

## THE PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET AMONG STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF SRIWIJAYA POLYTECHNIC

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**ABSTRACT:** This study was conducted for the purpose of investigating the students' use of International Phonetic Alphabet in the English Department of State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya. It is well known that English words are difficult to read and pronounce due to several factors. For instance, most of the words are not pronounced the way they are spelled. In other words, the letters in English alphabet are not always the exact representation of the sounds they are trying to symbolize in the written form. Therefore, the writers were in great intention of pointing out that there was a solution that would put an end to it called the International Phonetic alphabet. Besides, the writers were also curious about the students' familiarity towards the English phonetic symbols. After the study was completed, it was found that the majority of the students were still unaware of the existence the International Phonetic Alphabet and thus, they were not in the practice of using it properly to improve their English pronunciation.

**Keywords:** *International phonetic alphabet, pronounce, sound, symbol*

English is not a language whose writing is easy to read even though it uses Latin script just like Indonesian language. In Bahasa Indonesia, there is a certainty of how a word sounds if a certain consonant combines with a certain vowel. In English, such consistency is almost non-existent. Let us take the letter "U" for instance. All Indonesian people will know how to pronounce "susu" and all of them will say the word with the same sound without any doubt. In English, the letter "U" is pronounced "ju" in its alphabet. However, when it meets another letter there is a great chance that it will make a different sound, for example "ununiversity", "cuut", "cuute", "puut", "tongue", etc.

In Bahasa Indonesia, an individual letter symbolizes only a certain sound, with just very few exceptions, of course. In addition, every letter will not be left unsounded. Let us take a random word like "*mempertanggungjawabkan*". In this word, like with so many other words in Bahasa Indonesia, every single letter is pronounced the way it is supposed to be thoroughly without any exception. This does not seem to be the case in English. The following words prove that some letters are just standing there without the chance of contributing sound to the words: '*night*', '*numb*', '*through*', '*autumn*', '*know*', '*Wednesday*', '*subtle*', '*debt*', etc. It is rather sad that they are invited to turn up on this particular occasion but their being there is merely ignored. They are just silent like they

do not exist, even though they are clearly visible to the eyes.

To add to the weirdness, some words, whose spellings are of the exact same letters, are pronounced differently depending on the word class they belong to. The following words are very popular and frequently used. However, their popularity may not correlate with the correctness of their pronunciation when it comes to the tongue of the English learners. The word “present” as a noun is not pronounced the same way as it changes form into a verb. Its collection of letters is still unchanged but the sound it makes is no longer similar. The word “object” and “object” present themselves as a carbon copy of each other but a fatal mistake produces itself once we recognize them as a noun and the other as a verb. The followings are the other words causing such confusion in term of pronunciation when connected with the different word classes where they come from: ‘tear’, ‘dove’, ‘lead’, ‘close’, ‘use’, ‘wound’, ‘desert’, ‘content’, ‘separate’, ‘deliberate’, and so many others.

Diphthongs in English also do not guarantee producing the same sound when two different vowel sounds standing next to each other come into view. One clear set of examples here is as follows: ‘head’, ‘dead’, ‘bread’, ‘dread’, ‘read(v2)’. The combination of “e” plus “a” produces the sound “e” like “*teh*” in Bahasa Indonesia. However, there is a question of whether or not they will maintain the same sound when this diphthong comes into contact with other words. How about the words like ‘meat’, ‘beat’, ‘feat’, ‘neat’ dan ‘freak’? It turns out that the combination of “e+a” here produces a sound like “i” in Bahasa Indonesia in words like “*jijik*”, “*bibi*”, “*mimik*”, “*titip*”, etc. The sound “e” in this case has lost its function and is no longer taken into account. Unfortunately, another challenge present itself when the word “great” and “break” make their way to our already confused state of mind. We have to decide now if the diphthong should sound like “e” in the word “*teh*” or “i” in the word “*jijik*”. Any sound decided based upon the previous discussion will in no way meet a positive result. The fact is that neither the sound “e” nor “i” is in effect now. The sound “ei” like in “*day*” and “*say*” take its turn to show its power now.

From the above discussion, it can definitely be said that letters in English may not function as the symbols of sounds the way they do in Bahasa Indonesia. The combination of letters in an English word may sound quite different under certain contextual occurrences, even though the said word contains the exact same letters. This situation is

at times not a very good news for those learners of English, especially for the Indonesian students who have been so accustomed to the reliability of their letters which are the exact representation of the sounds in their language.

