

# Mapping Students' Phonological Problems in Pronouncing English Sounds: A Study on Speakers of Local Languages in West Nusa Tenggara

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**Abstract** – Learning English to EFL learners must always be challenging since it requires not only the willingness for learning, but also students' awareness of the phonological differences between the students' mother tongue on one hand and English as the target language on the other. One of the potential problems is phonology. This study aims at describing the students' phonological problems in pronouncing English segmental sounds. There are 10 students' each of local language speakers taken as the sample in this study. Data is gained by using phonological test. In the test, the sample were asked to pronounce English words of which the sounds do not exist in each local language phonology. The result reveals that, there two English sounds found to be a problem encountered by Sasak students, both of which are consonants. The sounds are fricative labiodental voiceless /f/ as in /fʌðər/ pronounced /fʌðər / in initial position, /stʌf/ pronounced /stʌp/, and /hʌf/ pronounced /hʌp/ in the last position and labiodental fricative voiced /v/ as in /varieisən/ pronounced /parieisən/ in initial position, /weiv/ pronounced /weip/ in the last position. This mispronunciation was encountered by 2 out of 10 students. For Bimanese students, consonants alveolar plosive voiced /d/, alveolar plosive voiceless /t/, and open middle central vowel /ə/ were mispronounced with labiodental plosive voiced /D/, labiodental plosive voiceless /T/, and middle front vowel /e/ respectively. This mispronunciation was encountered by 4 out of 10 students. What seems interesting is that the evidence found in Sumbawan students which shares the same as in both neighboring students. There are 2 students out of 10 who mispronounced the labiodental fricative voiceless /f/ and labiodental fricative voiced /v/ with bilabial plosive voiced /p/ as Sasak students did. Meanwhile, the other 2 students mispronounced the open middle central vowel /ə/ with middle front vowel /e/ as encountered by Bimanese students. This result is expected to draw a pedagogical implication for English learners to speakers of three local languages in West Nusa Tenggara.

**Keywords** – mispronunciation, English students, local language speakers, West Nusa Tenggara

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is a language of 21st century [1]. It is the language of global communication and science. In Indonesia, English has taught from elementary to university level. However, the competence of English learners is still low at all levels of education [2]. For most Indonesia learners, it is a challenging subject to learn due to its phonological characteristic which is different from Indonesian and their mother tongues (MT). Several researches have suggested that the influence of phonological aspects of the MT in EFL

learner is significant. Swan and Smith [3], for example stated that the failure in English learning was not due to the unsystematic afford of learning, but to the reflection of phonological inventory, the rule of sound combinations, and stress and intonation pattern of the MT of the learners. Renaldi, Stefani, and Gulo [4] found that the absence of English phonological segments of ESL learners' in their MT phonological segments contributes much on the pronunciations of standard English words. Similarly, Keshawarz and Khamis [5] implied that MT played an important role in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

What causes the failure of English Language Learning in Indonesia is now seen to have much been effected by the phonological characteristics of the learners' MT. The difference between the phonological characteristics of learners' MT put on some constraints at the learners' afford in performing their English skills, especially speaking. The negative feeling and behaviour, like afraid of being tittered, become the major cause of the failure. This is also true to the Bimanese English Learners [6].

In conclusion, several studies, ([7]; [8] ; [9]) have proved the phonological structure of learners' MT has an impact on their L2 acquisition and contribute a lot to the negative transfer of the target language (TL) pronunciation compared to the grammar and vocabulary.

## II. METHOD

This descriptive study was done by recruiting 30 English students from English Department of Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Mataram University as the sample. These students were from 3 local language speakers in West Nusa Tenggara Province (i.e. the speakers of Sasak, Sumbawan, and Bima Language who have been learning English for several years. The data of this study were the English segmental sounds which are absent in the three local language phonology inventories as produced by the samples. The samples were asked to pronounce the words twice. At first, they were asked to read the words only, then at the second time they were asked to repeat the words as they were narrated by tape-recorded native speaker narrators. During the pronunciation test, the recorder was on to make the sounds of the languages documented. This data were transcribed both literally and phonetically. The data were analysed descriptively with comparing the sample productions

with the Standard English ones using Error Analysis Hypothesis introduced by Larry Selinker and friends in 1970's ([10]; [11]). This way the data can be easily identified, classified, and described.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All three languages phonetic inventories look different from English. Quantitatively, the number of sounds of the three local languages is less than that of English which has 24 consonants and 12 vowels [12]. This fact influences the English performance of the learners of the speakers of the languages. Some obvious problems encountered are narrated in the following.

A. The Problems Encountered by the Sasak Learners

There are two English sounds found to be problems by Sasak speaking learners both of which are consonants. These sounds are mispronounced by two Sasak learners from ten. The sounds are fricative labiodental voiceless /f/ and fricative labiodental voiced /v/. The followings are English words where the problematic sounds for Sasak speaking learners occur.

