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*ELT in Asia in the Digital Era: Global Citizenship and Identity – Madya et al. (Eds)*  
© 2018 Taylor & Francis Group, London, ISBN 978-0-8153-7900-3

## Learners' native language interference in learning English pronunciation: A case study of Indonesian regional dialects

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**ABSTRACT:** English pronunciation is difficult for most Indonesian learners. Research shows that their native language is the most influential factor in this case. Therefore, this study aimed to find out learners' native language interference in learning English pronunciation by identifying the influence of two regional dialects (Madurese and Javanese). It also aimed to find out whether the English sounds lead to unintelligible pronunciation. The possible language contact related to Indonesian learners' pronunciation will be one of the analyses in this study by involving 12 Indonesian learners aged 14 to 18. They were asked to pronounce selected English words and read a given passage and these data were analyzed descriptively. The findings show that their pronunciation problems vary dealing with consonant and vowel sounds, some of which lead to unintelligibility. The conclusion was that the outcome of language contact that the learners' pronunciation is much interfered by their native language.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Incorrect pronunciation not only often prevents the understanding of a message, but also can adversely affect the listeners' judgment. All too often bad pronunciation might be perceived as a lack of 'competence' since the way we speak immediately conveys something about ourselves to the people around us (Yates 2002). More importantly, Yates & Zielinski (2009) argue that learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. It should be noted, though, that to become competent users of English, learners must focus on its various different aspects such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

However, foreign language learning tends to emphasize the importance of grammar and vocabulary, and this causes other aspects to be neglected (Harmer 2001, Backley 2015). Those being neglected are particularly the practical skills that allow learners to use the language for real communication (e.g. pronunciation). Therefore, it is common to find learners of English who have an extensive knowledge but lack the ability or confidence to use spoken English. Pronunciation is, therefore, is considered as one of complicated aspects for most EFL learners, Indonesian learners in particular (Menard 2010). Indeed, this is true that learning pronunciation does not aim to sound exactly like a native speaker of English, but it does aim to be intelligible, meaning that the pronunciation is clear enough to be understood. To some Indonesian learners some English sounds seem to be difficult to produce that sometimes lead to unintelligibility (Mathew 1997).

In response to pronunciation difficulties, some work has been conducted especially in countries in which people learn English as a foreign language (EFL). For instance, studies conducted to investigate problems with English pronunciation among Thai students and identify key reasons for the problems (Wei & Zhou 2002, Khamkhien 2010). They found that there are English consonants and vowels which appear to be problems for them; e.g. words with transcriptions ended with a consonant; consonant clusters; words with /ei/, usually pronounced as /e/; words with /t/, usually pronounced as /l/; words with /v/, usually pronounced as /f/; and words with /z/, usually pronounced as /s/ or voiceless, intonation and stress problems.

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Moreover, the key reasons of the pronunciation problems are such as words directly borrowed from English into the Thai language are pronounced in Thai ways, the Romanization of the Thai language influences English pronunciation, and Thai intonations are applied into English pronunciations. This is to say that the native language is the most influential factor.

Moreover, studies on Indonesian learners' pronunciation have also been conducted. A study which was conducted towards English department students of Semarang State University, for instance, found out that most of them found it difficult to pronounce words with ED ending such as those found in regular past forms (Dewi 2009). In addition, pronunciation errors made by Indonesian learners in the province of Aceh, northern Sumatra, are not only in ED ending words, but any sounds which are largely limited to final stops and sibilants, and initial and final affricates and interdental (Mathew 1997).

All in all, much has been written about EFL learners' pronunciation, indeed. However, most of the literature in the field is concerned with identifying pronunciation errors of learners in general and not many writers focus on identifying learners' native languages interference (i.e. by identifying the influence of different regional dialects) on their English pronunciation. More importantly, there have never been any studies considering the possible language contact related to Indonesian learners' pronunciation, which will be one of the analyses in this study.

Therefore, this study aims to find out native language interference in learning English pronunciation by identifying the influence of two different regional dialects of the learners. This is because native language is the most influential factor on one's pronunciation (Kenworthy 1987). More importantly, this study seeks to find out whether several English sounds interfered by the learners' native language leads to unintelligible pronunciation. Finally, to conclude the learners' pronunciation ability this study analyzes the possible influence of language contact. The result of the study would facilitate teachers to improve learners' pronunciation ability by recognizing the learners' native language sounds interference and emphasizing on the difficult sounds learners might encounter.

## 2 METHOD

This study used a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design is defined as documenting or portraying the everyday experience of individuals by observing or interviewing them (Fraenkel & Wallen 2006). It seeks to describe and analyze the data collected from the learners' pronouncing a list of English words and reading a given passage. It involved twelve (12) Indonesian learners who belong to Curahdami English Community (CEC). CEC is a study club of English learners from various levels of education in a village named Curahdami in Jember, East Java. The twelve learners were chosen randomly considering the length of learning English and having no difficulty recognizing English alphabets. They come from two different native languages and study in either public or private Junior and Senior High Schools. They were male and female of either Madurese or Javanese (i.e. two of many regional dialects in Indonesia). They are around fourteen (14) to eighteen (18) years old when involved in this study.

The data were collected from the above Indonesian EFL learners. They were asked to pronounce English words one by one. After all participants pronouncing the list of English words provided, they were assigned to read a passage. Before they read the passage, a video of the story on the passage was played once. This is to help them familiar with the words in the passage. The learners' pronouncing words and reading the passage were recorded. The researcher was the one assessing the learners' pronunciation. It is in fact proposed that in a qualitative research, the researcher was as a key instrument collecting the data (Krippendorf 1987). The assessment was adapted from Brown's pronunciation assessment (Brown 2004).