One of the solutions to solve the problem above is by making ‘sound generalization’. As English learners, we certainly have enough vocabulary in our memory or repertoire to decide how certain words we come across should be pronounced. Let us say that our level of English is still basic and our vocabulary is not that advanced. However, this would not stop us from instinctively guessing the sound of the new word especially when they have similarities with the words we have already known. For example, the words such as spoon, room, soon, mood, food, moon, tooth, zoom, fool, are no strangers to us and very common and basic in English. Therefore, if we find a word that we have never seen before like “ooze”, it is very likely that we shall be able to pronounce the word correctly since it has the same combination of double letter “oo” in it. Let us take another example with the following words: ‘but’ ‘fun’ ‘rung’ ‘run’ ‘swum’ ‘duck’ ‘cup’ ‘cut’ ‘shut’ ‘punch’. The letter “u” is pronounced “a” like in “makan” in Bahasa Indonesia. From here we can figure out how to pronounce “u” in more difficult words such as ‘bung’ ‘blunt’ ‘buff’ ‘bulk’ ‘tuck’. This is called ‘sound generalization’ and this simple method shows its glory in the two cases above.

However, does the above method have the strongest background for us to completely depend on it? This ‘sound generalization’ may work with certain words but it does not always do the trick. Take the word “put”, for instance. The letter “u” is pronounced like ‘putri” in Bahasa Indonesia and it does not represent the sound “a” like in makan. In other words, the word “put” does not seem to be on the same league as “but”, “fun”, “run”, etc. This so called “sound generalization” fails to do its magic this time. Therefore, we must find another method that works 100% accurate, and this method is called “International Phonetic Alphabet” or “IPA” for short.

## INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system of phonetic notation devised by linguists to accurately and uniquely represent each of the wide variety of sounds (phones or phonemes) used in spoken human language. It is intended as a notational

standard for the phonemic and phonetic representation of all spoken languages (Wiktionary, 2020).

As for the word 'alphabet' alone, Hornby (1987) mentioned that alphabet is a set of letters, arranged in a particular order, and used in writing. He also declared that phonetic is an adjective form of Phonetics which is the study and science of speech sound. Therefore, phonetic alphabet deals with how speech sounds are presented in the form of writing or letters and symbols.

In Indonesian language it is understood that letters are supposed to do the job as the phonetic representation of spoken language. In English, it could be quite a different case. Words are spelled differently from the way they are pronounced. Encyclopaedia Britannica (2020) adds that International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), an alphabet developed in the 19th century to accurately represent the pronunciation of languages. One aim of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was to provide a unique symbol for each distinctive sound in a language—that is, every sound, or phoneme, that serves to distinguish one word from another.

The above statements have confirmed that IPA is a particular way of pronouncing words or reading out sentences aloud. The phonetic symbols could visually be unique because they are in charge of representing unique and typical sounds in that particular language, the sounds which may not exist in other languages. However, these symbols may also look like the ordinary letters because they actually represent generally used sounds which are in most languages especially those benefitting from Latin letters just like English and Indonesian language.

**Table 1.** The Visualization of International Phonetic Alphabet (Phonetic Symbols)

## Phonetic symbols used in the dictionary

### Consonants

p	pen	/pen/	s	so	/səʊ/
b	bad	/bæd/	z	zoo	/zu:/
t	tea	/ti:/	ʃ	shoe	/ʃu:/
d	did	/dɪd/	ʒ	vision	/ˈvɪʒn/
k	cat	/kæt/	h	hat	/hæt/
g	got	/gɒt/	m	man	/mæn/
tʃ	chain	/tʃeɪn/	n	no	/nəʊ/
dʒ	jam	/dʒæm/	ŋ	sing	/sɪŋ/
f	fall	/fɔ:l/	l	leg	/leg/
v	van	/væn/	r	red	/red/
θ	thin	/θɪn/	j	yes	/jes/
ð	this	/ðɪs/	w	wet	/wet/

### Vowels and diphthongs

i:	see	/si:/	ʌ	cup	/kʌp/
ɪ	happy	/ˈhæpi/	ɜ:	bird	/bɜ:d/
ɪ	sit	/sɪt/	ə	about	/əˈbaʊt/
e	ten	/ten/	eɪ	say	/seɪ/
æ	cat	/kæt/	əʊ	go	/gəʊ/
ɑ:	father	/ˈfɑ:ðə(r)/	aɪ	five	/faɪv/
ɒ	got	/gɒt/	aʊ	now	/naʊ/
ɔ:	saw	/sɔ:/	ɔɪ	boy	/bɔɪ/
ʊ	put	/pʊt/	ɪə	near	/nɪə(r)/
u	actual	/ˈæktʃuəl/	eə	hair	/heə(r)/
u:	too	/tu:/	ʊə	pure	/pjʊə(r)/

(r) indicates that British pronunciation will have /r/ only if a vowel sound follows directly; otherwise it is omitted. In American pronunciation, every 'r' of the ordinary spelling is retained.

