



Lost in translation: The challenge of Javanese students in pronouncing English consonant sounds

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Abstract

Pronunciation difficulties in English often arise due to differences in the phonological system between English and the speaker's mother tongue. One of the problematic consonant clusters for Indonesian learners, particularly those with strong Javanese accents, is the "gh" sound, which varies in pronunciation depending on the word. This research aims to explore the challenge by Javanese students in pronouncing three variations of "gh": silent "gh," "gh" pronounced as [f], and [g]. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected through observation and a pronunciation test using a list of 20 English words containing three types of "gh" pronunciation. To gain deeper analysis, structured interviews consisting of five questions were conducted with four students who have strong Javanese accents. The results indicate that the silent "gh" is the most difficult form to pronounce, while the [f] is the easiest for most participants. The [g] variant ranks in between. The main influencing factor is the strong interference of the Javanese mother tongue. These findings suggest that pronunciation teaching for Javanese learners should explicitly emphasize the three "gh" patterns, especially the silent form, and incorporate targeted drilling and minimal-pair practice to reduce first-language interference.

Keywords:

English consonant; Javanese accents; Pronunciation

A. INTRODUCTION

In English Education, the language has become a cornerstone for learners worldwide. Untoro & Rustipa (2020) mention that English is one of the foreign languages that Indonesian university students commonly study. It is often considered a challenging language in Indonesia, due to its complex grammar, tenses, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). According to Amalia (2022), one notable aspect of English pronunciation is its irregular orthography, meaning that the spelling does not consistently reflect the sounds. Some sounds even lack a dedicated symbol in the writing system. Furthermore, Islam et al. (2022) point out that learners face difficulties in mastering English because certain English sounds do not exist in their native language.

According to Dandee and Pornwiriyaakit (2022), the place of articulation is an important part of English pronunciation that can be difficult for learners, especially those who are not native speakers. In English, there are different places of articulation, such as bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal. Each of these requires specific movements of the mouth and tongue that may be new to learners whose native languages do not have the same sounds. These positions affect how each sound is made, making it hard to pronounce words correctly. For example, when a learner needs to produce velar sounds like [k] and [g], Johan & Cahyani (2024) state that their tongue must be positioned at the back of the mouth, which can be challenging for speakers where these sounds are less common.

Another challenging factor is that in some words, the "gh" combination is silent, which means it does not make any sound. For example, in words like "bought," "thought," and

"drought," the "gh" is not pronounced at all. This creates a situation where the letters do not affect how the word sounds, but learners still need to remember this as part of the spelling. This silent use of "gh" can be complicated for Indonesian learners, who may expect each letter to have a sound, as is usually true in their native language. Because English spelling is not always regular, students often have to memorize both how words are spelled and how they are pronounced separately, instead of relying on a simple connection between letters and sounds (Wahyudin et al., 2021).

One of the six plosive consonants is "gh" pronounced as [g]. A plosive is a consonant articulation where two articulators form a total structure, trapping air, which is then released explosively, potentially producing a noise called plosion, and may or may not be voiced (Roach, 2009). Every plosive consonant has a different place of articulation, while [g] occupies the velar position, which is when the part of the mouth where the soft palate starts and the hard palate finishes is pressed against the back of the tongue. With the mouth in that position, the consonant [g] can be pronounced both voiced and voiceless, but mostly voiced. An easy way to determine if the letter 'gh' in a word is pronounced as [g] is usually at the beginning of the word i.e. ghost, gherkin, and ghoul.

The third way to pronounce "gh" is [f]. This phoneme is commonly found in the middle or at the end of the word. Along with phonemes [v], they are part of the labiodental. It is the place of articulation where the lower lip touches the upper teeth (Roach, 2009). Therefore, when pronouncing [f], the mouth does not open wide but instead produces a hissing sound. This is called a voiceless fricative consonant. Some words that are spoken in this way are tough, rough, enough, etc.

Pronouncing English words perfectly requires continuous practice. Mispronunciation can occur due to several factors. According to Azane (2021); Listyani et al. (2024); Shanmugasundaram & Jebakumar (2022); and Rafael (2019), the mother tongue is the biggest influence on the mispronunciation of English words. Lam & Thi (2022) showed that complex consonant clusters can lead to mispronunciation. As research conducted by Situmorang et al. (2023) Indonesian learners simplify two or more consonant clusters by inserting extra vowels between the consonants.

