

CHALLENGES IN PRONOUNCING THE LETTER "R" IN THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the challenges faced by students in pronouncing the letter "r" in English words. A descriptive quantitative research design was used, incorporating pronunciation tests to gather data. The study focused on eighth-grade students at SMP Islam An Nizam Medan, with a sample of 15 students selected through simple random sampling from a total of 30 students. The students' pronunciation was recorded as they read aloud from three different texts, and their performance was analyzed for errors in pronouncing the "r" sound. The results revealed significant difficulties, with a total of 79 errors across all three texts. Specifically, Text 1 contained 21 errors (26.5%), Text 2 had 39 errors (49.3%), and Text 3 accounted for 19 errors (24%). The findings highlight the widespread difficulties students face in pronouncing the "r" sound, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and teaching strategies to help improve pronunciation skills. This study contributes valuable insights into the specific pronunciation challenges encountered by non-native English learners.

Keywords: *International Phonetic Alphabet; pronunciation; pronunciation challenges*

1. Introduction

Language is a tool for communication of human life. Language is commonly used to express love, affection, ideas, opinions, etc. Language is also a resource for human beings to get career opportunities abroad. For example, English is one of the most widely used languages. According to Crystal (1997), more people use English today than have used any other language in the history of the world. English is the international language par excellence. Estimates of the number of speakers are debatable. Perhaps 380 million have English as a first language but more than a billion people use it as a second (or additional) language, largely to communicate with other second language users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background. Thus, people from the so-called "core" English-speaking countries are now in the minority among English users and "native speakers" of the language no longer determine how the language is being used internationally.

There are four skills in language learning; Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. Speaking is very important for communicating. Speaking is a mode of oral communication. According to Akhyak and Indramawan (2013), improving English-speaking competence is very important for Indonesian students, where it is known that speaking is extremely needed to give a big contribution to students to perform their

communication skills better. The important thing about pronunciation in speaking is pronunciation. The pronunciation must be clear.

It has an impact on the listener to being able to understand the conversation easily. From the perspective of contemporary research in discourse analysis (Brazil, Coulthard, & Johns, 1980), however, pronunciation is seen not only as part of the system for expressing referential meaning, but also as an important part of the interactional dynamics of the communication process. According to this view, it is artificial to divorce pronunciation from communication and from other aspects of language use, for sounds are a fundamental part of the process by which we communicate and comprehend lexical, grammatical, and sociolinguistic meaning. (Pennington and Richards, 1986) noted that pronunciation, once a central concern of language teaching, had been sidelined in response to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement emphasizing meaning over form. Since then, attention to pronunciation has been revived, with greater attention to suprasegmental phonology and other contextual aspects of pronunciation.

A study by Sembiring (2003) found that Indonesian students have communicative problems in actually using their English. One of the problems of students in Indonesia was the pronunciation of English words. They still do not properly speak in English, because they are shy or lack confidence when speaking in English. Yates (2014) states that 'Pronunciation' is a lay term widely used in language learning and teaching to describe how utterances are articulated. As Indonesian students who want to acquire English as a second language, it is a must that we have to learn the pronunciation properly so that we can understand how the English word is pronounced.

This research is aimed to find out why the students feel difficulty to pronounce the letter /r/ and to reveal the factor that makes the students difficult to pronounce it by eight semester students of SMP Islam An Nizam Medan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linguistics

People who are experts in linguistics are called linguists (English linguists). In English, linguist has two meanings, namely people who are linguistic experts and people who are fluent in several languages. Linguistics is also called general linguistics (general linguistics), meaning that linguistics does not only study a language but also the ins and outs of language in general. In the scientific world, language is also taken as an object of study, not only linguistics but also disciplines such as literature, social psychology, and physics. However, there is a difference. The difference lies in the difference in the approach of these sciences to language to express language as a means or tool to express works of art. Social sciences or sociology approach and view language as a tool of social interaction in society (Hutton, 1993; Berwick et al., 2011).

