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Students' Perception and Challenges towards the Use of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

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Abstract— Accurate pronunciation is essential in English communication to ensure the clear delivery of the intended message. One approach to helping students understand English pronunciation is through the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This study aims to explore students' perceptions and the challenges they encounter when using IPA. A qualitative method with a descriptive approach was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with junior high school students who had been introduced to IPA. Preliminary findings indicate that most students found IPA helpful in recognizing correct pronunciation. However, they also faced difficulties, particularly in memorizing phonetic symbols and applying them in everyday conversation. These findings provide meaningful insights into how IPA can be more effectively integrated into language learning, as well as the importance of a more contextual and engaging approach to make students feel more involved and motivated

Keywords— International Phonetic Alphabet, Pronunciation, Students' Perception, Students' Challenges

abstrak— Pelafalan yang tepat merupakan hal yang penting dalam komunikasi berbahasa Inggris agar makna pesan tersampaikan dengan jelas. Salah satu upaya untuk membantu siswa memahami pelafalan Bahasa Inggris adalah melalui penggunaan *International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi siswa serta tantangan yang mereka alami dalam menggunakan *IPA*. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui angket dan wawancara mendalam kepada siswa sekolah menengah pertama yang telah diperkenalkan dengan *IPA*. Hasil awal menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar siswa merasa *IPA* cukup membantu mereka dalam mengenali pelafalan yang benar. Namun, mereka juga menghadapi kendala, terutama dalam menghafal simbol fonetik dan menerapkannya dalam percakapan sehari-hari. Temuan ini memberikan gambaran yang bermakna mengenai bagaimana *IPA* dapat diintegrasikan secara lebih efektif dalam pembelajaran, serta pentingnya pendekatan yang lebih kontekstual dan menyenangkan agar siswa merasa lebih terlibat dan termotivasi.

Kata kunci— International Phonetic Alphabet, Pelafalan, Persepsi Siswa, Tantangan Pembelajaran

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation plays a vital role in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) communication, as it enables clear interaction and effective comprehension despite potential language barriers. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), mispronunciations can hinder communication, decrease intelligibility, and lower learners' confidence. Murphy (2014) further argues that although pronunciation is a fundamental component of language learning, it is frequently neglected in favor of other skills such as grammar and vocabulary.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a valuable tool for addressing pronunciation challenges. By providing a standardized system for representing speech sounds, the IPA assists learners in accurately producing unfamiliar phonemes (Gilakjani, 2016). Research has shown that using the IPA can enhance learners' phonological awareness and lead to improved pronunciation performance (Asrul & Husda, 2022). However, incorporating the IPA into EFL instruction is not without challenges. Many students find the IPA symbols intimidating, especially if they lack prior exposure to phonetics. Furthermore, the disconnect between IPA symbols and the phonological patterns of students' native languages often complicates the learning process (Asrul & Husda, 2022). In the Indonesian context, for instance, learners frequently struggle with sounds absent from their mother tongue, which makes the application of IPA more difficult.

Additionally, many students lack foundational phonetic knowledge, causing the IPA to appear overly technical or irrelevant. This issue is compounded by the fact that many EFL teachers are not adequately trained in phonetics and therefore may not be equipped to deliver effective pronunciation instruction (Levis, 2020). Time constraints within the curriculum also limit the integration of pronunciation training, as grammar and vocabulary are often prioritized due to their easier measurability. Moreover, learners in EFL environments often value fluency over phonetic accuracy, which can reduce their motivation to engage with the IPA (Murphy, 2014).

This study seeks to address a significant gap in both the practical and theoretical dimensions of IPA instruction. While existing research has primarily focused on the implementation of the IPA in language teaching, few studies have delved into the deeper, more nuanced challenges learners face, particularly in understanding and mapping IPA symbols to actual sounds. This research aims to explore both the technical and motivational barriers students encounter when learning the IPA and to provide insights into effective strategies for its integration into current EFL curricula.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design to explore students' perceptions of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and the challenges they encounter in using it to improve their English pronunciation. The research was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 4 Balen, Bojonegoro, involving 32 students. Both the research site and participants were selected purposively due to their relevance to the objectives of the study.

Data were collected through structured interviews and semi-structured questionnaires. The use of multiple data collection methods aimed to facilitate triangulation and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Interviews were used to explore students' experiences and perspectives in depth, while the questionnaires offered both quantitative and qualitative data related to their understanding and the difficulties, they face in using the IPA.

