

Analysis of Mispronunciation The “TH” Sound by EFL Learners in University Level

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the pattern of pronunciation errors of “th” (/θ/ and /ð/) by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students at the university level. This study used a qualitative research method with pronunciation test instruments and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that EFL students in Indonesia have difficulty in pronouncing the “th” sound due to the influence of their mother tongue (L1) which does not have the same sound. Students tend to replace the “th” sound with other sounds such as /t/, /d/, or /s/, depending on the position of the “th” sound in the word. Interviews with students also showed that psychological and social factors such as shyness and fear of being judged also affect the pronunciation errors of the “th” sound. This study emphasizes the importance of considering the influence of the mother tongue and psychological factors in teaching English pronunciation.

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INTRODUCTION

Accurate pronunciation is a critical aspect of language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, as it plays a vital role in achieving both clarity and fluency in communication. For EFL learners, mastering pronunciation is essential because poor pronunciation can significantly hinder effective interaction and reduce learners' confidence, ultimately impacting their overall communicative competence (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Research highlights that pronunciation forms the foundation of oral communication, with intelligibility being impossible without it. Among the many phonetic challenges English presents to non-native speakers, the production of the “th” sounds, /θ/ and /ð/, stands out as one of the most difficult and is commonly mispronounced by EFL learners. This challenge is closely linked to the fact that “th” sounds are absent in many languages, leading EFL learners to substitute them with more familiar alternatives such as /t/, /d/, /s/, or /z/.

The “th” sounds are absent in many languages, causing EFL learners to frequently substitute them with more familiar sounds such as /t/, /d/, /s/, or /z/. These

substitutions can obscure meaning and hinder comprehension, as seen when "think" becomes "tink," "this" turns into "dis," "thin" is replaced by "sin," or "them" becomes "zem." Such mispronunciations reflect a deeper phonological challenge rooted in the influence of the learner's native phonological system, which often lacks equivalent sounds and consequently interferes with the learner's ability to produce these unfamiliar English phonemes accurately (Winarti, Monika, & Yundayani, 2019). These mispronunciations, in turn, can significantly affect both the clarity and fluency of EFL learners' speech. This impact on clarity and fluency is often closely tied to the influence of a learner's first language (L1), which plays a critical role in shaping pronunciation and determining the types and frequency of errors.

The influence of a learner's first language (L1) plays a critical role in shaping pronunciation and often dictates both the types and frequency of errors that occur. When a sound does not exist in a learner's native language, learners tend to substitute it with the closest sound available in their own phonetic system. For example, in languages such as Indonesian, Arabic, and Vietnamese, there are no voiced or voiceless dental fricatives, so speakers of these languages often replace /θ/ and /ð/ with stops or fricatives that are more familiar to them. Indonesian learners, for instance, frequently use /t/ and /d/ to replace "th" sounds due to the absence of these sounds in their native phonological inventory, impacting their intelligibility and giving the perception of reduced fluency in English (Setyaningsih & Suparno, 2019). Similarly, Arabic speakers may approximate "th" sounds with other fricatives or stops, like /s/ and /z/, or adopt substitutions that align more closely with Arabic phonology, which also disrupts their pronunciation accuracy in English (Al-Rubaat & Alshammari, 2019).

At the university level, even advanced EFL learners may struggle with the "th" sounds despite having years of language study experience, as this challenge persists beyond beginner levels. These phonological interference patterns suggest that the mispronunciation of "th" sounds is not solely a matter of language proficiency but also of L1 influence and the learner's age and exposure level to accurate phonemic models in English. Studies by Abdelreheem (2023) and Abdely (2021) have indicated that such pronunciation difficulties often persist among learners, underscoring how deeply native phonology affects language learning at all levels and highlighting the need for sustained, focused attention on these sounds throughout the learner's educational journey.

Existing studies have explored the mispronunciation of the "th" sound (/θ/ and /ð/) by EFL learners across various linguistic and cultural contexts. For example, research on Northern Cyprus learners identified that motivation and practice opportunities significantly improved learners' pronunciation of /θ/ and /ð/ (Ercan & Kunt, 2019). Similarly, Vietnamese learners commonly substitute /t/ for /θ/ and /d/ for /ð/ due to first-language interference and difficulties in tongue positioning (Khanh, 2020). In Egypt, learners also struggle with these sounds, largely attributed to mother tongue interference and insufficient pronunciation training (Fouly & El-Aziz, 2020). However, these studies focus on specific national contexts and lack a comprehensive investigation into the unique challenges faced by EFL learners.

