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ENGLISH PHONETIC SYMBOLS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PRONUNCIATION SKILLS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS

Nur Syamsiah ✉
English Education Study Program
UIN Raden Intan Lampung
Indonesia

Pia Alpiana
English Education Study Program
UIN Raden Intan Lampung
Indonesia

David Witanto
English Education Study Program
UIN Raden Intan Lampung
Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between students' understanding of English Phonetic Symbols and their pronunciation skills, focusing on key indicators such as intonation, fluency, and phonetic symbol comprehension. The research employs a quantitative descriptive method, utilizing a sample of 40 first-semester students from the English Education program at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. Data were collected through a pronunciation test, a phonetic symbol test, a questionnaire, and performance recordings analyzed for accuracy and fluency. The results reveal a positive correlation between phonetic symbol comprehension and pronunciation performance. Students with a better understanding of phonetic symbols, such as articulation, voicing, and assimilation, demonstrated stronger pronunciation skills, including improved accuracy, fluency, and intonation. phonetic symbols exhibited challenges in articulation and intonation, leading to reduced pronunciation accuracy. The findings suggest that phonetic symbol understanding plays a crucial role in enhancing students' pronunciation skills, highlighting the importance of formal phonetic instruction. Based on these results, the study recommends integrating comprehensive phonetic training into the early stages of language education to help students improve their overall pronunciation abilities.

Keywords: English Phonetic Symbols; Pronunciation Skills; Intonation; Fluency

Corresponding author: nursyamsiah@radenintan.ac.id

Introduction

The ability to speak English accurately and effectively is essential for students in English Education programs. One of the fundamental aspects of speaking skills is pronunciation, which significantly impacts the clarity and effectiveness of oral communication. However, many students, particularly those in their first semester, face challenges in mastering pronunciation. These challenges include hesitation while speaking, the influence of their first language, and a lack of practical experience with English pronunciation. Additionally, the impacts of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these issues. This situation underscores the importance of understanding English Phonetic Symbols as a tool for improving students' pronunciation skills.

According to Roach (2009), English Phonetic Symbols, as represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), are widely used to describe speech sounds scientifically. These symbols help learners understand how to produce English sounds, covering aspects such as place of articulation (where sounds are formed), manner of articulation (how sounds are produced), and voicing (vocal cord vibration). For example, bilabial sounds like /p/ and /b/ are produced with both lips, while alveolar sounds like /t/ and /d/ are created by placing the tongue against the upper gum ridge. By learning these phonetic symbols, students can systematically understand how to pronounce words accurately.

Intonation, alongside pronunciation, can be a challenge for many first-semester students. Often, they depend on the intonation patterns of their native language and do not fully grasp the concepts of stress, rhythm, and pitch in English. Underhill (2005) emphasizes that effective intonation requires proper stress placement, sentence rhythm, and appropriate rising and falling pitch patterns. A lack of understanding in these areas can result in speech that sounds unnatural and mechanical. By mastering English phonetic symbols, students can gain a better understanding of intonation, enabling them to speak more naturally and adhere to the standards of spoken English.

Fluency, or the ability to speak smoothly and effortlessly, is another common issue for first-semester students. Limited vocabulary knowledge and an inadequate understanding of phonetic symbols often hinder their speaking fluency. Collins and Mees (2013) argue that phonetic symbols provide an accurate guide for word pronunciation, including stress placement and sound articulation. By learning these symbols, students can gradually enhance their speaking fluency and overcome hesitation or mispronunciation. This systematic approach helps students gain confidence and speak more naturally in English.

The objective of this research is to analyze how understanding English Phonetic Symbols influences the pronunciation skills of first-semester students in the English Education program. The study focuses on students' mastery of phonetic symbols, including place of articulation, manner of articulation, voicing, and their application in pronouncing English words. Additionally, the research will explore how understanding phonetic symbols impacts students' intonation and fluency in speaking English. Through this study, it is expected that students will develop more accurate and natural pronunciation.

Overall, this research emphasizes the significance of understanding English Phonetic Symbols to improve pronunciation, intonation, and fluency among first-semester students. Phonetic symbols not only aid students in understanding how to produce English sounds but also help build their confidence in oral communication. By mastering these symbols, students are anticipated to overcome pronunciation challenges and achieve better speaking skills that align with international English pronunciation standards.

