UNLOCKING THE POWER OF TOPHONETICS: INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ON PRONUNCIATION ENHANCEMENT THROUGH A PHENOMENOLOGICAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research conducted at one of the public universities in Banten was to investigate the perception of second-semester students in the English Department regarding the features of the Tophonetics application in improving their pronunciation of fricatives. Employing a phenomenological qualitative research design, the researchers selected five participants through purposive sampling, focusing on students who had experience using Tophonetics and were willing to participate. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted via online Zoom meetings, utilizing three main open-ended questions to delve deeper into participants' experiences. The obtained data was analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Kenn technique, as described by Moustakas (1994). The analysis revealed four themes, including positive perception, negative perception, the features of Tophonetics, and the obstacles of using Tophonetics. The findings suggest that students in the English Department perceive Tophonetics positively in terms of improving their pronunciation of fricative sounds, highlighting the potential benefits of integrating this application into language teaching and learning practices.

Keywords: Perception, Pronunciation, Tophonetics.
1. Introduction

In the realm of language learning, pronunciation stands as a pivotal aspect, shaping the way words are spoken and understood in communication. According to Yates and Zielinski (2009), pronunciation represents how people produce the sounds that they use to construct a meaning when they speak. In communication, people might construct another meaning which happens when they mispronounce the words. The mispronunciation occurs when there is a change in sound. For example, when people say a word “she” by pronouncing it with /si:/, which is “sea” instead of /ʃi:/, it will construct another meaning. When the mispronunciation happens, it could lead to a misunderstanding.

Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, like many others, encounter challenges in mastering English pronunciation, leading to potential misunderstandings and communication breakdowns (Sidik, et al., 2021; Meliyani, et al., 2022). Among Indonesian college students, pronunciation challenges are evident when speaking English. Tambunsaribu and Simatupang (2021) reported that many Indonesian college students encounter difficulties in correctly pronouncing English words. Numerous studies have explored these challenges, revealing issues with English fricatives (/ʃ/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /h/) (Sumiranti, 2017), as well as the dental fricatives /ʃ/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /v/, and /f/ (Purba, 2018). Situmeang and Lubis (2020) also identified difficulties with the sounds /ð/ in the first word position and /θ/ in the beginning word position. It is supported by Hamidiyah and Arief (2015) who state that the sound /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ə/, /v/ were considered as being difficult to pronounce by Indonesian EFL learners.

To substantiate the previously mentioned issue and provide supporting evidence, the researchers conducted a preliminary study by administering questionnaires to 117 second-semester students majoring in English at a public university in Banten. The findings revealed that these students faced significant challenges in pronouncing specific
sounds, including /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʧ/, and /ʤ/. In summary, both the previous studies and the preliminary research indicate that students continue to encounter difficulties in pronunciation, particularly concerning fricatives.

In addition, to address these pronunciation difficulties, Indonesian students have been introduced to the "Tophonetics" application, recommended by their lecturers. Tophonetics has shown promise in improving pronunciation skills among learners (Yusuf, 2019), and studies have demonstrated its positive impact on English pronunciation for second-semester English Education students (Ferdina and Kalisa, 2022).

Building on these insights, this research aims to explore students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the Tophonetics application in enhancing their pronunciation, particularly in segmental features. Employing a phenomenological research design, this study delves into the lived experiences and perspectives of Indonesian EFL learners using Tophonetics for pronunciation improvement.

Through this investigation, we seek to contribute to the body of knowledge on language learning and pronunciation instruction by shedding light on the benefits and challenges of using Tophonetics in the context of Indonesian EFL learners. Our findings may inform language educators on how best to integrate this application into language learning curricula, providing practical insights for enhancing pronunciation skills among learners.

The research is conducted at the English Department of a public university in Banten, and we anticipate that the outcomes will help guide future efforts to improve English pronunciation instruction for Indonesian EFL learners.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Perception

Perception is the process of organizing, recognizing, and making sense of information from the senses in order to convey and understand the world. As stated by Robbins (2003), perception is described as the process
by which people organize and understand their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their surroundings. In addition, Koentjaningrat (2010) claimed that perception is the way the human brain works out and shows up as a view of an event. In this process, many things are involved, including feelings, motivation, education, experience, and others. Then, the process moves on to the part where the brain figures out what something means. Through the help of perception, individuals can figure out what different people need, since a person's needs affect how they see the world.

2.2 Tophonetics

The application that is called Tophonetics is a tool that shows the phonetic transcriptions of a given English word, phrase, or sentence. As Yusuf (2019) stated that the application Tophonetics is an application to find the English phonetic transcriptions. Tophonetics can be found on the internet browser or the play store on a smartphone, and it is suitable for anyone learning English and wishing to improve their pronunciations (Yusuf, 2019). Tophonetics application is an online converter of English text to International Phonetic Alphabet (Musonic, 2013). Tophonetics can be described as an application that is used to transcribe English words into the International Phonetic Alphabet.