The research gap lies in the absence of a focused study on Indonesian university-level EFL learners and their specific difficulties in pronouncing the "th" sound. Unlike other contexts, the influence of Indonesian linguistic backgrounds, such as the phonetic structure of Bahasa Indonesia and regional languages, on the substitution patterns for /θ/ and /ð/ has not been explored. Additionally, sociolinguistic factors such as exposure to English, teaching methodologies, and the learning environment in Indonesia remain under examined. Finally, while general strategies like pronunciation drills have been suggested,

no tailored interventions have been developed for Indonesian learners. This study aims to address these gaps by analyzing mispronunciation patterns of “th” sound and find the factors contribute to the difficulty in pronouncing the “th” sound among EFL learners at the university level.

THEORY AND METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method to analyze the mispronunciation of the “th” sound by EFL learners at the university level. Qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring nuanced linguistic phenomena and understanding participants’ experiences in-depth (Tong et al., 2012). The instruments used in this study are pronunciation tests and semi-structured interviews. Pronunciation tests are widely used in qualitative studies to identify articulatory challenges, while interviews allow the collection of contextual information about language learning and phonetic development (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The participants of this study consist of two students from each semester in the English Education Department at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. This purposive sampling ensures representation across academic levels and facilitates a deeper understanding of pronunciation progression over time (Hollin et al., 2019).

The data collection process includes two stages. In the first stage, participants are asked to complete a pronunciation test containing words and sentences with the “th” sound in various phonetic positions (e.g., initial, medial, and final). These tests are audio-recorded to enable detailed phonetic analysis. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews are conducted with participants. The interviews focus on factors influencing their pronunciation, such as mother tongue exposure, phonetic training, and learning habits. Furthermore, this study is also guided by the theory of Mother Tongue Interference (Listyani et al., 2024), which emphasizes that learners’ native language significantly impacts their English pronunciation. According to this theory, EFL learners tend to substitute native sounds for absent phonemes in English, leading to systematic mispronunciations. This is particularly relevant to the mispronunciation of the “th” sound, as many languages lack equivalent phonemes, causing learners to replace them with /t/, /d/, /s/, or /z/ sounds. By incorporating this perspective, this study seeks to explore how native language influence affects the production of the “th” sound and contributes to pronunciation difficulties.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, the researchers found that there is a pattern of pronunciation errors commonly made by the participants, namely the substitution of the sound /th/ into /t/, /d/, and /s/. The results of this research can be seen in the following table below.

Table 1. Pronunciation Test Results

Participant	Word	Correct Pronunciation	Substitution Error	Substituted Sound	Position of /th/
VA	This	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Initial
VA	Thursday	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Initial
VA	Weather	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Medial
VA	Mother	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Final
VA	Bath	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Final
HZ	Theater	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Initial
HZ	Thank	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Initial
HZ	Thoughtfulness	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Medial
IT	Both	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Final
ZA	Brother	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Final
AN	Smoothly	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Medial
AE	Everything	Incorrect	Yes	/t/	Medial
SA	They	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Initial
IA	Them	Incorrect	Yes	/d/	Medial

The analysis of the pronunciation test data underscores significant challenges faced by participants in accurately producing the /th/ sound across various linguistic contexts. The findings reveal systematic substitution patterns that highlight both the phonetic complexity of the /th/ sound and its interplay with native language influences, making it particularly difficult for learners to master. Participants consistently substituted /th/ with other sounds such as /d/, /t/, or /s/, depending on the position of /th/ within a word whether initial, medial, or final.