2.1.1 Microlinguistics

Chaer (2007) asserts that studies in micro-linguistics focus on the internal structure of a particular language. In this context, micro-linguistics investigates the components and systems that form the foundation of a language. Unlike macro-linguistics, which explores the broader sociocultural and contextual aspects of language use, micro-linguistics delves into the detailed, structural elements of language itself. The scope of micro-linguistic studies includes various subfields, such as phonology, which examines the sound systems of a language; morphology, which studies the structure and

formation of words; syntax, concerned with the arrangement of words into sentences; semantics, which analyzes meaning in language; and lexicology, the study of the vocabulary and word meanings. Each of these areas contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how language functions at a granular level, providing insights into the rules and patterns that govern communication.

2.1.2 Linguistic Theory

According to Currie (1975:31), the rise in interest in theoretical linguistics has triggered off a wide development in applied linguistics in universities and in colleges of education and other center of language research. As a matter of fact, the development of linguistic theories gives effect to the practical application in language teaching. Stern (1994) states that linguistics is a theoretical science. Linguistics formulates explanations which are designed to account for the phenomena of language. For many linguistic scholars, the central purpose of linguistics is the development of theories on aspects of language and a general theory of language.

2.1.3 Phonology and Phonetics

The study of phonology and phonetics transcription are correlated. Phonology is the study of the organization and structure of the sounds of language (Nathan, 2008). Like most areas of grammar, it deals both with universal and language-specific principles. All spoken human languages make all (or virtually all) their words with combinations of consonants and vowels, and all (or virtually all) languages group those sounds into units called syllables, and generally, group the syllables into larger groups called feet. These constitute universal aspects of phonology, although the reader will notice hedges even within these statements. Phonetics is concerned with how sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived (we will only look at the production of sounds) (Forel & Puskás, 2005). Phonology is concerned with the function of sounds about each other in a language. In other words, phonetics is about sounds of language, phonology is about sound systems of language. Phonetics is a descriptive tool necessary for the study of the phonological aspects of a language. Phonetics and phonology are worth studying for several reasons. One is that like all studies of language, the study of phonology gives us insight into how the human mind works. Two more reasons are that the study of the phonetics of a foreign language gives us a much better ability both to hear and to correct mistakes that we make, and also to teach pronunciation of the foreign language (in this case English) to others.

2.1.4 Articulation

Then, speaking through articulation devices shows sounds, syllables, single words, simple sentences, and continuous speech. The quality of pronunciation also requires the safety of the organic articulation devices, the absence of psychological and social obstacles that affect the clarity and impossibility of diction, and the proper delivery of words to the listener so that the communication process can take place through speech.

2.1.4.1 Place of Articulation

Place of Articulation is the point that the articulators and the vocal tract are interconnected. According to (Hossen, 2017) Place of articulation refers to where the air stream from the lungs or the sound stream from the larynx is constricted (limited) by the

articulators. Articulators refer to organs that play a role in producing sound. Phonetically, speech organs involve eight organs: lips, teeth, tongue, palate, uvula, nasal, oral cavities, and vocal cords.

The articulators are then classified as active and passive articulators. The active articulators are the lower lip and the tongue, while the passive 15 articulators are the upper lip, the upper teeth, the roof of the mouth, and the rear wall (Ogden, 2017).

According to Zheng and Huang (2013) study on English consonant sounds, each sound produced in the speech organs, or articulators, is referred to as a distinctive speech sound. These speech sounds can be distinguished into eight categories based on the place of articulation of the consonant, which includes:

1. Bilabial, which is a consonant that occurs on both the upper lip and lower. For example [p,m,b].
2. Labiodental, which is a consonant that occurs in the upper teeth and lips lower. For xample [f,v].
3. Dental, which is a consonant that occurs at the tip of the tongue and teeth up and down. For example [θ, ð].
4. Alveolar, the consonants that occur on the leaves of the tongue and gums. For example [t, s, d, z, n, l].
5. Palate-alveolar, which is a consonant that occurs on the leaf of the tongue (or tip of the tongue) and touches the gums. Example [tʃ, dʒ, ʃ, ʒ, r].
6. Palatal, which is a consonant that occurs at the front of the tongue and palate. For example [j].
7. Velar, which is a consonant that occurs at the base of the tongue and the soft palate. For example [k,g,n].
8. Glottal, the consonants that occur between the vocal cords. Example [h]

