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## **Difficulties in Pronouncing English Vowel and Consonant by English Language Education Undergraduate Students at UINSU**

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### **Abstract**

*This research investigates the challenges encountered by undergraduate students majoring in English Language Education at UINSU (State Islamic University of North Sumatera) when pronouncing English vowels and consonants. A descriptive qualitative research method was employed, involving 25 students from the fourth semester of the English Language Education program. The results revealed several difficulties faced by the students, including difficulty pronouncing vowel and consonant sounds that are not present in their mother tongue, challenges in matching the sound of English words with their written form, struggles in determining the correct sound to use in different words or sentences, interference of the mother tongue on the pronunciation of English vowels and consonants, and difficulties in accurately pronouncing English vowels and consonants due to inconsistencies in pronunciation. These findings highlight the need for targeted instruction and practice to address these challenges and enhance students' pronunciation skills in English language learning.*

**Keywords:** *English pronunciation difficulties, Phonology, English vowel and consonant*

### **Introduction**

Learning English vowels and consonants is of utmost importance for students. Firstly, understanding and mastering English vowels is crucial for achieving proper pronunciation and clarity in speech. Vowels play a fundamental role in forming the core sounds of the language and differentiating between words (Walker, 2011). By learning the correct pronunciation of English vowels, students can effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas, enhancing their overall language proficiency (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Additionally, acquiring proficiency in English vowels enables students to comprehend spoken English more accurately, as they can recognize and differentiate between similar-sounding words that may vary only in vowel sounds, such as "ship" and "sheep" or "pen" and "pan" (Baker & Trofimovich, 2006). Furthermore, developing a strong foundation in English vowels empowers students to improve their listening skills, enabling them to understand various accents and dialects, which is vital in an increasingly globalized world.

Similarly, mastering English consonants is essential for students for several reasons. Consonants contribute to the overall intelligibility and clarity of speech, allowing students to convey their messages effectively (Levis, 2018). English has a wide range of consonant sounds, and understanding the distinctions between them is crucial for accurate pronunciation. Learning consonant sounds helps students differentiate between words with similar spellings but different meanings, such as "cat" and "cut" or "bit" and "beat." Moreover, developing proficiency in English consonants enhances students' reading and writing abilities (Rajab, 2013). By recognizing and producing consonant sounds correctly, students can improve their spelling, vocabulary, and grammar, enabling them to express themselves accurately in written form (Al-Zuoud, & Kabilan, 2013). Overall, acquiring

knowledge of English vowels and consonants empowers students to become effective communicators and opens doors to various academic and professional opportunities.

Students face several difficulties in pronouncing English vowels and consonants, as revealed by research. Challenges include differentiating between long and short vowels, unfamiliarity with certain consonant sounds, struggling with specific articulatory features, difficulty in understanding sound distribution and context, challenges in achieving fluency, and difficulty in relating pronunciation to conventional spelling. These obstacles hinder students' ability to accurately pronounce English words and affect their overall communication skills. Addressing these difficulties through targeted instruction and practice is crucial to help students improve their pronunciation proficiency and enhance their language abilities (Simarmata & Pardede, 2018).

Research indicate that students encounter various difficulties when pronouncing vowel and consonant sounds in English. Challenges include inconsistencies in single-vowel letter sounds, as students struggle to pronounce vowels like "a" and "u" correctly, resulting in mispronunciations of words like "what" and "ball." Inconsistencies in double-vowel letter sounds also pose challenges, with mispronunciations occurring in words like "clean" and "bear." Additionally, students face difficulties in understanding the sound-spelling relationship, leading to mispronunciations when relying solely on word spelling. Mother tongue interference further contributes to pronunciation difficulties, as students struggle to differentiate between English sounds and those of their native language. Furthermore, inconsistencies in single-consonant letter sounds, such as the soft "g" sound and silent consonants like "h" and "k," pose additional obstacles. These difficulties in pronouncing vowel and consonant sounds arise from inconsistencies in English pronunciation, the influence of the students' native language, and a lack of knowledge about sound-spelling relationships in English (Tambunsaribu & Simatupang, 2021).

The research highlights several factors contributing to the difficulties by Chinese students face in pronouncing English vowels and consonants. Firstly, the interference of the students' mother tongue, Chinese, plays a significant role, as the phonological systems of Chinese and English differ, and English contains sounds absent in Chinese. This disparity poses challenges for accurate sound production. Secondly, age is a factor, as younger learners generally find it easier to acquire new languages and accents, while older learners may struggle more. Native language knowledge, in this case, Chinese, can also hinder pronunciation learning. Lastly, insufficient knowledge of phonology and phonetics impacts learners' ability to acquire correct pronunciation. Without a solid understanding of the English sound system, learners may encounter difficulties in accurately producing vowel and consonant sounds (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the specific challenges faced by undergraduate students studying English Language Education at UINSU (State Islamic University of North Sumatra) when pronouncing English vowels and consonants. The study aimed to identify the factors contributing to these difficulties, such as native language interference, age-related factors, and the students' knowledge of phonology and phonetics. By understanding the specific pronunciation challenges encountered by these students, the research aimed to provide insights that could inform targeted instructional approaches and interventions to enhance their pronunciation skills. The ultimate goal was to improve the students' overall English language proficiency and communication abilities.