In phonology, initial, medial, and final positions refer to the placement of phonemes within a word, significantly influencing their articulation and perception. Initial position (word-initial) refers to a phoneme occurring at the beginning of a word, such as the /t/ in *time*. Phonemes in this position are often pronounced with greater aspiration in languages like English but may undergo weakening in certain phonological environments (McMahon, 2020). Medial position (word-medial) occurs when a phoneme is located between two vowels or consonants within a word, such as /t/ in *butter*. In many dialects of English, phonemes in this position undergo processes like flapping or lenition, where /t/ is pronounced as a soft /ɾ/ sound (Saavedra, 2022). Final position (word-final) refers to phonemes appearing at the end of words, such as /d/ in *road*. Word-final sounds are often subject to processes like devoicing in languages such as German or deletion in fast speech.

patterns (Jimola, 2022). The interaction between phonemes and their positional context plays a key role in phonological processes such as assimilation, elision, and liaison, shaping how sounds are realized in connected speech (Brannen et al., 2021).

In the initial position, substitutions were especially frequent. Words like *this* and *they* were commonly pronounced with /d/ replacing /th/, while words like *Thursday* and *thank* were altered to start with /t/. These errors suggest that initial /th/ poses a significant articulatory challenge, likely because the sound requires the placement of the tongue against the upper teeth a configuration less common in many participants' native phonetic inventories. The replacement with stops like /d/ and /t/, which require less precise articulation, points to a preference for sounds that are easier or more familiar to produce.

Medial positions also proved problematic. Participants struggled with words such as *weather*, *thoughtfulness*, and *everything*, frequently replacing /th/ with either /d/ or /t/. This pattern suggests a similar difficulty in maintaining the correct tongue placement during the flow of speech. The presence of surrounding vowels and consonants may further complicate the production of /th/, leading learners to substitute it with simpler or more automatic sounds from their phonological repertoire.

Final positions, while slightly less error-prone than initial and medial ones, were still marked by frequent substitutions. In words such as *bath* and *both*, participants often replaced /th/ with /s/ or /t/, indicating challenges in sustaining the fricative articulation of /th/ at the end of words. The substitution with /s/ is particularly notable, as it reflects a shift to another fricative sound, though one that is easier to produce without requiring dental placement.

The findings from the pronunciation test highlight consistent difficulties among learners in articulating the /th/ sound, evidenced by systematic substitutions with /d/, /t/, and /s/ sounds across different word positions. These challenges align with established research on phonological acquisition and second language (L2) learning, revealing the influence of native language interference, the complexity of articulatory demands, and the social factors surrounding mispronunciation. The frequent substitution of /th/ with stops such as /d/ or /t/ reflects the phonological interference of the learners' first language (L1). Sa'adiyah et al (2017) explains specific cases of one ethnicity in Indonesia replacing the /th/ sound in English with stops due to L1 interference.

The interviews provided deeper insights into the factors influencing pronunciation. Participants consistently used the substitution pattern because their native language did not have any words containing the consonant /th/. There are responses from the respondents about the question "Do you substitute the /th/ sound with another sound from your native language when speaking English?"

"Yes, I usually use 't' for 'th' in words like 'think' or 'd' in words like 'this'." (I)

"Yes, I often use 's' or 't' for example, I say 'tree' instead of 'three'." (A)

"Yes, I usually use 'd' for 'th' in the word like 'mother'." (H)

The difficulty of pronouncing the /th/ sound among the three participants is largely influenced by the phonetic system of their native language, Indonesian, which does not have an equivalent sound. In respondent (I)'s case, she struggles with the /th/ sound because the closest sounds in Indonesian are /t/ and /d/ which require different tongue positions. This leads her to unconsciously replace /th/ with these sounds when speaking English. Similarly, respondent (A) also lacks an equivalent sound in Indonesian, so she substitutes /th/ with /s/ or /t/ both of which are easier for her to articulate based on her native phonetic patterns. Respondent (H) faces a similar challenge, where she replaces /th/ with the /d/ sound, as this is more familiar and comfortable for her due to Indonesian's use of tongue placement similar to /t/ and /d/. For all three, their native language influences their pronunciation by making them rely on familiar phonetic patterns, which makes it difficult to master the /th/ sound in English. These challenges illustrate the broader issue faced by many EFL learners, where the absence of certain sounds in their native language creates obstacles in acquiring new phonemes in English.