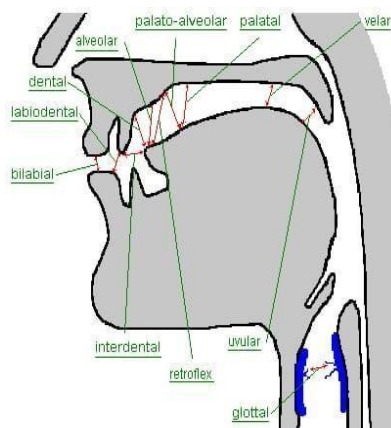


Figure 1. Source: Anderson, (2017). Place of articulation [Image]. In *Essentials of linguistics* (2nd ed., p. 91). Routledge

2.1.4.2 Manner of Articulation

Manner of articulation is another distinguishing feature of how consonants are produced. Marza (2014) says that segmental and supra segmental are the aspects required in oral communication besides correct grammar and a lot of vocabulary. According to Gorman (2019), consonants in the English language can be classified into six different types based on their manner of articulation: plosive, fricative, affricative, nasal, lateral, and approximant. The explanations of each type of consonant are as follows:

1. Plosive Consonants: Also known as stop consonants, these sounds are produced by a complete blockage of the airflow in the vocal tract, followed by a sudden release of the air. Examples of plosive consonants in English include /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, and /g/.
2. Fricative Consonants: These sounds are produced by forcing the air through a narrow opening in the vocal tract, creating a turbulent airflow and a hissing or buzzing sound. Examples of fricative consonants in English include /f/, /v/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, and /ʒ/.
3. Affricate Consonants: These sounds are produced by a combination of a plosive and a fricative sound, where the plosive blockage is released into a fricative sound. Examples of affricate consonants in English include /tʃ/ as in "church" and /dʒ/ as in "judge".
4. Nasal Consonants: These sounds are produced by lowering the velum (the soft tissue at the back of the mouth) to allow air to flow out of the nose. Examples of nasal consonants in English include /m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ as in "sing".
5. Lateral Consonants: These sounds are produced by allowing the air to flow along the sides of the tongue, while blocking the airflow through the center of the mouth. Examples of lateral consonants in English include /l/ as in "like".
6. Approximant Consonants: These sounds are produced by bringing the articulators (tongue, lips, etc.) close together, without creating enough obstruction to produce a turbulent airflow. Examples of approximant consonants in English include /w/ as in "water" and /j/ as in "yes".

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 2020)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)											© 2020 IPA
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Table 1. Source: International Phonetic Association. (2020). International Phonetic Alphabet (revised to 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/ipa-chart>

2.1.4.3 R-sounds or Rhotic

Ladefoged and Maddieson (1996) in their survey of r-sounds conclude that there is no phonetic basis for a unity within this otherwise well-motivated class, and see only a historical and orthographic basis for referring to a group of r-sounds. The present paper will first show that the variation of r-sounds, within and across languages, is indeed impressive. But the evidence for "r" from phonological patterns in the languages of the world is so strong that we cannot leave the matter here. To conclude this section, here is notation provided by the IPA (International Phonetics Alphabet) used for r-sounds.

	Dental/Alveolar/Postalveolar	Retroflex	Uvular
Trill	r		R
Tap or Flap	ɾ	ɽ	
Fricative			ʀ
Approximant	ɹ	ɻ	