Based on the above visualization, (source: englishlearnsite.com, 2020), it is quite clear that some phonetic symbols have the same forms as letters. This is caused by the fact that they actually represent the exact same sounds as letters. Look at the following table:

**Table 2.** Phonetic Symbols with Identical Letters

Phonetic Symbols	Words
P	<u>P</u> ut
B	<u>B</u> ook
T	<u>T</u> ake
D	<u>D</u> ig
K	<u>K</u> ind
G	<u>G</u> o
F	<u>F</u> ine
etc.	

However, some other phonetic symbols have unique visualization. This is due to the fact that they represent the sounds which do not exist in, for instance, Bahasa Indonesia. Words like 'thick' 'thumb' 'thin', 'three', etc. whose initial sound is **θ**, is nowhere to be found among Indonesian sounds (visitpare.com, 2020). That sound which is symbolized similarly to the letter "O" with a horizontal line in the middle, can be found at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a word in English. In the words like 'bathroom', 'anything', 'nothing', the sound exists right in the middle, while in 'tooth', 'breath', 'death', 'both', etc. the sound stays at the end. Even though its position can be anywhere, the sound remains the same. Some other phonetic symbols with their unique forms can be observed in the following table:

**Table 3.** Phonetic Symbols in Unique Visualization

Phonetic Symbols	Words
<b>θ</b>	<u>Th</u> in
<b>ʃ</b>	<u>Sh</u> ut
<b>ʒ</b>	Le <u>is</u> ure
<b>ʌ</b>	H <u>u</u> t
<b>æ</b>	B <u>a</u> d
<b>ð</b>	<u>Th</u> at
<b>ŋ</b>	S <u>ing</u>
etc.	

There are quite a few sounds of English which are causing troubles to the Indonesian tongues such as (ð ʒ θ ʃ ɔ: ɜ: u: æ). Even the slightest mistake in producing these sounds would change the meaning entirely. Take a look at these two words “bag” and “beg”. The first is symbolized with (bæg) which means ‘a container used to carry things from place to place’, while the second comes with (beg) which means ‘ask for something’. Our lack of understanding toward the phonetic symbols and how they represent sounds will cause us to be unaware that those two words are basically different in sounds and thus, described in different forms of symbols as well. This situation may be looked down upon by Indonesian students learning English by claiming that the context of the sentence should clear up the meaning itself. However, if this thought made to justify one’s ignorance should remain without being contradicted, one would never learn to improve one’s pronunciation.

With proper understanding toward International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), English learners will be more aware of the necessity to develop their critical thinking in facing linguistic problems especially when dealing with English pronunciation and will not attempt to read the English words through the perspective of Indonesian pronunciation practice. Symbolization of sounds named phonetic symbols will confirm and ascertain that certain sounds in English may have been quite similar to the ones in Indonesian language but at the same time contrast the differences. The meanings in English may differ greatly even in a situation where the pronunciation deviates just a little bit from the original sound of a particular word. Ignorance of the usage of the phonetic symbols opens up a great opportunity for us to wrongly pronounce a new English word because everything is just based on mere assumption. On the contrary, understanding the phonetic symbols with such distinctive visualizations will provide accurate and objective guidance towards how a word should be pronounced properly in English. International Phonetic Alphabet or phonetic symbols will never fail to solve lots of pronunciation ambiguities for the English learning students.

### **The Importance of Knowing IPA**

There are some factors that urge us to learn and master the International Phonetic Alphabet, which are:



1. Words in English are mostly pronounced differently from the way they are spelled. Therefore, the use of phonetic symbols which actually represent the sounds the way they do in Bahasa Indonesia will help guide us to be able to pronounce the English words with certainty and assurance.
2. Some English sounds do not have the equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia. By learning the phonetic symbols, we are given the chance to specifically learn the new sounds which are possibly very difficult to be pronounced by the Indonesian tongue. But once we take on the challenge, our English will sound more natural just like the native speakers. Our speech will be more understandable, especially to those whose mother tongue is English.
3. The complete monolingual dictionary like Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary provides International Phonetic Alphabet in it. It would be such a pity if such valuable information were meaningless to us and looked as if it were just some kind of artistic illustration of the dictionary. If that really happens, it means that we have lost the opportunity to gain lots of important information connected with pronunciation which we should have mastered.
4. If we have understood how a word is pronounced in English through those phonetic symbols, we shall be able to pronounce any English word at all, even those of such a weird combination of letters just like '*meerschaum*' '*usurp*' '*gadolinium*' '*demesne*', if those words ever existed. We shall be able to do it without having to bother other people to pronounce those words for us and without having the slightest doubt about the accuracy of the sound we shall produce from reading those extraordinary weird-looking words.

