

## THE INFLUENCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE ON YOUNG INDONESIAN LEARNERS' ABILITY TO PRONOUNCE ENGLISH SHORT VOWELS

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of native language on the ability of young Indonesian learners to pronounce English short vowels. Focusing on kindergarten-level students in Badung, Bali, the research explores difficulties in producing English vowel sounds absent in the Indonesian vowel system. Through observation and analysis of students' pronunciation recordings of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words, the findings reveal that vowel sounds such as /æ/, /ʌ/, and /ɒ/ are often substituted with more familiar vowels from the Indonesian language, such as /e/ and /o/. These mispronunciations are attributed to the limited vowel system of Indonesian, which consists of only five primary vowels. The results support the theory of first language (L1) interference, which posits that differences in phonological structures between the native and target languages pose challenges in language learning. This study highlights the importance of increased exposure to English pronunciation and phonetic practice to enhance learners' pronunciation skills.

### Keywords:

native language  
interference,  
vowel pronunciation,  
young learners,  
phonetic learning,  
English

## I. INTRODUCTION

Introducing English vowels is an important skill for students learning the language. However, it can lead challenging to the learners because of the influence of their native language on their pronunciation. In the case of Indonesian native speakers, their language is characterized by a limited set of vowel sounds that differ from those in English. This study examines the challenges faced by young Indonesian learners in producing English vowels.

Language acquisition is a process influenced by some factors, including the native language of learners. In Indonesia, the English learners mostly speak Bahasa Indonesia, it makes them often face challenges in mastering the English language including in pronunciation. The differences of vowel sounds between Bahasa Indonesia and English become the pronunciation problem for Indonesian learners. While Bahasa Indonesia has a simple vowel system consists of only six vowel sounds (/a, e, i, o, u, and é/), English has a more complex system of vowel sounds, like both short, long vowels, and diphthongs. This difference can lead to difficulty for Indonesian speakers when producing English vowel sounds accurately. **Corder (1967)** suggests that a contrastive study of the learner's native language (L1) and the second language (L2) can help identify the specific areas where the difficulties mostly arise. This study focuses on similarity and difference between the two languages, providing information into where difficulties may arise.

In addition, Lado's statement emphasizes that the similarities between the learner's mother tongue and the target language (English) will make learning easier, whereas differences will create challenges. This means that if certain phonological features in the learner's first language are present in English, the learner will find it easier to pronounce those sounds. On the other hand, phonological features that are not present in the learner's native language will be more difficult for

them to master. The focus here is on **pronunciation difficulties** caused by **interference** from the learner's native language. In other words, when learning English pronunciation, the learner's L1 influences how they perceive and produce English sounds (**Lado: 1957**). Bose (2005) mentioned that one of the reasons for learner errors is the interference of his mother tongue, which is described as the negative and positive transfer between the mother tongue and the target language. The negative transfer happens when the forms of the target language and those of the learner's mother tongue are different from each other whereas, the positive transfer between the mother tongue and the target language is similar.

This study discusses the influence of native language on the ability of young Indonesian learners to pronounce English vowel sounds. These young learners are students at the play group education level who are learning the English Phonics. Phonics is a teaching method in reading and spelling that emphasizes the relationship between letters and their sounds. It is a basic approach in early literacy education, helping children spell and then read based on these sound-letter correspondences. According to **The National Reading Panel (2000)**, systematic phonics instruction is effective way in improving children's reading skills, particularly for struggling readers. By examining phonetic similarities and differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English, we can better understand the challenges and opportunities that arised by the young learners.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The **native language interference** on Indonesian students' pronunciation has been a subject of interest in several studies. Many of these studies focus on how Indonesian learners struggle with certain **English vowel sounds** that are absent or pronounced differently in Indonesian.

**Sudipa, Laksmi, and Rajeg (2010)** conducted research on the interference of the Indonesian mother tongue in the English language learning process. Their findings suggest that a significant cause of L1 interference was due to students' **lack of knowledge** about certain concepts and vocabulary in English. This lack of understanding causes **directly translates** concepts from Indonesian to English, which make inaccurate pronunciations. The authors emphasize the need for more exposure to English language contexts that could help Indonesian students understanding English pronunciation patterns without interference of L1 structures.

**In addition, Listyani, Ardiyarso, Kurniawan, Andrew T., and Thren (2020)** provide additional evidence that Indonesian learners struggle with English vowel sounds. Their study found that **habitual pronunciation patterns** from the Indonesian language were the primary cause of mispronunciations. For example, Indonesian does not have the vowel sounds /æ/ (as in "cat") or /ʌ/ (as in "cup"), and Indonesian learners often substitute these sounds with vowels from their L1. This research shows how the phonological differences between Indonesian and English contribute to pronunciation challenges.