## 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed into three main points in relation to the research questions, namely *English Sounds Produced by Madurese and Javanese learners, Unintelligible Pronunciation, and Language Contact*.

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### 3.1 English sounds produced by Madurese and Javanese learners

As mentioned above, the twelve Indonesian learners were assigned to pronounce a list of English words and read an English passage. The twelve Madurese and Javanese learners erroneously pronounce several vowel sounds of both Monophthongs and diphthongs. The most Monophthongs erroneously pronounced were the sounds /æ/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/ and /u/. The sound /æ/ in 'hat' was pronounced /e/ as in 'left', /ɑ:/ as in 'far' was pronounced /ʌ/ as in 'run', /ɔ:/ as in 'call' was pronounced similarly as /ɒ/ in 'dog', and /u:/ as in 'food' was like /ʊ/ in 'book'. Meanwhile, the diphthongs were /eə/ and /ʊə/. Learners whose native language is Madurese pronounced the sounds /eə/ as /e/ and /ʊə/ as /u:/, while Javanese pronounce them as /ei/ and /ui/. Thus, words like 'stairs' are pronounced with the vowel sound /e/ as in /pen/ by Madurese and pronounced /ei/ as in 'brain' by Javanese.

In addition, there are some other interesting differences between Madurese and Javanese learners. Learners whose native language is Madurese pronounce monophthong sounds /ɪ/ as in 'hit' and /i/ as in 'feel'. Meanwhile, those whose native language is Javanese pronounced it correctly. Moreover, the diphthong vowel sounds erroneously pronounced by Madurese was /eɪ/ which was pronounced as monophthongs/e/. Thus, words like 'pain' and 'pen' are similarly pronounced with the sound /e/. The Javanese learners, however, erroneously pronounced diphthong /ɪə/ as in 'beer' as /i:/. Thus, the vowel sound /eɪ/ sound in words like 'beer' and 'beat' are pronounced similarly by Javanese. For the Madurese, the diphthong /ɪə/ was pronounced correctly, since they find many Madurese words with the vowel /ɪə/.

Dealing with consonants, the Madurese and Javanese learners have mostly the same pronunciation errors. This can be seen as the errors of Indonesian learners in general, since Indonesian is their official language. Most of the learners found consonant sounds /θ/ and /ð/ difficult. Instead of pronouncing the consonant /θ/ as in 'thing' and /ð/ as in 'that', they pronounce /θ/ as /t/ and /ð/ as /d/. Moreover, other consonants they pronounced erroneously were the final /b/, final /d/ (by mostly Madurese), final /g/, /v/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. The final /b/ was erroneously pronounced as /p/, final /g/ as /k/, /v/ as /f/ and both /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ as /s/. For the Madurese and few Javanese, final /d/ was pronounced quite similarly as /t/.

### 3.2 Unintelligible pronunciation

As explained previously, the goal of learning pronunciation is not to sound like a native speaker, though it is good to be. Instead, learning pronunciation should aim to sound intelligible. Intelligible pronunciation is 'listener-friendly' pronunciation-one which listeners can understand without effort and which can be used to make meaningful conversation possible (Backley 2015). This is to say that when a listener (e.g. native or another speakers) hardly understands one's pronunciation, his/her pronunciation is unintelligible.

With regard to Madurese and Javanese learners' pronunciation of English, the errors found as a result of the two dialects' interference need to be analyzed in terms of the intelligibility. As the study had found that both Madurese and Javanese pronounced erroneously some vowels and consonants, the way to analyze the intelligibility was by identifying the errors as to whether their pronunciation errors were still 'understood' or 'unintelligible' already. The analysis was based on the result of the learners' pronouncing a list of words and reading a passage.

Regarding vowels, the researcher found some sounds pronounced by the learners unintelligibly. This was identified from a sentence (taken from the passage) like *the King wanted everyone to feel his pain*. Most of the learners pronounced the vowel sound in the word 'pain' as /e/ that makes it sound like 'pen'. Another example was in the sentence *Immediately, the King's servant put the hat on his head*. This is interesting since the word 'hat' and 'head' are pronounced exactly the same by either Madurese or Javanese. A more interesting finding was the word 'hate' appearing in the list and in some sentences of the passage, which was pronounced by most Madurese similarly as 'had', 'head' and even 'hat'. In some contexts, such pronunciation errors will lead to unintelligibility.

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Regarding consonants, moreover, several sounds were also found intelligibly pronounced by the learners. They were mostly in the final consonant sounds such as the final /b/ and /p/ in the words 'cab' and 'cap'. However, the cases of unintelligibility in the vowels are more commonly found.

All in all, unintelligibility in the learners' pronunciation was found in some cases. Comparing to the intelligibility of the other sounds, however, the unintelligibility was very few encountered. In other words, their errors do not often lead to unintelligibility.

### 3.3 Language contact

One of the outcomes of language contact can be seen through phonology (sound systems) (Thomason, 2001). Phonology (sound system) is the one this study will analyze dealing with the learners' pronunciation. Phonological interference or transfer would appear likely that farther along in the contact history, in the process of acquiring bilingual competence, the version of the second language spoken by such people would still contain many phonological features derivable from their native language, i.e. substratum phonological influence (Sankoff 2001). Therefore, the case of language contact influence on the learners' pronunciations can be seen from several sounds which they pronounce erroneously as the interference from their native language.

## 4 CONCLUSION

To date, this study is the first to investigate Indonesian learners' native language interference by identifying two different regional dialects, namely Madurese and Javanese. Problems of pronunciation here were more sounds, than the unintelligible ones, which are still considered intelligible despite the two different dialects interference on the pronunciation. Finally, with regard to the result of the study, it concludes that it is the outcome of language contact that the learners' pronunciation is much interfered by their native language.

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