## METHOD

The subject of the study was "The Practice of International Phonetic Alphabet among students of English Department of Sriwijaya Polytechnic". Descriptive research design was employed in doing this research. According to ResearchGuides (2017, pg. 1), Descriptive research was used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to describe "what exists" with respect to variables or conditions in a situation. The population was all the first year students of English department who had

been studying in State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya for almost 11 months. There were 45 samples taken out of this population comprising two morning classes and two afternoon classes.

Questionnaires were used as the instruments to obtain the data. the questionnaires were presented in English language since they were all the English students themselves. Each item of the questionnaires had four answers which the respondents would have to choose one of them. The choice had to be based on their real-life activities related to the topic of research. The choices were grouped and calculated in percentage to discover their use of International Phonetic Alphabet in improving their English pronunciation. In order to find out the information on students' practice of International English Alphabet, and to analyze the data from the questionnaires, the data classification and analysis of frequency and percentage had been be applied

## **FINDINGS**

All the data obtained throughout the research were described in the form of narration on how the students had been using the International Phonetic Alphabet in improving their English pronunciation. The descriptive method was used because it was considered to be the most suited to the research objectives. The connection between the data and the description had been confirmed to be more vivid and reliable due to the direct analysis and narration being applied.

The findings were collected in groups for individual analysis to answer the research questions. There were 45 students taking part in the research as respondents. They described recognition and use of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Percentage was also made to discover the students' tendency of familiarity towards the subject being discussed.

## **DISCUSSION**

- When the phrase “International Phonetic Alphabet” met the eyes of the respondents, 40% of them acknowledged that they had no idea of what it was. It was just a total stranger to them. There was a great possibility that they had never learned about it either formally or informally. To add to the rather sad fact, 40% of them admitted that they only had very little knowledge about the symbols and that was merely due to the similarity of form between the symbols and the letters of the alphabet. It was very clear



that they actually referred to such symbols as **t, k, d, f**, etc. which represented sounds similar to those of the letters. As for the weird looking symbols like **θ, ʒ, ð, θ**, they must have felt like meeting aliens from the other planet. In addition, 15.6% of the respondents said that they were not sure of what the International Phonetic Alphabet was all about. They might have tried to guess what the phrase meant, but they could not be 100% certain of the kind of advantage that this phrase would present them with. Only 4.4% of the respondents revealed the fact that they were quite familiar with these symbols of sound. However, when 95.6% out of the whole respondents declined their familiarity with the subject, the 4.4% of those with good recognition of the symbols would not really bring pride to the world of English education. A lot was indeed still in need of improvement.

- The next question that the respondents needed to respond to was if they actually thought that International Phonetic Alphabet could function as letters in Bahasa Indonesia. As it had been well-known, letters in Bahasa Indonesia represented sounds constantly and their accuracy was quite reliable linguistically. 35.6% of the respondents just said that they had no idea. 28.9% stated that they were not sure. 13.3%, this could be the most disturbing answers, showed their disapproval of the matter. They disagreed that International Phonetic Alphabet could be a solution to read English words independently. That was very contradictory to most, if not all, the linguistic information concerning this subject. However, since most of them were not quite well-informed about the International Phonetic Alphabet, it was considered that what they had in mind was just an opinion based on their unrecognition towards the subject itself. As for the rest 22.2%, it was found that they agreed on the functionality of the topic of the discussion. However, the scale weighed too much down on the left or negative side rather than on the right or positive side. The 77.8%, who were still in the dark, were quite unbeatable by those 22.2% who had seen the light or understood the use and functionality of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The respondents, in this case the students involved in the research, were still unaware of the existence of the International Phonetic Alphabet. The majority of them

had no idea of what it was and how it could function to improve their pronunciation. This unfamiliarity towards the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) had led to their inactivity in using these very useful phonetic symbols. However, since these students were still in their freshman year, there was still a chance for them to get to know, learn and finally made the most use of this very important reading system.

Finally, the writers suggest that teachers/lecturers be more enthusiastic about providing subjects on the International Phonetic Alphabet, encourage students to investigate how those unique symbols are pronounced by the native speakers of English, especially on the internet. There are a lot of discussions about it online which students and teachers/lecturers can benefit from.

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