Besides, **Herfyna (2024)** investigates the specific challenges that Indonesian learners face when pronouncing English vowels. Her study shows that many Indonesian students fail to produce **accurate vowel sounds** because their lack knowledge of native English pronunciation, which is often a key factor in helping learners' correct vowel mispronunciations. This study suggests that **increased exposure** to native English pronunciation through listening and practice is essential for improving learners' pronunciation skills.

## III. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted at a private course in Badung, Bali, where a phonics program is taught to young learners especially on **playgroup students**, a group of young learners at an early stage of English acquisition. The data were collected by doing observations during their phonics lesson. Students were given **lists of CVC words** containing different short vowels (e.g., "cat," "bat," "log," "sit," "cut" ). These words were chosen because CVC words are often used in phonics instruction as they contain simple, distinct vowel sounds that can show how accurately students

produce English vowels. After reading these words aloud, students' pronunciations were recorded for analysis. While observing the students and listening to their recordings, detailed notes were taken to capture both the students' **pronunciation errors**.

#### IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to observe the influence of native language faced by young Indonesian learners in pronouncing English vowels while learning phonics. The study specifically focuses on students in a **phonics class** in **Badung, Bali**, who have already learned the English alphabet and are now progressing to **blend** and **read CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words**. The students showed proficiency in producing consonant sounds, but **mispronunciations of certain vowel sounds** were frequently occurred. Below, we provide a detailed analysis of the students' pronunciation of CVC words with different vowel sounds.

Table 1. Pronunciation of CVC Words with the "a" Sound (IPA: /æ/)

No	List of Words	English Pronunciation	Students' Pronunciation
1.	Mat	/mæt/	/mæt/, /met/ and /mʌt/
2.	Hat	/hæt/	/hæt/, /het/ and /hʌt/
3.	Pan	/pæn/	/pæn/, /pen/ and /pʌn/
4.	Man	/mæn/	/mæn/, /men/ and /mʌn/
5.	Jam	/jæm/	/jæm/, /jem/ and /jʌm/

The students' pronunciation of the vowel sound /æ/ (as in the words "pan" and "hat") showed significant difficulty. While some students could produce the correct pronunciation of words like **"pan"** as /pæn/, many students mispronounced the /æ/ sound by substituting it with either the /e/ sound (as in "pen") or the /ʌ/ sound (as in "cup").

This difficulty can be happened because the **absence of the /æ/ vowel sound** in the **Indonesian language**. Indonesian has only five vowel sounds, which includes sounds like /a, e, i, o, u, and é/. However, the /æ/ sound, a front, open vowel, is not part of the Indonesian vowel system. As a result, Indonesian learners tend to replace /æ/ with more familiar vowels, such as /e/ or /ʌ/. The /e/ sound is closer to the /æ/ sound in terms of tongue placement but still represents a different quality. This makes it an easier substitute causing to mispronunciations like /met/ for "mat" or /men/ for "man."

Furthermore, some students also produced the /ʌ/ sound (as in "cup") when trying to pronounce /æ/, as seen in the word "pan" pronounced as /pʌn/. This substitution can be explained by the **similarity in tongue position** for both sounds, though they are phonetically distinct. Since Indonesian does not have the /æ/ sound, students tend to substitute the vowel to the most familiar sound /ʌ/.

Table 2. Pronunciation of CVC Words with the "i" Sound (IPA: /ɪ/)

No	List of Words	English Pronunciation	Students' Pronunciation
1.	Pig	/pɪg/	/pɪg/
2.	Pin	/pɪn/	/pɪn/
3.	Sit	/sɪt/	/sɪt/
4.	Hit	/hɪt/	/hɪt/
5.	Six	/sɪx/	/sɪx/

The students performed well in pronouncing **CVC words with the "i" sound (/ɪ/)**, such as "pig" and "sit." This can be attributed to the fact that the /ɪ/ sound is present in the Indonesian language, and its pronunciation is relatively similar. As a result, students did not experience significant difficulty when pronouncing this vowel sound in English.