Methods

The research employs a quantitative descriptive method (Moleong, 2009) to analyze the relationship between students' understanding of English Phonetic Symbols and their pronunciation skills, focusing on first-semester English Education students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung who were purposively selected due to their beginner-level status, limited exposure to

formal phonetic instruction. A sample size of 40 students will be analyzed using multiple instruments: a pronunciation test to evaluate accuracy, intonation, stress, and fluency through recorded readings, a phonetic symbol test to measure understanding of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and phonetic concepts like articulation and assimilation, and a questionnaire to explore students' challenges and perceptions regarding pronunciation and phonetics. To ensure precise evaluation, a scoring rubric will assess key pronunciation criteria, including accuracy, stress placement, intonation, and overall fluency, providing a comprehensive analysis of how phonetic symbol comprehension influences students' ability to pronounce English words accurately and naturally.

Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between students' understanding of English Phonetic Symbols and their pronunciation skills, focusing on the key indicators of pronunciation accuracy, intonation, fluency, and phonetic symbol comprehension. The data was collected through tests and recordings of 40 students' performance, and the results are summarized as follows:

1. Pronunciation Skills

The pronunciation scores ranged from 16 to 23 out of 30, indicating moderate to high variability in student performance: a) Majority Performance: Most students scored between 18 and 22, suggesting moderate pronunciation skills overall; b) High Performers: Students like A7 (23) excelled, demonstrating better pronunciation accuracy and clarity; and Low Performers: Students such as A29 (16) and A34 (16) scored on the lower end, reflecting difficulties in articulating sounds and achieving accurate pronunciation.

The findings indicate that while many students achieved moderate scores, the variation suggests differences in exposure to pronunciation practice, phonetic training, and language learning strategies.

2. Intonation

Intonation scores ranged between 10 and 16 out of 20, with most students achieving scores between 12 and 15: a) Strengths: Students like A21 (16) and A7 (16) demonstrated a strong understanding of intonation patterns, including appropriate stress and pitch variation; and Challenges: On the lower end, students such as A29 (10) and A34 (10) struggled to apply correct intonation, suggesting difficulties in recognizing and replicating natural speech rhythm.

These results highlight that intonation remains a challenge for some students, likely due to mother tongue interference and a lack of exposure to native-like spoken English patterns.

3. Fluency

Fluency scores showed variation, ranging between 10 and 17 out of 20: a) High Performers: Students like A4 (17), A28 (16), and A35 (16) exhibited smooth and continuous speech delivery with minimal hesitation; and b) Low Performers: Students such as A29 (10), A34 (10), and A38 (10) demonstrated hesitations, pauses, and a lack of flow, indicating difficulties in speech rhythm and confidence.

The findings suggest that fluency is closely linked to confidence, practice opportunities, and overall comprehension of the language.

4. Phonetic Symbol Understanding

The phonetic symbol scores ranged between 10 and 16 out of 20, showing notable variation across participants: a) High Performers: Students like A17 (16), A28 (16), and A31 (16) demonstrated strong understanding of phonetic symbols, including articulation, voicing, and

assimilation; and b) Low Performers: Students such as A23 (10), A34 (10), and A38 (10) exhibited limited familiarity with phonetic transcription and its application.

These results emphasize the importance of phonetic symbol comprehension as a foundation for improving pronunciation accuracy and other speech indicators. Here distribution of scores across pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and phonetic symbols, as well as a comparison between the indicators.