Previous studies have found that common English mispronunciations are [tʃ], [ʒ], [θ], [v], [dʒ], [j] (Hadroh, 2020; Widhiastuti et al., 2022; Tambunsaribu & Simatupang, 2021). However, other consonants should be noted, which are gh silent, gh [f], and gh [g]. Since the previous studies have been conducted on the consonants mentioned, this study only focuses on "gh" consonants. Another difference is that this study concentrates on challenges for tertiary Javanese students who have strong Javanese accents. Therefore, this study aims to discover the challenges Javanese students face when pronouncing gh silent, gh [f], and gh [g].

B. METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to explore the challenges of pronouncing "gh" sounds faced by Javanese students. Four participants with strong Javanese accents were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they represented learners with noticeable first language (L1) phonological influence. Data were collected through an online observation in which participants were asked to complete a pronunciation test consisting of twenty English words containing silent gh, gh [f], and gh [g]. The pronunciation test and subsequent semi-structured interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, and participants submitted their responses in the form of recorded voice notes.

For a deeper analysis of the source of pronunciation difficulties, a structured interview with five questions was conducted after the observation test. The collected data were examined using thematic analysis, allowing to identify recurring patterns related to articulation challenges and L1 interference. Findings were generated based on pronunciation patterns and interpreted through themes that emerged.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

This section highlights the results of the observation conducted. Table 1 contains a summary of samples that have pronounced twenty words containing the letter combination "gh."

Table 1. Pronouncing Gh silent

Word	IPA	Student's mispronounce			
		FW	AN	SL	RM
Bought	/bɔ:t/	/bout/	/bouf/	/baut/	/boht/
Dough	/dəʊ/	/doot/	/douf/	/dauf/	/daug/
Doughnut	/'dəʊ.nʌt/	/doug.nut/	/donat/	/dounat/	/doug.nat/
High	/haɪ/	/haɪg/	/hai/	/hai/	/haɪg/
Light	/laɪt/	/laɪt/	/lait/	/lait/	/laɪt/
Naught	/nɔ:t/	/nɔ:t/	/naut/	/naut/	/nɔ:t/
Sigh	/saɪ/	/saɪg/	/sih/	/sai/	/saɪjh/
Sought	/sɔ:t/	/sout/	/saut/	/sou/	/sɔ:t/
Thought	/θɔ:t/	/tɒt/	/tou/	/daut/	/touj/
Through	/θru:/	/troht/	/tru/	/tru/	/throht/

Source: researchers' documentary

From the data in Table 2, it can be concluded that all samples found it difficult and mispronounced the letter "gh" as silent.

According to research conducted by Rosemarie & Veniranda (2022), there were 27% of respondents mispronounced "gh" silent. Meanwhile, the research concluded by Al-Hamzi & Musyahada (2022) showed that four out of five students mispronounced "gh" silent. The letter silent "gh" is unique and difficult to pronounce. The speaker must know its phonetic alphabet to pronounce it correctly. It showed that most respondents pronounce "gh" as "t."

"I am familiar with those words, but the letters "ght" confuse me in terms of pronunciation."

"Pronouncing the silent 'gh' is the most difficult among these three methods, sometimes forgetting whether the 'gh' should be pronounced or not."

"Gh silent is the hardest one because my pronunciation is not good."

"The written text and spoken language are different, that is why it is hard to pronounce."

Based on the interview conducted, the letter silent "gh" is the most difficult to pronounce among the three ways of the letter "gh."

Table 2. Pronouncing Gh [f]

Word	IPA	Student's mispronounce			
		FW	AN	SL	RM
Cough	/kɒf/	/koj/	/kɒf/	/kɒf/	/kɒuf/
Draught	/dra:ft/	/drouj/	/drauf/	/drauf/	/drauf/
Enough	/ɪ'nʌf/	/inoj/	/ɪ'nʌf/	/ɪ'nʌf/	/ɪ'nʌf/
Laugh	/lɑ:f/	/laoj/	/lɑ:f/	/lɑ:f/	/lɑ:f/
Rough	/rʌf/	/rogh/	/rouf/	/rauf/	/rʌuf/
Tough	/tʌf/	/toj/	/tʌf/	/tʌf/	/tʌf/

Source: researchers' documentary

In Table 3, it was found that one of the students had difficulty pronouncing the [f] sound in the "gh" of all words. The student FW mistakenly pronounced the "gh" sound as a "j" sound. In contrast, the other three students found it easy to pronounce this sound. This indicates that

the [f] sound is easier for these students.

According to research by Maulidiana (2020), there were 92 errors out of a total of 240 sounds, meaning that 38% of participants mispronounced the [f] sound in "gh". Additionally, Angkarini (2023) concluded that some students often pronounced the word "laugh" with a [v] sound instead of a [f] sound. These issues are influenced by how they pronounce sounds in their first language.