The data were analysed using a descriptive qualitative technique, which involved data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source and methodological triangulation, as well as credibility checks conducted by the researcher and expert reviewers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Perceptions of the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The findings of this study revealed that students generally held positive perceptions toward the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in improving English pronunciation. Based on the questionnaire results from 32 respondents, 62.5% of the students agreed that learning IPA helped them understand how to pronounce English words more accurately. Specifically, 56.3% of respondents strongly agreed, while 6.3% somewhat agreed with the idea that IPA made it easier to recognize correct pronunciation. Many students (71.9%) acknowledged that their pronunciation improved after using IPA, and a similar proportion (59.4%) reported that they enjoyed learning IPA, with only 28.1% finding it difficult. These positive perceptions were further supported by interview data, which provided deeper insights into students' experiences.

From the interviews, five students (ANA, BAS, NSR, CAM, and ZNH) described their initial exposure to IPA and reflected on how it influenced their pronunciation learning. ANA, for instance, stated that she first learned IPA in the seventh grade and felt happy during the process. She emphasized that IPA was easy to understand and remember, contributing to her increased confidence, which she rated 8 out of 10 in pronouncing numbers in English. Similarly, BAS expressed enthusiasm and a strong belief in the usefulness of IPA, though she acknowledged that some symbols were more difficult than others. He rated his pronunciation confidence at 9 out of 10. NSR shared comparable experiences, mentioning that she

enjoyed learning IPA despite the occasional difficulty due to unfamiliar symbols. She still maintained high confidence, scoring herself 8 out of 10.

Meanwhile, CAM recalled being introduced to IPA during her time at MI (elementary Islamic school) and highlighted that she found it beneficial, although memorizing symbols posed a challenge. Her confidence level was slightly lower than the others at 6 out of 10. ZNH also conveyed her enjoyment in learning IPA and recognized its value, though she mentioned that unfamiliarity with certain symbols made it somewhat difficult. She rated her confidence at 7.5 out of 10. Collectively, the interviews support the questionnaire findings that students perceive IPA as an important and helpful tool for improving English pronunciation. They generally enjoyed the learning process, felt that their pronunciation skills improved, and demonstrated moderate to high confidence levels.

2. Students' Challenges Toward the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

Despite the overall positive perceptions, students also reported several challenges related to learning and applying IPA. The questionnaire results indicated that a significant number of students faced moderate to considerable difficulties in understanding and memorizing IPA symbols. Out of 32 respondents, 43.8% somewhat struggled with understanding the symbols, while 68.8% admitted to having difficulty remembering them. These results highlight that although IPA is viewed positively, memory retention and symbol recognition remain major obstacles.

Moreover, students also struggled with applying IPA in daily pronunciation. A total of 43.8% of respondents found it somewhat difficult to use IPA in everyday speech, while 37.5% reported a higher level of difficulty. Similarly, 62.5% of students stated they had trouble distinguishing the phonetic differences between IPA sounds and those of the Indonesian language, suggesting that linguistic interference plays a role in these challenges. In terms of interpreting IPA in dictionaries, many students found it hard to read phonetic transcriptions, with 34.4% indicating significant challenges and 43.8% reporting moderate difficulty. These findings suggest that practical application and symbol interpretation are key areas needing improvement.

Additional data from interviews aligned with the questionnaire findings. For instance, although ANA found IPA easy to remember, other students like CAM and NSR reported difficulty in memorizing or recognizing unfamiliar symbols. CAM's lower confidence score reflected her struggles, showing that the challenge of symbol memorization can affect students' performance and self-assurance. Furthermore, ZNH noted variability in symbol familiarity, which made consistent application of IPA in speech a challenge.

Interestingly, while students acknowledged these difficulties, they did not view IPA learning as boring. Questionnaire responses showed that most students (43.8%)

somewhat disagreed with the idea that IPA learning was dull, and 34.4% strongly disagreed. This indicates that motivation and interest in pronunciation learning remain strong, even amid challenges. Additionally, when asked about receiving guidance, most students felt they were not entirely lacking support. Although 28.1% somewhat agreed they lacked sufficient instruction, 71.9% either disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that while improvements could be made in teaching support, it is not perceived as a severe problem.

The findings of this study revealed that students had generally positive perceptions toward the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in improving English pronunciation. Similar to a study conducted by Fitrianiingsih (2023) on enhancing student motivation through the Si Raca app, this study also found that students' favourable views of IPA significantly contributed to their engagement and confidence. Most participants reported that IPA helped them understand and pronounce English more accurately, and they enjoyed the learning process despite difficulties in symbol memorization. This is aligned with Gilakjani (2016), who emphasized that IPA supports learners in accurately producing unfamiliar phonemes, enhancing both phonological awareness and performance. Furthermore, Murphy (2014) highlights that pronunciation instruction, when prioritized, can play a significant role in language mastery supporting the students' reported improvement in confidence.