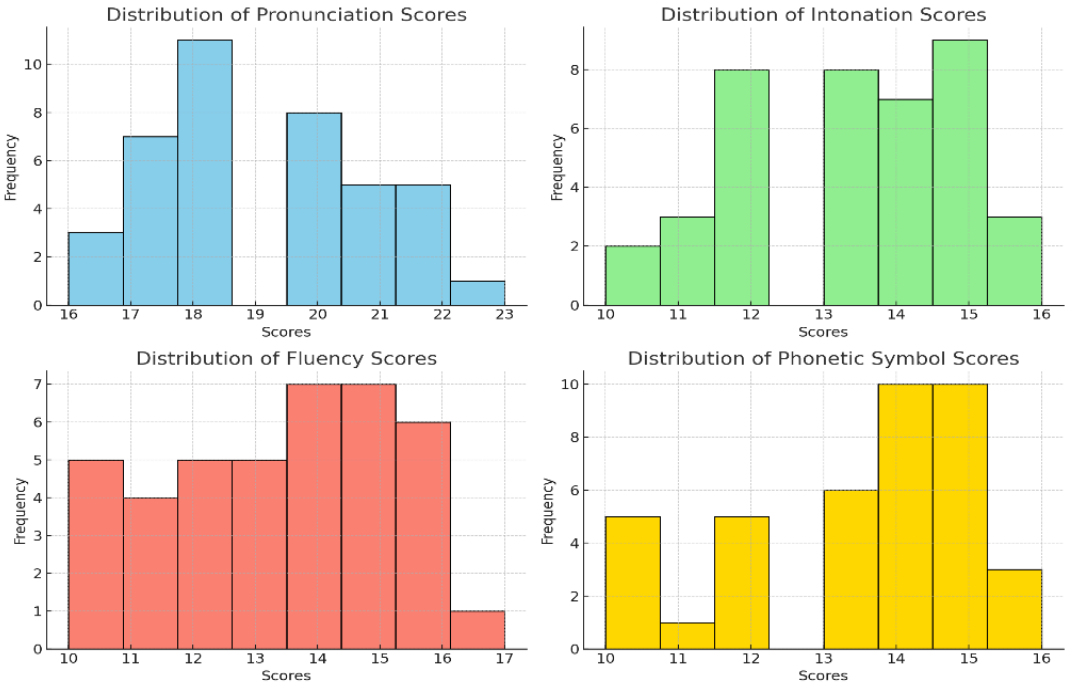

Figure 1 Statistical Analysis of Pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and phonetic Symbol

The distribution of scores reveals patterns across the four key indicators: 1) Pronunciation: Scores are distributed between 17 and 23, with the majority clustered between 18 and 20. High scores (22–23) are less frequent but significant; 2) Intonation: Scores cluster between 12 and 15, with very few students scoring at the extremes (10 or 16). The most frequent scores are 13–14; 3) Fluency: Scores range from 10 to 16, with the majority concentrated around 13–15. Lower scores (10–11) occur less frequently; and Phonetic Symbols: Scores are concentrated between 13 and 15, while lower scores (10–11) are present but less common.

Based on overall performance, students can be categorized into three levels: 1) High Performance: Students scoring consistently high across indicators (Pronunciation > 20, Intonation > 14, Fluency > 14, Phonetic Symbols > 14). Examples: A7, A28, A31, A17. These students demonstrated strong pronunciation skills, fluent speech delivery, and a clear understanding of phonetic symbols; 2) Moderate Performance: Students with fluctuating scores, showing strengths in some areas but weaknesses in others (Pronunciation -18–20, other indicators -12–14). Examples: A9, A13, A21, A22. These students performed moderately but required further support, particularly in intonation and fluency.; 3) Low Performance: Students scoring consistently low, particularly in fluency and phonetic symbol understanding (scores < 12–13). Examples: A29, A34, A37, A38. These students exhibited significant challenges, indicating the need for targeted intervention in foundational areas.

The data shows a positive correlation between phonetic symbol understanding and pronunciation performance. A notable trend observed in the data is the positive correlation between phonetic symbol understanding and pronunciation performance. Students who achieved high scores in phonetic symbol comprehension, such as A17, A28, and A31, also performed well in pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Their ability to apply phonetic knowledge likely enhanced their accuracy and confidence in pronunciation. Conversely, students with lower phonetic symbol scores, such as A29, A34, and A38, demonstrated weaker

performance across all indicators, underscoring the importance of phonemic awareness as a foundation for effective pronunciation and speech delivery.

This correlation aligns with previous studies (Ladefoged, 2006; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010), which emphasize that phonetic training improves students' pronunciation accuracy and fluency by providing them with a systematic understanding of sound production. So, this finding underscores the need for integrating phonetic training into English language instruction, focusing on targeted support for students struggling with pronunciation accuracy, intonation patterns, and fluency development.

Conclusion

This study reveals a positive relationship between students' understanding of English phonetic symbols and their pronunciation skills, particularly in intonation, fluency, and accuracy. Students with strong phonetic symbol comprehension tend to achieve higher pronunciation scores, while those with limited understanding face difficulties in achieving accurate and natural pronunciation. Factors such as limited pronunciation practice, the impact of learning disruptions during their senior high school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and mother tongue interference contributed to these variations in performance. Future researchers are encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of these findings. Additionally, studies can focus on developing innovative teaching methods that integrate phonetic symbol instruction with pronunciation practice using technology-based approaches.

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