TABLE I. PROBLEMATIC SOUNDS FOR SASAK SPEAKING LEARNERS

No	Words	English pronunciation	Sasak pronunciation
1	Father	/fʌðər/	/pʌðər/
2	phenomena	/fenomenə/	/penomenə/
	Comfortable	/kəmfortəbəl/	/kəmportebəl/
3	Staff	/stʌf/	/stʌp/
4	Half	/hʌlf/	/hʌlp/
5	Variation	/vəri'eɪʃən/	/parieɪʃən/
6	Evening	/iviniŋ/	/ipiniŋ/
7	Wave	/weɪv/	/weɪp/

The above data shows how the sounds were mispronounced. Fricative labiodental voiceless /f/ as in /fʌðər/ pronounced with /pʌðər/ and /fenomenə/ with /penomenə/ in initial position, /kəmfortəbəl/ pronounced with /kəmportebəl/ and /səfistikeɪtəd/ with /səpistikeɪtəd/ in the middle, /stʌf/ pronounced with /stʌp/, and /hʌlf/ with /hʌlp/ in the last position. Meanwhile, labiodental fricative voiced /v/ as in /vəri'eɪʃən/ pronounced with /parieɪʃən/ in initial position, /iviniŋ/ with /ipiniŋ/ in the middle, and weɪv/ with /weɪp/ in the last position.

Due to the absence of such sounds in Sasak Language, makes the learners alter the pronunciations of the words to the closest sounds in the language. Bilabial stop voiceless /p/ is the most applicable they could afford for labiodental fricative voiced and voiceless /v/ and /f/. The alternations of the sounds is drawn in the following.

TABLE II. THE ALTERNATIONS OF THE SOUNDS

	Bilabial (Sasak Language)		Labiodental (English)	
	+v	-v	+v	-v
Stop	b	p	b	p
Fricative		v	f	f

This evidence suggests that Sasak learners generalize the sounds by their place of articulations rather than manner and voicing. Keshawarz and Khamis [13], for instance found that Hausa-speaking learners mispronounced /f/ with /p/ since

this sound does not exist in Hausa. Herman [14] also found that Senior High School students of Pematangsiantar in Indonesia faced difficulties in pronouncing labiodental fricative /f/ and /v/.

B. The Problems Encountered by Bimanese learners

There are 4 out of 10 Bimanese students encountered problem in pronouncing alveolar plosive voiced /d/ as in /di:k/ /lædər/, and /ri:d/ alveolar plosive voiceless /t/ as in /tʌsk/, /letər/ and /kæt/. These sound were mispronounced with labiodental plosive voiced /D/, labiodental plosive voiceless /T/. Observe the data below.

TABLE III. MISPRONOUNCED SOUND

No	Words	English Pronunciation	Bima Language Pronunciation
1	Deak	/di:k/	/Di:k/
2	Ladder	/lædər/	/læDər/
3	Read	/ri:d/	/ri:D/
4	Task	/tʌsk/	/Tʌsk/
5	Letter	/letər/	/leTər/
6	Cat	/kæt/	/kæT/

The alternation of alveolar plosive voiceless /t/ and alveolar plosive voiced /d/ are labiodental plosive voiced /D/, labiodental plosive voiceless /T/ which exist in the Bima Language phonology. The following shows the features of the sounds and illustrate how the alternations were made.

TABLE IV. THE ALTERNATIONS SOUND

	Dental (Bima Language)		Alveolar (English)	
	+v	-v	+v	-v
Stop	D	T	d	t

The choice of dental stop voiceless /T/ for alveolar stop voiceless /t/ and dental stop voiced /D/ for alveolar stop voiced /d/ are the most possible alternations which the Bimanese learners could make as they share very close point of articulations.

Meanwhile, 3 students mispronounced half open middle central vowel /ə/ and half open middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ as in /mathər/ and /posibəl/ /ɜ:rn/ and /gɜ:rl/ with open middle front vowel /e/ and close front vowel /i/ respectively as shown in the following.

TABLE V. MISPRONOUNCED HALF OPEN MIDDLE CENTRAL

No	Words	English pronunciation	Bima Language pronunciation
1	Mother	/mʌθər/	/mʌther/
2	Possible	/posibəl/	/posibel/
3	Girl	/gɜ:rl/	/gɜ:rl/
4	Bird	/bɜ:d/	/bir:d/; /ber:d/
5	Earn	/ɜ:rn/	/i:rn/; /e:rn/

The sounds the Bimanese speaking learners could make for open middle central vowel /ə/ and half open middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ are open middle front vowel /e/ and close front vowel /i/. These two sounds were pronounced interchangeably depends on the letter they were used to

represent them. The following shows how the mispronunciations were made.