Motivation emerged as a key factor in students' active participation. As Fitrianiingsih (2023) suggested, motivated learners tend to show greater improvement in language acquisition. Similarly, this study found that students who enjoyed learning IPA were more willing to engage with pronunciation exercises. Additionally, the connection between IPA and self-directed learning (SDL), as discussed by Oktavianti et al. (2023), was also reflected here. Several students reported using IPA independently to guide their pronunciation practice, aligning with the concept of learner autonomy and a study by Gilakjani (2016) which reveal that IPA serves as a lifelong reference for language learners.

Nevertheless, challenges were also observed, particularly in remembering symbols and applying them in real-life conversation. Students like CAM and ZNH expressed that unfamiliar IPA symbols created barriers to consistent usage. These findings are supported by Asrul & Husda (2022), who noted that IPA can be intimidating for learners, especially without prior phonetic exposure. Likewise, Levis (2020) emphasized that a lack of teacher preparation in phonetics can hinder effective pronunciation instruction, which may explain why students in this study expressed a need for clearer guidance.

To address such challenges, Fitrianiingsih (2022) proposed the use of differentiated learning strategies, which could also be beneficial in IPA instruction. Considering the varying abilities and phonetic awareness among students, tailored approaches may support individual learning needs more effectively. This pedagogical adaptation is crucial, as students often struggle with distinguishing

English phonemes from those in their mother tongue echoing the findings of Tirtanawati et al. (2023) and the theoretical observations of Gilakjani (2016) regarding the interference of L1 phonological patterns.

Moreover, the benefit of structured language exposure was evident in this study. Putra, Rozak, and Murdianingsih (2023) emphasized that consistent English input, such as through the English Area program, improved learners' communicative competence. This aligns with the idea that the learning process must be presented in a meaningful and enjoyable way, as emphasized by Rohmah (2021), who stated that effective teaching requires thoughtful preparation, including engaging lesson delivery that captures students' attention and fosters a positive learning experience. The positive perceptions shared by many participants in this study suggest that when the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is taught in an interactive and enjoyable manner, students are more likely to appreciate its value in improving their English pronunciation skills. In the current study, the intentional use of IPA offered structured phonetic input that helped students gain both clarity and fluency. This reinforces Murphy's (2014) assertion that when pronunciation is given systematic attention, it positively affects learners' speaking performance.

Even though speech rate was not measured in this study, some students reported that IPA made them speak more clearly and confidently. This corresponds to Budiarsih et al.'s (2023) findings on the link between speech rate and pronunciation quality, and it also suggests that tools like IPA can enhance pronunciation precision, which in turn contributes to overall fluency.

Despite the noted difficulties, students remained motivated to learn IPA. It is supported by Murphy (2014) who claims that pronunciation instruction can be enjoyable when integrated meaningfully, and it underscores the need for better support systems. With improved teacher training, differentiated strategies, and more time allocated to pronunciation within the EFL curriculum, the IPA has the potential to significantly boost learners' confidence, accuracy, and autonomy.

In summary, while students' perceptions of the IPA were largely positive emphasizing its usefulness, enjoyment, and contribution to pronunciation improvement they also encountered several challenges. These included difficulties with symbol recognition, memorization, practical application, and distinguishing English sounds from those in their first language. Nevertheless, students maintained an overall interest in learning IPA and felt that with better instructional support and more engaging learning strategies, their mastery of the IPA could improve further. This highlights the importance of balanced instruction that combines motivation, practice, and targeted support to help learners overcome the barriers they face in mastering the International Phonetic Alphabet.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer two main research questions: how do students perceive the role of IPA in enhancing their English pronunciation and what challenges do students face when using IPA in learning English pronunciation. The findings suggest that students generally perceive IPA positively, recognizing its role in improving their pronunciation. However, they also face challenges, particularly in symbol memorization and applying IPA in everyday speech.

While students found IPA useful, many struggled to remember the symbols and apply them correctly in their pronunciation. Additionally, students reported difficulty distinguishing IPA sounds from those of the Indonesian language, which suggests linguistic interference. Although most students felt adequately supported by their instruction, some highlighted the need for further improvement in teaching methods and practice.

In conclusion, IPA is seen as a valuable tool for pronunciation improvement, but students encounter challenges in mastering its use. These findings point to the importance of refining teaching strategies and providing more support to enhance students' understanding and application of IPA in English pronunciation.

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