also found that the problematic features are consonant cluster, long and short vowels, r/2 and r/2 sounds, schwa addition in monosyllabic words, r/2, r/2 and r/2, and issues in word stress, prominence, and intonation also contributing the complexity of learning pronunciation.

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The next problem found by the research was the lack of confidence which hindered participants from expressing ideas when they wanted to speak. This finding was found in Boni, Clyde, and Flanita. They argued that finding unfamiliar words will influence their learning process in pronunciation. Since Boni defined pronunciation as the process of expressing, the researcher believes that therefore finding unfamiliar words hinder Boni from learning pronunciation. In this case, the participant's lack of vocabulary will slow down the process of expressing their thought, and later, it will influence the way the participant speaks. It can be recognized as follows "I doubt my pronunciation when I do not know many vocabularies, I just cannot express it properly because I do not know what I am saying [the meaning]" (Boni's Excerpt)

Likewise, Flanita stated that finding unfamiliar words will also influence pronouncing the word. Furthermore, because of the lack of vocabulary, the participant cannot compare the pronunciation of each word. In this case, the participant rarely meets with a similar sound in different written forms, so this participant tends to read the word as the written form, not as the way to pronounce it. The researcher argues that the intensity of someone meeting words also will enrich their 'pronunciation word dictionary'. Consequently, when someone meets the words in a different context, he/she still can differentiate the sound. As this finding is coined, it is in line with the finding of Hu and Tsai (2019), who studied problems and strategies for facing unfamiliar words in EFL settings found that meeting new English words can be a stopping point for the learners unless they have already been familiar with the words.

After differentiating words' sounds and finding unfamiliar words, the lack of motivation also can be a barrier when participants learn pronunciation. The researcher found this finding in Abey. Learning pronunciation will be closed related to errors and mistakes. Students can learn not only from their teachers' explanations but also from their mistakes. One thing that makes it different is the number of people trying what they have already learned. A highly motivated person will learn and try to practice even though he/she is wrong. However, it will help them get more insight. On the other hand, if students are afraid of making mistakes and lack motivation, the practicing stages from the things they have already will be minimal. As a result, they cannot get more insight. Starting from that statement, the research argues that lack of confidence will hinder students from learning pronunciation. Moreover, P3 stated that the more confident a person is, the faster that person can learn pronunciation. Besides, it was mentioned by P3 stated:

"When I am on fire (motivated), I will push myself to learn not only from the video but also directly practicing it" (Abey's Excerpt)

This finding was also related to Shabani and Alipoor (2017), who found that students with high scores in pronunciation were typical of motivated students. From that point, it can be concluded that someone who has high learning motivation in learning pronunciation will influence their pronunciation during learning or the result of the learning. In addition, if students have high motivation, their confidence in the students' confident learning pronunciation process can be higher so that they will learn pronunciation eagerly, especially when they try to pronounce the words.

Another problem found in the finding was the accent problem. The research found this problem in Flanita's interview data. The accent here can be understood as the British and American ac-

cents, which confuses the participant as accents can be so various around the world. Since the popularity of British and American accents plays a part in learning English, this also causes a problem. As mentioned by Flanita that sometimes the accent is mixed so that one word and another word have a different sound.

"I feel confused which one should be followed, British or American accent, sometimes those accents are mixed in my mind" (Flanita's Excerpt)

Despite the intercultural benefit of the accent, it also makes students confused to differentiate the pronunciation. Sometimes, students think that the way they pronounce the word is different from others because they use a specific accent. This condition makes the students doubt their pronunciation, which will lead to a problem in learning pronunciation because they must know some accents.

Furthermore, the influence of accent can be noticed as a unique finding from this research. Accent plays a role in giving students intercultural knowledge and getting them confused when they hear two different versions of pronunciation. Therefore, the presence of various accents when learning pronunciation should be minimalized to avoid students' learning process, in this case, learning pronunciation.

The last finding, the research found that mother tongue hinders the participants in learning pronunciation. Previously, mother tongue has been recognized as a unique feature when someone learns a second language. However, it can also be a barrier when someone wants to learn pronunciation. This problem was found by the researcher in Eger's data interview. Eger comes from Sumatra, where he has a unique first language in his place. Eger faces some problems pronouncing "a" from the obtained data because his first language forces him to read it as "ei". So, during his pronunciation learning, it hinders him from learning pronunciation because he must deal with the influence of the first language.

"I find it difficult to throw away my first language when I learn English pronunciation" (Eger's Excerpt)

Based on this finding, the theory of language acquisition proved that the mother tongue would influence the acquiring process of a second language. This finding also showed that the problem does not merely come when the students start to learn pronunciation when they are adults; this finding shows that the problem can come from the closest thing, the first language/mother tongue. The last problem faced by the participant was the influence of the mother tongue. Luo (2014) found that the dialect of the first language the learners in pronunciation. Further, the phonetics of students is noticed as the most affected part in students' pronunciation.

3.2 Strategies to Overcome the Problems

After knowing the problem faced by the participants, the research tried to ask the participant how to handle the problem. Based on the obtained data, the participants did several things to handle

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their problems when learning pronunciation. The participants propose three strategies: increasing exposure to English, following expert or teacher guidance, and having a severe practice. The profound explanation will be explained as follows:

The strategy used by the participant was increasing exposure to English. Increasing exposure could be noticed when the participants tried to engage with English in many forms such as music, video, and reading. The researcher found this finding in Clyde, Parti, Abey, Boni, and Eger. Moreover, each of them had a different way of increasing their exposure to English. In this case, watching movies and listening to music were preferable to be used to increase their exposure to English as Parti, Abey, Boni, and Eger. One student expressed:

"Learning pronunciation by watching a movie is more comfortable, I usually see the subtitle and pay attention how the character pronounces the word" (Donita's Excerpt). "I see the lyric when I listen to the English sound to know how to pronounce it" (Abey's Excerpt)

In addition, watching a video clip and native speaking on the internet was also used by the participant to increase their exposure to English as Clyde did.