2.3 Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a sub-skill which allows a person to speak the word correctly according to its spelling. As Hornby (1995) (quoted by Perwira 2011) stated that pronunciation is described as “the way language or word is spoken”. Another definition of pronunciation is by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994). They stated that the act of making a meaningful sound, which can be thought of in two ways: as the making and receiving of speech sounds, and as the making and receiving of words. Other experts, Yates and Zielinski (2009) also stated pronunciation, which represents how people produce the sounds that they use to construct meaning when they speak. Furthermore, pronunciation is described as the ability to pronounce consonants, vowels, and stress in a
native-like manner within the context of a phrase and with fluency as the rhythm, phrasing, and timing seen in producing, reading, and repeating sentences (Murcia, 2010: 316). All of these definitions lead to the conclusion that pronunciation is the ability of the sound of language to carry meanings from the speaker to others, which should be paid attention to.

3. Methodology

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research approach, which is frequently employed in social science studies to understand and describe individuals' life experiences (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). According to Christensen et al. (2017), descriptive phenomenology allows researchers to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences. Similarly, Creswell (2014) emphasizes that phenomenological research focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences. This study aligns with the characteristics of phenomenological research, as it aimed to explore learners' perceptions of using Tophonetics to improve their pronunciation in fricatives, gathering detailed information about their experiences.

Purpose sampling was employed to select the research subjects for this study. According to Arikunto (2010), purposive sampling involves selecting samples based on specific research requirements rather than random selection based on level or region. Additionally, as stated by Creswell (2013), in a phenomenological study where the sample consists of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, it is essential to obtain permission from the participants to investigate them. For this research, the researcher chose five second-semester English Department students from a public university in the Banten province who have prior experience using Tophonetics and willingly agreed to participate in the study, adhering to the recommended sample size for phenomenological research as proposed by Dukes (1984) in Creswell (2013).

The researchers employed semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore learners' perceptions of using Tophonetics among those who have
prior experience with the application. The interviews were conducted using an interview protocol to ensure that the discussions followed a well-defined and focused path.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

The result of this research showed that there are four themes. They are positive perception, negative perception, features of Tophonetics, and obstacles while they were using Tophonetics.

Positive perceptions consisted of very effective and effective sub themes. The results are obtained from three informants. They conveyed that Tophonetics is very effective and effective in improving their pronunciation in segmental features.

Informant 1:
“…I can say that Tophonetics is very effective for learning IPA symbols and improving my pronunciation as well, and I will highly recommend junior students to use it if they would like to learn about IPA symbols because to the ease and practicality of Tophonetics besides being easy to use it is also practical.”

Informant 2:
“…To me, Tophonetics is effective in improving my pronunciation in consonant sounds. Of course, it tells us about how the user pronounces English words correctly and allows the user to write transcription with IPA symbols as well. Furthermore, when we read the phonetics symbol, we are more able to pronounce the words correctly and the audio is quite clear.”

Informant 3:
“…Tophonetics is effective for improving my pronunciation especially in vowel sounds, but it is only for the people who are able to read IPA symbols, but it is effective for improving my pronunciation. It is just getting used to it…”

Negative perception consisted of less effective and not effective sub themes. The results are obtained from two informants, who conveyed that Tophonetics is less effective and not effective in improving their pronunciation, especially in segmental features.

Informant 4:
“…it is less effective to improve my pronunciation, for me and some people who still have difficulty differentiating some English sounds.”

Informant 5:
“… Not effective”
“...for me, it is not effective in improving pronunciation except for people who are able to pronounce and differentiate all English sounds.”

Besides the themes of positive and negative perception, there are the features of Tophonetics and the obstacles in using Tophonetics.

By interviewing five participants, the researchers found the sub themes, which are easiness, audio feature, and accent feature.

**Easiness**

**Informant 1:**
“...its simplicity in getting IPA symbols transcription and audio features...”  
“...instantly assisted in doing assignments...”

**Informant 3:**
“...it could transcribe English words and even text all at once...”

**Informant 4:**
“...It was super easy to get phonetics transcription by typing the text and copying them to the book...”

**Informant 5:**
“...It is easy to use just do typing the text we want to find out...”  
“...It is accessible to everyone...”

**Audio feature**

**Informant 1:**
“...Could learn how to pronounce words by using the audio feature”

**Informant 2:**
“...is the audio feature that Tophonetics provides. I used a web platform which has a voice feature.”  
“...Gaining new knowledge about British and American accents”

**Informant 5:**
“... It provides the audio of each phonetic sound”

**Accent feature**

**Informant 4:**
“...I was getting used to knowing the phonetics symbols of the British accent as well as the American accent that is provided by Tophonetics.”