Table 2: International Phonetic Alphabet symbols for r-sound

In addition to these seven symbols, the IPA notation recognizes a dental/alveolar lateral flap: J, and a diacritic for rhoticity, to be added to vowel symbols such as: sr-, e \ a \ etc. The list of rhotics provided by Ladefoged and Maddieson (1996: 216) is very similar; they do not include the rhotic vowel and use [ʀ] for a uvular approximant instead of a fricative (as does Dickey 1997: 14). Note that even with these extensions, we have not arrived at a complete list of rhotics. For example, there is no simple symbol in (1) for the uvular approximant, although there is very likely to be such a non-rolled, non-fricative r-sound, for example in Standard German (prevocally; according to a number of descriptions; see Hall (1993) or Wiese (2000)). If [ʀ] is used for the approximant, the question arises whether the uvular fricative is a rhotic as well. By using diacritics, such additional sounds can be described, in this case, as [ʀ̥]. 2 Of course, there may not be any logic behind the use of the letter r in this system of notation, and indeed, we will see immediately that other segments are treated as rhotics as well. Conversely, there is no compelling reason to assume that all r-like symbols are indeed used by members of the class of rhotics.

3. Research Method

The writer used a quantitative descriptive method to find out how difficult to pronounce the letter /r/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet in the eighth semester of SMP Islam An-Nizam Medan in which the research was conducted on March, 05th until March, 08th 2024 at SMP Islam An-Nizam Medan. It is located at Jl. Tuba II No.62, Tegal Sari Mandala III, Kec. Medan Denai, Kota Medan, North Sumatera 20226. Quantitative research involves the collection of data so that information can be quantified and subjected to statistical treatment in order to support or refute “alternate knowledge claims” (Creswell, 2003, p. 153). There are three broad classifications of quantitative research: descriptive experimental and causal comparative (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). The descriptive research approach is a basic research method that examines the situation, as it exists in its current state. Descriptive research involves identification of attributes of a particular phenomenon based on an observational basis, or the exploration of correlation between two or more phenomena.

In collecting the data, the researcher used two techniques, namely pronunciation test and recording. Then the data were analyzed by using a formula to get the percentage errors (Sudjono, 1989, p. 79) in Mulansari et al (2014) as the following:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

P = The total percentage of errors

F = The total number of students' errors

N = The total number students' subject

4. Discussion

Research on the pronunciation test reveals that students have difficulty pronouncing English words /r/. The researcher wanted to test the students' ability to pronounce English. Therefore, the researcher provided warm-up exercises for the students which contained a lot of "r" letters to read. But this test has no influence on the scores the researchers give.

There are several reasons why the researcher wants to give this test to the students, as follows:

1. The researcher just wants to students to get used to reading lots of “r” sound.
2. To improve student's abilities, especially in understanding different concepts.
3. To give the students’ inspiration and motivation.
4. Reading can help keep the brain so that it always carries out its functions perfectly.
5. Reading can improve students' memory.

<u>ROSE FROM EMILY</u>
Emily is a really pretty girl
Emily is a romantic girl
She liked to smell roses.
She picked roses in the garden.
She brought roses to home
She brought roses to her mommy.
She brought roses to her daddy.
She brought roses to her sister.
She brought roses to her brother.
She brought roses to Rilki
Whatever the reason, She loved roses.

Table 3. Test for reading to students

After the researcher gave warm-up exercises, the researcher then gave the recorded pronunciation score.

English Words	English Pronunciation (IPA)	Recorded
Rabbit	/ˈræbət/	/rɒbit/
Ring	/rɪŋ/	/ring/
Rainbow	/ˈreɪn,boʊ/	/rein,boʊ/
Reindeer	/ˈreɪn,dɪr/	/reinder/
Rocket	/ˈrɒkət/	/roket/
Garbage	/ˈgɑːrbɪdʒ/	/garbdʒ/
Ruler	/ˈruːlɜːr/	/ruler/

Table 4. The English Pronunciation (IPA)

There are few instructions on how researcher rates recorded student’s voice, as follows:

- AP : Appropriate Pronunciation
 - 1 : Appropriate
 - 0 : Inappropriate
- The Highest score 100 and The Lowest score 0

No	Name	English Words					Total AP	Score	%
		Rabbit	Ring	Rainbow	Reindeer	Rocket			
1	AAT	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%
2	ARF	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%
3	FRN	1	0	1	1	1	4	80	80%
4	FTR	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
5	IYZ	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%
6	KA	1	1	0	0	1	3	60	60%
7	MHP	1	0	0	0	1	2	40	40%
8	MAZ	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
9	MF	1	0	1	0	1	3	60	60%
10	MI	0	1	0	0	1	2	40	40%
11	MRM	0	1	0	0	0	1	20	20%
12	NS	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%
13	NNA	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%
14	RR	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
15	SA	1	1	1	0	1	4	80	80%