Table 3. Pronunciation of CVC Words with the "e" Sound (IPA: /e/)

No	List of Words	English Pronunciation	Students' Pronunciation
1.	Jet	/jet/	/dʒet/
2.	Wet	/wet/	/wet/

3.	Pen	/pen/	/pen/
4.	Red	/red/	/red/
5.	Ten	/ten/	/ten/

Similar to the "i" sound, the "e" sound (/e/) was also correctly pronounced by the students. Words like "wet" and "pen" did not cause significant mispronunciations. The similarity between the Indonesian vowel system and the /e/ sound contributed to the students' ability to pronounce these words accurately.

Table 4. Pronunciation of CVC Words with the "o" Sound (IPA: /ɒ/)

No	List of Words	English Pronunciation	Students' Pronunciation
1.	Dog	/dɒg/	/dog/
2.	Log	/lɒg/	/log/
3.	Pot	/pɒt/	/pot/
4.	Hot	/hɒt/	/hot/
5.	Hop	/hɒp/	/hop/

This difficulty can also occur in the pronunciation of vowel o. In Oxford English Dictionary it is pronounced as open-back rounded vowel /ɒ/. This mispronunciation can be happened because in Indonesia the vowel o is pronounced as close-mid back rounded vowel. As a result, Indonesian learners tend to replace /ɒ/ with more familiar vowel /o/.

Table 5. Pronunciation of CVC Words with the "u" Sound (IPA: /ʌ/)

No	List of Words	English Pronunciation	Students' Pronunciation
1.	Mug	/mʌg/	/mʌg/ and /mug/
2.	Hug	/hʌg/	/hʌg/ and /hug/
3.	Sun	/sʌn/	/sʌn/ and /sun/
4.	Hut	/hʌt/	/hʌt/ and /hut/
5.	Sub	/sʌb/	/sʌb/ and /sub/

This mispronunciation is influenced by L1 interference from Bahasa Indonesia, which does not have the /ʌ/ sound. In Bahasa Indonesia, the letter "u" is generally pronounced as a rounded back vowel (/u/), similar to how it is pronounced in words like "boot" or "food." Since Indonesian students are familiar with this sound in their L1, they often apply the same pronunciation rules when pronounce the letter "u" in English. This leads them to mispronounce English words like "sun," "mug," and "nut," as they substitute the expected /ʌ/ sound with the /u/ sound from their native language.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the mispronunciation of English vowels by Indonesian learners is significantly influenced by first language interference (L1 interference). This phenomenon aligns with Lado's statement (1967) which emphasizes that the similarities between the learner's mother tongue and the target language (English) will make learning easier. Meanwhile, the differences will bring challenges to the students. It means that if certain phonological features in the learner's first language are present in English, the learner will find it easier to pronounce those sounds. On the other hand, for phonological features that are not present in the learner's native language will be more difficult for them to master it.

In addition, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) mentioned that errors caused by interference are a natural part of the language learning process. According to them, the interference occurs when learners try to apply the rules and patterns of their native language to the target language, especially in cases where the linguistic structures of native language is different to the target language. In this context, Indonesian learners will find difficulties with sounds that are absent or different in their native language when they learn English and it leads mispronunciations.

The Indonesian vowel system is relatively simple which consists of five vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/. This limited vowel means that learners often have difficulty to produce English vowel

sounds that are absent in their L1, such as /æ/ (as in “cat”). Therefore, the students tend to substitute /æ/ to /ʌ/ and /e/ that are more familiar from their native language. It is also happened when the students try to produce vowel ‘o’. It is pronounce as open-back rounded vowel /ɒ/ in English. This mispronunciation can be happened because in Indonesia the vowel o is pronounced as close-mid back rounded vowel. As a result, Indonesian learners tend to replace /ɒ/ with more familiar vowel /o/. Besides, when the learners pronounce letter “u”, in which in English, it is produced as /ʌ/ (as in “cup”), meanwhile in Indonesia it is produce as /u/ as in rumah.

This interference is particularly noticeable in the early stages of learning English, when learners have limited exposure to the sounds and rules of the target language. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) emphasize that while such errors are a natural part of language learning, they are generally overcome as learners gain more experience with the language and receive more exposure to its sounds. As learners continue their language development, these errors become less frequent as their understanding of the target language deepens and they begin to internalize the correct phonetic distinctions.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, mispronunciations observed in this study can be traced back to L1 interference, as Indonesian learners of English substitute unfamiliar English vowel sounds with those from their native language. The sounds which are leading mispronunciations based on this analysis are the letters “a”, “u” and “o”. These errors are mostly occurring in the early stages of language learning, but as the learner gets more practice and often listen to the sounds, these errors can be reduced, thereby improving pronunciation.

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