The final theme that was obtained by the researchers is the obstacles while the informants were using Tophonetics. Then, the researchers also found the sub themes. They are internal obstacles and external obstacles. The internal obstacles are the obstacles which came from the Tophonetics itself, while the external obstacles came from the users.

**Internal obstacles**

**Informant 1:**
“...It happened when I was trying to find a phonetics transcription of some words, but I accidentally mistyped it.”
“...It was continuously loading so I could not find the transcription”
“...I had difficulty in getting some words, such as slang words, expressions…”

Informant 3:
“... Because I used the application platform, I had difficulties in having the audio of the phonetics transcription. That feature is only available on the website platform.”
“...could not found any certain words, such as some unpopular names”
“...the application does not provide the feature side-by-side or line-by-line.”

Informant 4:
“...could not find any phonetics transcription of certain words.”

External obstacles
Informant 4:
“...There are still any difficult sounds I have, such as the sound /ʒ/.”

Informant 5:
“...The challenges I got when using Tophonetics were I still struggling to distinguish the sounds”
“...I am still struggling to pronounce them.”

All of the essential statements which obtained from the informants will be analyzed deeper by the researchers using the techniques of data analysis by Stevick-Colsizzi-Kenn.

4.2 Discussions
At this public university, first-semester English Department students have utilized Tophonetics, a tool designed to assist users in transcribing English words, phrases, or sentences into the International Phonetic Alphabet. This tool was recommended by their pronunciation lecturer to support their assignments in transcribing English texts into the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Various studies have demonstrated the positive impact of Tophonetics on pronunciation skills. Yusuf (2019) reported that students experienced improvement in their pronunciation by using the application. Participants in his study praised Tophonetics for enhancing their fluency and familiarity with International Phonetic Alphabet symbols. Additionally, Tophonetics proved effective in enhancing students’ English pronunciation skills, as confirmed by Ferdina and Kalisa's (2022) study, which highlighted its efficacy in displaying International Phonetic Alphabet symbols for English words and improving phonetic transcription reading abilities.

During interviews with the informants, the researchers identified
four themes representing students' perceptions: very effective, effective, less effective, and not effective. The theme of "very effective" emerged from the first informant, who found Tophonetics highly effective in improving his pronunciation, especially in segmental features. The application was particularly beneficial for him, as he was not familiar with International Phonetic Alphabet symbols, and using Tophonetics accelerated his understanding and recall of these symbols, surpassing the traditional lecture-based instruction. This aligns with the findings of Ferdina and Kalisa (2022), who demonstrated Tophonetics' superiority in aiding students with English pronunciation.

The second informant expressed the theme of "effective," acknowledging Tophonetics' effectiveness in improving pronunciation, but noted that it was most beneficial for those already familiar with phonetic symbols.

On the other hand, two other perceptions emerged, labeled as "less effective" and "not effective." The fourth informant stated that Tophonetics was "less effective" for her in improving pronunciation in segmental features, as she still struggled with certain sounds even after using the tool. However, Tophonetics was still helpful for her in completing phonetic transcriptions for assignments. The last informant expressed that Tophonetics was "not effective" in improving her pronunciation, particularly when it came to specific sounds like /θ/ and /ð/. Despite using Tophonetics, she continued to encounter difficulties with these sounds.

5. Conclusion

Effective pronunciation is essential for successful communication in the English language. In this study, we examined the perception of second-semester English Department students at a public university in Banten regarding the effectiveness of the Tophonetics application in improving their pronunciation, particularly in segmental features.

Based on the data gathered and analyzed, four significant themes emerged from the students' responses.
The first theme was positive perception, which encompassed two sub-themes: 'very effective' and 'effective.' Students with positive perceptions found Tophonetics beneficial in enhancing their pronunciation skills. They reported that the application's features contributed to their improvement in segmental features.

Conversely, negative perception emerged as the second theme. Some students expressed that Tophonetics had no significant effect on their pronunciation skills. This perception may be attributed to certain obstacles encountered while using the application.

The third theme focused on the features of Tophonetics, which included options for easiness, audio, and accents. Students appreciated these features as they aided in their pronunciation improvement.

The fourth theme delved into the obstacles of using Tophonetics. These obstacles were categorized into two groups: internal and external obstacles. Internal obstacles pertained to issues within the Tophonetics application itself, such as the inability to detect mistyped words, lack of audio feature, and limited availability of certain words. External obstacles arose from the users' difficulties in pronouncing and distinguishing specific English sounds, even after utilizing Tophonetics.

Understanding these themes provides valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers to address students' pronunciation challenges effectively. By considering the positive and negative perceptions, the application's features, and the encountered obstacles, targeted improvements can be made to enhance English pronunciation instruction for Indonesian EFL learners. In this regard, the next study can analyze the effectiveness of other pronunciation tools to improve learners’ speaking skills.
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