Table 5. Text 1. Rating for Student's Pronunciation

No	Name	English Words					Total AP	Score	%
		Garbage	Ruler	Wrong	Car	Sure			
1	AAT	0	1	0	0	1	2	40	40%
2	ARF	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
3	FRN	1	0	0	0	1	2	40	40%
4	FTR	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
5	IYZ	0	0	1	1	1	3	60	60%
6	KA	0	0	0	1	1	2	40	40%
7	MHP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
8	MAZ	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
9	MF	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
10	MI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
11	MRM	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
12	NS	1	0	1	1	1	4	80	80%
13	NNA	0	1	1	1	0	3	60	60%
14	RR	1	0	0	0	1	2	40	40%
15	SA	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%

Table 6. Text 2. Rating for Student's Pronunciation

The students got a score of 100, 2 students. score of 80, 3 students. score of 60, 2 students. score of 40, 4 students. score of 0, 4 students.

No	Name	English Words					Total AP	Score	%
		Occur	Tour	Prefer	Share	Sugar			
1	AAT	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
2	ARF	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
3	FRN	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
4	FTR	0	0	1	1	1	3	60	60%
5	IYZ	0	1	0	1	1	3	60	60%

6	KA	0	0	1	1	1	3	60	60%
7	MHP	0	1	1	1	0	3	60	60%
8	MAZ	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
9	MF	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
10	MI	1	1	1	1	1	5	100	100%
11	MRM	0	1	0	1	1	3	60	60%
12	NS	0	1	0	1	1	3	60	60%
13	NNA	0	1	0	1	1	3	60	60%
14	RR	0	1	1	1	1	4	80	80%
15	SA	1	1	0	1	1	4	80	80%

Table 7. Text 3. Rating for student’s pronunciation

The students got a score of 100, 3 students. score of 80, 5 students. score of 60, 7 students. After the researcher obtained the appropriate score, then the researcher recapitulated the inappropriate score by the students.

No	Name	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Total Error
1	AAT	1	3	1	5
2	ARF	1	1	0	2
3	FRN	1	3	1	5
4	FTR	0	1	2	3
5	IYZ	1	2	2	5
6	KA	2	3	2	7
7	MHP	3	5	2	10
8	MAZ	0	0	0	0
9	MF	2	5	1	8
10	MI	3	5	0	8
11	MRM	4	5	2	11
12	NS	1	1	2	4
13	NNA	1	2	2	5
14	RR	0	3	1	4
15	SA	1	0	1	2
TOTAL		21	39	19	79
PERCENTAGE		26,5%	49.3%	24%	100

Table 8. Recapitulate of Students’ error in pronouncing the letter “r”

The total frequency from each of the texts were 21, 39, 19 or 26.5%, 49.3%, 24%. So, the English words that students find difficult to pronounce are in text 2.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that eighth-grade students at SMP Islam An Nizam Medan face considerable difficulty in pronouncing the letter "r" in English words. Through a descriptive quantitative approach, which included pronunciation tests and warm-up exercises, the research identified the specific challenges students encountered while attempting to pronounce words with the "r" sound. The analysis of their recorded pronunciations showed that the majority of students made errors, with the highest frequency of mistakes occurring in Text 2. The findings indicate that 49.3% of errors

were made in Text 2, followed by 26.5% in Text 1, and 24% in Text 3. This suggests that certain words or contexts may pose greater difficulty for students, highlighting areas where targeted instruction is needed. The research also showed that while some students performed well, with scores of 100%, many others struggled, demonstrating the need for more focused exercises to help students overcome these challenges. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of continued practice and tailored teaching strategies to improve students' pronunciation of the "r" sound, which is crucial for their overall language proficiency. Additionally, the research underlines the role of repetition and motivation in helping students refine their English pronunciation skills.

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