### **Research Method**

This research employed a descriptive qualitative research design. The participants of the study consist of 25 students who are currently in their fourth semester, majoring in English Language Education at UINSU (State Islamic University of North Sumatra). The primary technique used to collect data is questionnaires.

The questionnaires are designed to gather information regarding the students' difficulties in pronouncing English vowels and consonants. The questionnaire included items that address specific challenges identified in the literature

The questionnaire distributed to the participants, and they were asked to provide their responses based on their experiences and perceptions. The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively to get deep understanding about the students' difficulties in pronouncing English vowel and consonant. The findings were presented in the form of tables and descriptive summaries to provide a comprehensive overview of the students' difficulties in pronouncing English vowels and consonants.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research wants to know the students' difficulties experienced in pronouncing English vowels and consonants. This research was conducted on 25 undergraduate students majoring in English Education semester 4 at UINSU. To find out about this, the researcher created a questionnaire containing statements about the difficulty in pronouncing vowels and consonants derived from the results of previous studies. The following are the results of a questionnaire showing students' difficulties in pronouncing English vowels and consonants.

Tabel 1. Undergraduate Students' Difficulties in Pronouncing English Vowel and Consonant

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I struggle with pronouncing certain vowel and consonant sounds that are not present in my native language.	36%	64%	0%	0%
Matching the sounds of English words with their written forms is challenging for me.	32%	68%	0%	0%
I find it challenging to determine which English vowel and consonant are appropriate to use in different words or sentences in English.	16%	48%	36%	0%
My native language interferes with my pronunciation of English vowel and consonant.	24%	56%	20%	0%
I struggle with accurately pronouncing English vowels and consonant due to inconsistencies in their pronunciation.	8%	64%	28%	0%

The following is a discussion of each of the questionnaire items above:

### Difficulty Pronouncing Vowel and Consonant Sounds that are not In The Mother Tongue

The data number 1 in the table above shows that a significant majority of participants, 64% (n=16), agree that they struggle with pronouncing certain vowel and consonant sounds that are not present in their native language. Additionally, 36% (n=9) strongly agree with this statement, indicating a notable level of difficulty experienced by the participants. None of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting that all participants acknowledged the challenges they face in pronouncing these specific sounds.

This result highlight the common difficulty faced by students in pronouncing vowel and consonant sounds that are not present in their native language. It indicates the impact of

language differences and the influence of one's native language on pronunciation. The high percentage of agreement among the participants emphasizes the need for targeted instruction and practice to overcome these challenges. This is in line with research by Hassan (2014), who found that Arab students had difficulty pronouncing English vowels and consonants because Arab and English are very different in terms of vowels and consonants

The finding mentioned underscores the prevalence of a common difficulty encountered by students when attempting to pronounce vowel and consonant sounds that do not exist in their native language. This highlights the impact of language differences and the influence of one's mother tongue on the acquisition of pronunciation skills. The high percentage of agreement among the participants further emphasizes the universality of this challenge, indicating that many students face similar obstacles. These findings stress the importance of providing targeted instruction and ample practice opportunities to address these difficulties effectively. By focusing on specific sounds and providing systematic guidance, educators can help students overcome these challenges and improve their pronunciation skills in the target language.

### **Difficulty Matching the Sound of English Words with Their Written Form**

The data number 2 in the table above reveals that a majority of participants, 68%, (n=17) agree that matching the sounds of English words with their written forms is challenging for them. An additional 32% (n=8) strongly agree with this statement, indicating a significant level of difficulty experienced by the participants. None of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting that all participants acknowledged the challenges they face in this aspect of pronunciation.

This finding explains the difficulties students face when trying to associate the sounds of English words with their written representations. The data indicates a clear difficulty among the participants in matching the sounds of English words with their written forms. This result is in line with Tambunsaribu and Simatupang's (2021) which found that students had difficulty matching the sounds of English words with their written forms. Tambunsaribu and Simatupang (2021) argue that this occurs because a lack of understanding of the relationship between sound and spelling leads to mispronunciation when they rely solely on the spelling of words.

The finding highlights the challenges encountered by students in establishing the connection between the sounds of English words and their written representations. The data reveals a notable difficulty experienced by the participants in accurately matching the sounds with their corresponding written forms. This suggests a discrepancy between their auditory perception and their ability to associate the sounds with the visual cues provided by written words. Such difficulties can impede effective communication and comprehension in English. To address this issue, instructional strategies that focus on phonetic awareness, phonics instruction, and exposure to authentic language materials can be implemented to enhance students' ability to link sounds and written forms effectively. Providing explicit instruction on sound-symbol correspondence and offering ample practice opportunities can contribute to improving students' proficiency in associating English sounds with their written representations.

### **Difficulty Determining the Correct Sound to Use in Different Words or Sentences in English**

The data number 3 in the table above shows that 48% (n=12) of the participants agree and 16% (n=4) strongly agree that they find it challenging to determine which sounds are appropriate to use in different words or sentences in English. On the other hand, 36% of the participants disagree with this statement, while none of them strongly disagree.