"This [f] sound is quite easy for me because it is familiar and simple to pronounce."

Based on the interview, most of the students feel that the [f] on "gh" sound is the easiest way to pronounce rather than the two other methods.

Table 3. Pronouncing Gh [g]

Word	IPA	Student's mispronounce			
		FW	AN	SL	RM
Gherkin	/ˈgɜː.kɪn/	/gerkin/	/gerkin/	/gerkin/	/gerkin/
Ghetto	/ˈget.əʊ/	/getto/	/get to/	/gedo/	/ˈget.əʊ/
Ghoul	/guːl/	/ghol/	/gol/	/gul/	/gol/
Ghost	/gəʊst/	/ghos/	/gos/	/gus/	/gos/

Source: researchers' documentary

From Table 4, it can be concluded that all students are pronouncing the letter "gh" correctly, however, they mispronounce the vocal letters [əʊ], [e], and [u]. Additionally, how students pronounce "gh" is distinguished from the native speakers. Due to the difference between the Indonesian and English language rules, it is discovered that students face many difficulties in pronouncing English words. Same with the previous table, this problem also happened because the students expected that sounds would be produced in the same manner as they pronounce words in their native language.

One of the factors in mispronunciation is the influence of their mother tongue. The study conducted by Fadillah (2020) examined students from various ethnic backgrounds who speak different native languages, including Javanese, Malay, Minang, and Malay. The findings indicated that these students struggle with pronouncing the diphthong [av] but find it easier to pronounce the diphthong [ɔɪ]. This difficulty is largely due to the influence of their native languages. Listyani et al. (2024) noted that learners cannot ignore how their first language affects their ability to learn a second language. In interviews with students RM and FW, this influence was further highlighted.

"Because I am Indonesian and I think it'll be easy to pronounce the same as in the rules of Bahasa Indonesia."

Research conducted in Korea by Seo (2021) highlights the role of parents in helping their children become fluent in English is very important. To support their children's English speaking skills, parents should provide tutoring and engage in other helpful activities. Additionally, a study in China by Pan et.al (2021) found that most students accepted the unique features of "China English" as long as they could understand them. This indicates that it is acceptable to speak English using elements from one's native language, as long as the communication remains clear.

Besides their native language, a lack of motivation in speaking English also affects their pronunciation. Research conducted by Gilakjani et al. (2020) showed that 13 out of 50 Iranian students do not have enough motivation to learn English pronunciation. Meanwhile, the study of Pakistani students by Ikramullah et al. (2023) showed that lack of motivation is one of the psychological factors why students are not interested in learning English pronunciation. As quoted from students with initial FW and RM.

"I am not interested in learning this, I think understanding up to this is sufficient."

In contrast with the two other students, AN and SL are interested in learning phonology further. This can be proved by the following quote.

"I am interested because it could be material for improving speaking."

"I am somewhat interested in improving the correct pronunciation because it will be needed for the presentation."

According to Amoah & Yeboah (2021), Chinese students are fairly motivated to learn English pronunciation. The research conducted by Tan & Chee (2021) on students from different ethnic backgrounds shows that they gain motivation to learn English pronunciation by using QR code and Google Form media. Furthermore, Aditama & Sugiharto (2021) found that using Hypermedia improves students' motivation in learning English pronunciation. In short, motivation indeed affects students' interest in learning English pronunciation.

D. CONCLUSION

From the result of the discussion of this research, it can be concluded that the most difficult to pronounce "gh" sound is "gh" silent. However, the [f] is the easiest for 3 out of 4 students to pronounce. Besides, according to them, the [g] on "gh" sound is in the middle position. This happened because of some factors, as mentioned by the students' initial FW and RM.

This research found that mispronunciation of English consonants occurs due to two factors. The mother tongue is one of the biggest influences on students' pronunciation. Especially for the students with strong Javanese accents. It should be noted that the phonological rules in English and Indonesian are different, especially in the pronunciation of "gh." This also makes it difficult for students to pronounce perfectly, unless with continuous practice. The second is a lack of motivation to learn English pronunciation. Students will feel satisfied with knowing the meaning or pronouncing it with the correct accent, but they are not interested in further studying.

The scope of this research is students with strong Javanese accents. Besides, researchers conducted only three ways of "gh" letters which are "gh" silent, gh [f], gh [g]. Due to research limitations, further research can be conducted on other consonants or at a different academic level.

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