TABLE VI. MISPRONUNCIATIONS

	Front (Bima Language)	Central (English)
Close	i	
Close-Mid	e	
Half Open-Mid		ə ɜ:

The alternations for half open-middle central vowel /ə/ and half open-middle central-tensed vowel was mispronounced with open middle front vowel /e/. Meanwhile, middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ was mispronounced with both open middle front vowel /e/ and close front vowel /i/. The alternations of the sounds much depends on the letters the sounds are represented. Rahal [15], found that Tunisian English learners encountered mispronunciation of half open-middle central vowel /ə/ or schwa sound.

C. The Problems encountered by Sumbawan learners

What seems interesting is that the evidence found in Sumbawan shares the same mispronunciation sounds in both neighbour languages. There are 2 of 10 Sumbawan students encountered the mispronunciations of labiodental fricative voiceless /f/ and labiodental fricative voiced /v/ with bilabial plosive voiced /p/ as encountered by Sasak students as shown in the following.

TABLE VII. BILABIAL PLOSIVE VOICED

No	Words	English pronunciation	Sumbawan pronunciation
1	Flat	/flaet/	/plaet/
2	Phenomena	/fenomenə/	/penomenə/
3	Wave	/weiv/	/weip/
4	Staff	/stʌf/	/stʌp/
5	Half	/hʌf/	/hʌp/
6	Variation	/varieisən/	/parieisən/
7	Identify	/aidentifai/	/identipai/

Bilabial stop voiceless /p/ is the only applicable sound that Sumbawan speaking learners could afford for both labiodental fricative voiced and labiodental fricative voiceless /v/ and /f/ as the Sasak speaking learners could. The alternations of the sounds is drawn in the following.

TABLE VIII. THE ALTERNATIONS OF THE SOUNDS

	Bilabial (Sumbawan)		Labiodental (English)	
	+v	-v	+v	-v
Stop	b	p		
Fricative			v	f

The other 2 students encountered the problems in pronouncing half open middle central vowel /ə/ with open middle front vowel /e/ and half open middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ with close front vowel /i/ as Bima speaking learners did. The following are English words which Sumbawan speaking learners mispronounced as Bima speaking learners also did.

TABLE IX. SUMBAWAN SPEAKING LEARNERS MISPRONCED

No	Words	English pronunciation	Sumbawan pronunciation
1	Mother	/mʌθər/	/mʌθer/
2	Possible	/pɒsɪbəl/	/pɒsibel/
3	Girl	/gɜ:rl/	/gɜ:rl/
4	Bird	/bɜ:d/	/bir:d/; /ber:d/
5	Earn	/ɜ:rn/	/i:rn/; /e:rn/

Like Bimanese speaking learners, the pronunciation that Sumbawan could make for open middle central vowel /ə/ and half open middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ are open middle front vowel /e/ and close front vowel /i/. The following shows how the mispronunciations were made.

TABLE X. MISPRONUNCIATIONS

	Front (Sumbawan)	Central (English)
Close	i	
Close-Mid	e	
Half Open-Mid		ə ɜ:

Just like the evidence found in Bima speaking learners, the alternations for half open-middle central vowel /ə/ and half open-middle central-tensed vowel was mispronounced with open middle front vowel /e/. Meanwhile, middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ was mispronounced with both open middle front vowel /e/ and close front vowel /i/. This evidence may suggests the relationship and the contact between the two neighbour language to Sumbawan, Sasak Language from the west and Bima Language from the East.

IV. CONCLUSION

All speakers of West Nusa Tenggara Province encountered problems in pronouncing particular English sounds. That the sounds do not exist in the languages is believed to be the causes of the problems. For Sasak speaking learners, fricative labiodental voiceless /f/ and labiodental fricative voiced /v/ were mispronounced with stop bilabial voiceless /p/. Meanwhile, consonants alveolar plosive voiced /d/, alveolar plosive voiceless /t/, and open middle central vowel /ə/ were mispronounced with labiodental plosive voiced /D/, labiodental plosive voiceless /T/, and middle front vowel /e/ respectively by Bimanese speaking learners. Surprisingly, Sumbawan speaking learners shares the same mispronunciation of the sounds found in both neighboring languages. The labiodental fricative voiceless /f/ and labiodental fricative voiced /v/ were mispronounced with bilabial plosive voiced /p/ as Sasak students did, the open middle central vowel /ə/ and half open middle central-tensed vowel /ɜ:/ were mispronounced with middle front vowel /e/ as Bimanese speaking learners did.

From this finding, it is suggested that English sounds should be learned with approaches where phonetic and accoustic sound production is put into practice. The negative tranfer of MT sound production to EFL is still significant/emanent that drawing pedagical implications for English learners to speakers of three local languages in West Nusa Tenggara Province is essential to do in the future.

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