This findings indicate that a significant portion of the participants perceive difficulties in selecting the correct sounds for different words or sentences in English. The results of this study are in line with (Zhang & Yin, 2009) who found that because of a lack of knowledge of phonology and phonetics, Chinese students find it difficult to determine the sound of English words. This could be attributed to factors such as inconsistent sound patterns in English or a lack of familiarity with the phonetic rules and conventions of the language.

The findings suggest that a considerable number of participants experience challenges when it comes to determining the appropriate sounds to use in different words or sentences in English. This indicates a difficulty in applying the appropriate phonetic and phonological rules of the English language. The participants may struggle with understanding the sound patterns and context-dependent variations in pronunciation. These difficulties can lead to mispronunciations and hinder effective communication. To address this issue, explicit instruction on English phonetics and phonology can be beneficial. Providing practice opportunities with word and sentence-level exercises, as well as exposure to authentic spoken English, can help students develop their ability to select the correct sounds based on the specific linguistic context. Additionally, promoting self-awareness and metacognitive strategies can empower students to actively monitor and improve their pronunciation skills.

### **The Mother Tongue Interferes with The Pronunciation of English Vowels and Consonants**

The data number 4 in the table above reveals that 56% (n=14) of the participants agree and 24% (n=6) strongly agree that their native language interferes with their pronunciation of English vowel and consonant sounds. On the other hand, 20% (n=5) of the participants disagree with this statement, while none of them strongly disagree.

This finding explains that the majority of participants acknowledged that their native language interfere their English pronunciation. A high percentage of agreement highlights the impact of language transfer, in which the phonological patterns and sounds of one's native language influence the pronunciation of a second language. This result is in line with research by Tambunsaribu and Simaptupang (2021) which found that students' native language influences their pronunciation of English sounds. They struggle to distinguish between the sounds of English and the sounds of their native language, leading to mispronunciations. It is common for learners to struggle with producing English vowel and consonant sounds that don't exist in their native language or have different pronunciation rules.

The findings indicate that a significant majority of participants recognized the influence of their native language on their English pronunciation. This acknowledgment highlights the concept of language transfer, wherein the phonological patterns and sounds of one's first language impact their pronunciation of a second language. The high percentage of agreement underscores the pervasive nature of this interference and its impact on language learners. Understanding the specific ways in which the native language influences English pronunciation can inform targeted instruction and interventions. By addressing these interference patterns through focused pronunciation exercises, explicit instruction, and awareness-raising activities, educators can help students overcome the challenges posed by language transfer and improve their accuracy in English pronunciation.

### **Difficulty Pronouncing English Vowels and Consonants Accurately Due to Inconsistencies in Pronunciation**

The data shows that 64% (n=16) of the participants agree and 8% (n=2) strongly agree that they struggle with accurately pronouncing English vowels and consonants due to inconsistencies in their pronunciation. On the other hand, 28% (n=7) of the participants disagree with this statement, and none of them strongly disagree.

The high percentage of agreement and strong agreement indicates that a significant majority of the participants face challenges in accurately pronouncing English vowels and consonants. The inconsistencies in English pronunciation, such as variations in vowel and consonant sounds, contribute to their difficulty. This finding is in a line with Tambunsari and Simatupang (2021) who found that English vowels and consonants in words or sentences are inconsistent. Different words can cause different vowels and consonants. That inconsistencies lead students into confusing and misunderstanding.

The findings reveal that a considerable majority of participants experience difficulties in accurately pronouncing English vowels and consonants. The high percentage of agreement and strong agreement among the participants underscores the prevalence of this challenge. The inconsistencies in English pronunciation, particularly the variations in vowel and consonant sounds, contribute to the participants' difficulty. These inconsistencies may arise from factors such as regional accents, dialectal variations, and the complex nature of the English language itself. The participants' struggle to navigate these pronunciation variations highlights the need for focused instruction and practice targeting specific sounds and their variations. By addressing these challenges through targeted exercises, audiovisual resources, and exposure to different English accents, educators can support students in developing more accurate and comprehensible pronunciation skills.

## CONCLUSION

The research findings highlight the common difficulties encountered by students in pronouncing English vowels and consonants. The data reveals challenges related to the influence of one's native language, difficulties in matching sounds with written forms, determining appropriate sounds for different words or sentences, and inconsistencies in pronunciation. These findings emphasize the need for targeted instruction and practice to address these challenges and improve students' pronunciation skills.

Based on the research findings, several suggestions can be made to help students overcome difficulties in pronouncing English vowels and consonants. Firstly, it is essential to provide explicit instruction on the specific sounds that are challenging for students, especially those not present in their native language. This can include targeted practice exercises and resources that focus on these sounds. Secondly, incorporating phonetic training and awareness into language learning curricula can enhance students' ability to match sounds with written forms and understand the sound-spelling relationship in English. Additionally, promoting extensive listening and speaking activities, including conversations, dialogues, and pronunciation drills, can contribute to developing accurate pronunciation and improving fluency. Finally, creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment where students feel comfortable practicing and receiving feedback on their pronunciation can greatly enhance their progress.

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