This issue aligns with the broader phenomenon observed in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), where learners often struggle to produce sounds that are absent in their first language (L1). The absence of the /th/ sound in Indonesian phonology presents a specific barrier, as the learners in this study frequently substitute it with other sounds, such as /t/, /d/, and /s/ which are more familiar and easier for them to produce. This tendency is a well-documented phenomenon in SLA literature, known as language transfer, where phonetic habits from the first language influence the production of sounds in a second language.

As noted by Odlin (2022), language transfer can both facilitate and interfere with second language acquisition. In the case of the /th/ sound, the lack of a comparable sound in Indonesian means that learners do not have an equivalent auditory or motoric experience to guide their pronunciation in English. This often leads to substitution errors, where learners replace the non-existent sound with a similar but incorrect one from their native language. Gass (1988) also discusses the role of language transfer in SLA, asserting that learners' linguistic backgrounds influence their ability to perceive and produce unfamiliar sounds in a target language. This study confirms that Indonesian learners' failure to produce the "th" sound is not simply a matter of lack of practice but a result of deeper, more ingrained phonetic patterns shaped by their native language.

Another finding from the interviews was that social and psychological factors can also affect mispronunciation of the /th/ sound by EFL Learners. This conclusion is gained from the respondent's response to the following question "Do you feel self-conscious or embarrassed when trying to pronounce the /th/ sound in public?"

"Yes, especially in front of native speakers. I worry they'll notice my mistakes." (I)

"Yes, I feel embarrassed when I mispronounce it." (A)

"Yes, I worry about being judged." (H)

All three participants express similar psychological and social challenges related to mispronouncing the /th/ sound. They each experience a significant amount of self-consciousness and fear of judgment, particularly in front of native speakers. For respondent (I), this anxiety leads to her avoiding the /th/ sound in favor of easier

alternatives like /t/ or /d/ which minimizes his perceived risk of making mistakes. Respondent (A), too, feels embarrassed when mispronouncing the sound, especially after receiving feedback from peers. This has made her hesitant to use /th/ words, further hindering her ability to practice and improve. So does respondent (H) share similar feelings of shyness and often avoids using /th/ words in public, especially in formal settings, out of fear of negative judgment. Their experiences highlight how social pressures and the fear of being judged for mispronunciation can lead to avoidance behaviors, which limit their opportunities for practice and further contribute to difficulties in mastering the sound. This avoidance, in turn, creates a psychological barrier that stunts their progress and undermines their confidence in speaking English.

The findings from this study reveal significant psychological and social challenges faced by learners struggling with the /th/ sound, emphasizing the intertwined nature of linguistic performance and social identity in language acquisition. This aligns with Rothgerber's (2019) assertion that learners often experience heightened anxiety due to the influence of first-language phonological systems on second-language acquisition, which can result in mispronunciations and subsequent social discomfort. Rinda et al., (2019) also stated that such as fear of embarrassment or judgment, can obstruct effective communication.

The avoidance behaviors observed such as substituting /th/ with /t/ or /d/ echo findings by Al Hilou (2023), who highlighted that learners' reluctance to engage with challenging phonemes stems from fear of failure or correction, perpetuating pronunciation errors and reducing learning opportunities. Participants A and H reported embarrassment and hesitancy following critical peer feedback. This aligns with Agustine et al. (2022), who found that social pressures amplify pronunciation-related anxieties, particularly when learners feel their errors are being judged harshly.

The findings also highlight a psychological barrier whereby avoidance behaviors limit opportunities for practice, hindering confidence and progress. This is supported by Messum and Young (2020), who advocate for a motor-skill-based approach to pronunciation teaching, arguing that learners need structured and supportive environments to overcome phonological challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that EFL students in Indonesia have difficulty in pronouncing the sound "th" due to the influence of their mother tongue which does not have the same sound. The pattern of mispronunciation of the sound "th" found in this study shows that students tend to replace the sound "th" with other sounds such as /t/, /d/, or /s/, depending on the position of the sound "th" in the word. Psychological and social factors such as shyness and fear of being judged also affect the mispronunciation of the sound "th". Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of considering the influence of the mother tongue and psychological factors in teaching English pronunciation. English teachers need to understand that mispronunciation of the sound "th" is not only a technical problem, but also related to psychological and social factors that affect students. Thus, English teachers can design more effective teaching strategies to help students overcome difficulties in pronouncing the sound "th".

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