"When I get some difficulties, I try to watch a video clip on YouTube and pay attention on how the native speaker when they speak, then I try to remember how to pronounce it." (Clyde's Excerpt)

The participant used this strategy to handle some problems in learning pronunciation, such as how to differentiate the word's sound, lack of vocabulary, and recognize some English words in some accents. Therefore, exposure can be assumed to be used to handle some problems when learning pronunciation. Furthermore, the researcher argues that increased exposure will help the students learn many accents and increase their vocabulary. Consequently, the students will be able to express their ideas variously. This finding was also in line with Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) stated that the degree of exposure to and use of the target language can support or impede pronunciation skills development. Another prior research also found that getting used to familiarizing yourself with the content on the platform supporting speaking and listening activities can help the process of learning pronunciation in English (Rahayu & Putri, 2019).

The second strategy to handle the problem was following the expert and teacher's guidance. Moreover, this finding was found in Clyde, Parti, Eger, and Flanita. Furthermore, the terms expert here can be understood as the person participants think has mastered pronunciation. In following the guidance, the participants imitate the experts' or teacher's guidance pronunciation. Besides, they also tried to ask the expert to correct their pronunciation so that it can be directly fixed if there is a mistake in pronouncing a word. As mentioned by Clyde and Donita asserted:

"I try to pay attention to my teachers when they are pronouncing words; besides, I also ask them how to pronounce this or that word" (Clyde's Excerpt). "When I got some new pronunciations, I try to imitate those because I believe my teachers" (Donita's Excerpt)

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Furthermore, the participants used this strategy to handle some problems such as confusion when differentiating the word's sound, lack of vocabulary, the influence of the mother tongue, and accent. Since this strategy relies on teachers' or experts' guidance, so the students are supposed to find out or look for the right teachers who have well knowledge about pronunciation because if it is not, it will influence students and raise new problems in which participants need to find out the new solution to handle that problem.

Then, when those findings relate to the literature in the second chapter, expert guidance and having serious practice surely help students when they face the problem. Learners need a figure to give explicit instruction to achieve adequate and proper pronunciation (Aminah, 2014). Learners are the person that needs an assistant to assist with what they have learned, what they have done, what they are learning, and evaluate the step that they have already passed in learning pronunciation.

The last strategy to handle the problem was having a serious practice. The researcher found this finding in Donita, Eger, and Flanita. Moreover, the way they have serious practice tended to practice with native or experts and practicing using platform. In practicing with the expert or native, the participants tried to mingle and converse with the native or expert. In this way, they will be able to see whether their pronunciation is understandable or not. As mentioned by Flanita conveyed:

"I try to maximize when I have a chance to speak with them (teachers) so that it can be used to practice my pronunciation whether it is correct or not" (Flanita's Excerpt)

Not only practicing with an expert, but the participant also practiced their pronunciation with their peers after getting the knowledge from the classroom. Consequently, both the participant and her friend were able to give feedback about their pronunciation. Donita started this mentioned:

"We (participant and his friend) practiced our pronunciation after having class, we have a conversation." (Donita's Excerpt)

Furthermore, the second serious practice proposed by the participant was practice using the platform. This finding proved that technology development could boost the students' skills, particularly pronunciation practice. Moreover, one participant said he used an application, namely "ELSA (English Learning Speaking Assistant) Speak," to practice his pronunciation and handle his problem when learning pronunciation.

"ELSA Speak helps me to correct my pronunciation; then after that, I try to imitate the pronunciation from ELSA Speak" (Eger's Excerpt)

The participant used this strategy to overcome problems such as the lack of confidence and the lack of practice. Noticing the varied ways, the participant in practicing gives a general picture that problems in learning pronunciation can be handled using various ways even the presence of technology helps students tackle the problem when they are learning pronunciation. This finding is in line with the suggestion from Aminah (2014), who suggested that learners may practice their English skills to get used to the English terms. Also, this extension practice has been proofed by Afendi et al.

(2020) who found that additional exercise in pronunciation as the scaffolding activity was proofed effective in boosting pronunciation skills. By stating so, what the participants did was supported by other researchers. Additionally, students are expected to allocate their time to have learning extension time to sharpen and boost their learning process in English, particularly in learning pronunciation.

4. Conclusion

The process of learning pronunciation for the learners plays a crucial role in determining their success in mastering pronunciation, mainly English pronunciation. Even though research on pronunciation problems has attracted scholars' interest to conduct research, less attention can be found to the problem during the pronunciation learning process. Indeed, knowing what the barriers to learners' learning pronunciation are able to shorten the length of learners' mastery.

Thus, this research aims to discover the problem of ELED students learning pronunciation and how to solve their problems. By conducting a qualitative descriptive research design, this research was invited six fourth-year students of one of the English Language Education Department in one private Islamic university in Yogyakarta to be the participants of this research. The data were obtained using an interview process, to be an exact in-depth interview to find out the participants' views, experiences, and the problem solving from learning pronunciation.

The result of this research found some problems when participants learn pronunciation, such as confusion in differentiating the word's sound, finding unfamiliar words, low learning motivation, the influence of accent, and the influence of mother tongue, which led to a mixed concept in pronuncing the word for participants. Moreover, the most finding problems in learning pronunciation based on the data was the way to differentiate the word's sound followed by finding unfamiliar words and low learning motivation in pronunciation. In the other sense, participants expressed three ways to handle the problems in solving the problems. Those solutions could be noticed ad increasing exposure to English, following expert or teacher's guidance, and having a severe pronunciation practice outside of the classroom.

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