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Listen, Repeat, Fossilize: Introducing the English Pronunciation to Young Learners

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Abstract: *This paper addresses the mastery of English pronunciation for young learners. This is very prominent for them in acquiring a new language. Thus, the purpose of the community service activity was to introduce English phonetic symbols, especially vowels. This activity was conducted at one of the orphanages in Palembang, South Sumatra. The twelve participants were selected via convenience sampling; they were all female and between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. The pretest and posttest were administered to assess the progress of the young learners' pronunciation mastery. The results showed that the obtained value was much higher than the t-table value, and the p-value was much lower than 0.5. Besides, there were improvement between the pretest and posttest in the mean score. The mean score of the pretest was 33.258 and posttest was 49.608. Therefore, pronunciation mastery improved slightly among the young learners. Eventually, the findings show that learning English phonetic symbols, particularly vowels, can help young learners improve their pronunciation. Therefore, incorporating phonetic symbols into English learning activities can help young learners pronounce words more accurately and speak with greater confidence.*
Keywords*: English Pronunciation, Vowels, teaching, young learners*

Abstrak: Artikel ini membahas penguasaan pengucapan bahasa Inggris bagi pelajar muda. Oleh karena itu, tujuan kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat ini adalah memperkenalkan simbol fonetik, khususnya huruf hidup. Kegiatan ini dilaksanakan disalah satu panti asuhan yang terletak di Palembang, Sumatra Selatan. Sebanyak dua belas partisipan terpilih, mereka semua perempuan yang berumur antara tiga belas dan delapan belas tahun. Tes di awal dan di akhir diberikan untuk mengukur ketercapaian penguasaan pengucapan pelajar muda. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa t hasil lebih besar dari t-table, dan nilai p lebih rendah dari 0.5. Selain itu, ada peningkatan nilai mean antara nilai sebelum dan sesudah tes. Nilai mean di awal sebesar 33.258 dan nilai mean diakhir sebesar 49.608. Oleh karena itu, penguasaan pengucapan sedikit meningkat di kalangan pelajar muda. Pada akhirnya, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa mempelajari simbol fonetik bahasa Inggris, terutama vokal, dapat membantu pelajar muda meningkatkan pengucapan mereka. Jadi, memasukkan simbol fonetik dalam kegiatan belajar bahasa Inggris bisa membantu pelajar muda mengucapkan kata dengan lebih tepat dan berbicara dengan lebih percaya diri.
Kata kunci: pengucapan bahasa Inggris, huruf hidup, pengajaran, pelajar muda

1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation, as an essential element of spoken English, greatly affects intelligibility and communicative efficacy, particularly within the context of speaking skills. According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) intelligible pronunciation allows speakers to accurately transmit meaning and be understood by a wide range of interlocutors, particularly in English as a lingua franca (ELF) context. Pronunciation is a foundational element of oral communication that directly affects a speaker's intelligibility and social perception. Research has consistently demonstrated that pronunciation, more than grammatical accuracy or lexical richness, is the primary determinant of whether a non-native speaker is understood in cross-cultural interactions (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Intelligibility—the degree to which a listener can understand a speaker—is heavily influenced by segmental features (individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, and intonation). Poor control of these elements can obscure meaning, even when vocabulary and grammar are accurate, thereby limiting effective participation in academic, professional, and social settings (Levis, 2018). Consequently, prioritizing pronunciation in language instruction helps learners achieve functional communicative success.

English vowel sounds are a crucial part of segmental phonology because they can differentiate word meaning, going beyond pronunciation's general significance. However, learners may find it challenging to recognize and produce English vowels that are different from the sound categories in their native tongue. Yusuf et al. (2024) investigated the production of English vowels

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(monophthongs) among Acehnese students in a study of Indonesian EFL learners. They discovered that a number of vowel pairs were produced similarly, suggesting challenges in retaining specific vowel differences. The benefits of phonetic instruction are also supported by more recent research. Zhang & Yao (2025) discovered that learners in China were better able to differentiate between certain English vowel sounds when they received explicit phonetic instruction. These results collectively imply that vowel recognition and discrimination are crucial factors to take into account while teaching pronunciation, even though the specific challenges may differ depending on the language backgrounds of the students.

Phonetic symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) can be used to introduce English vowel sounds for educational purposes. In a traditional British English model, the monophthong inventory is commonly presented using 12 symbols: /iː/ as in see, /ɪ/ as in sit, /e/ as in bed, /æ/ as in man, /ɑː/ as in father, /ɒ/ as in hot, /ɔː/ as in law, /ʊ/ as in put, /uː/ as in food, /ʌ/ as in sun, /ɜː/ as in bird, and /ə/ as in about. Although the precise vowel inventory and transcription rules may vary among English dialects, these symbols offer a means of representing and comparing vowel sounds. Therefore, rather than providing lengthy technical explanation, the symbols should be given to young learners using straightforward examples and reinforced by listening, repetition, and word recognition exercises. In a study of primary school kids' pronunciation teaching, Abe (2024) revealed that phonics-based exercises were both helpful and entertaining, highlighting the need of age-appropriate education. Building on this body of work, the current study aims to teach young students how to pronounce English words, especially vowel sounds.

In addition, pronunciation influences listeners' views and judgements of non-native speakers. According to sociolinguistic studies, accented speech can elicit unconscious biases, influencing perceptions of credibility, competence, and even employability (Munro & Derwing, 2011). For instance, speakers with strong foreign accents may be seen as less educated or fluent, regardless of their actual language skills. This "accent bias" emphasises the necessity of developing intelligible pronunciation for efficient communication, as well as social fairness and inclusion. As a result, pronunciation teaching should be considered not only as a technical talent, but also as a sociocultural tool that enables students to negotiate globalised communication situations confidently and fairly.

Over the last decade, the instruction of pronunciation has encountered continuous issues due to marginalization in language curricula and teacher preparation. Despite empirical evidence demonstrating its importance, pronunciation is often overlooked in many English language teaching (ELT) programs around the world (Levis et al., 2022). Instructors commonly describe a lack of confidence and training in teaching pronunciation successfully, generally relying on incidental correction rather than systematic instruction. This negligence is exacerbated by the idea that pronunciation improves naturally with exposure, a claim countered by research demonstrating that explicit instruction produces considerably superior results (Derwing & Rossiter, 2023).

Another significant difficulty in recent years has been the shifting conceptualization of pronunciation goals in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Traditional native-speaker norms, such as those based on Received Pronunciation or General American English, are increasingly being criticized as unrealistic and culturally exclusive (Jenkins, 2015). Researchers now advocate for "intelligibility-based" goals that prioritize mutual comprehension among non-native speakers over the removal of accents. However, the shift to more inclusive frameworks has been sluggish, with many textbooks and standardized examinations (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) remaining based on native-speaker models. This discrepancy between research consensus and pedagogical practice continues to impede equitable and effective pronunciation instruction in the 2010s and 2020s (Walker, 2022).

Mispronunciations that distort phonemic distinctions—such as confusing /l/ and /r/ or omitting consonant clusters—can impede message clarity and lead to communication breakdowns (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Furthermore, Indonesian speakers struggle to identify the sounds /θ/ and /ð/, which are not included in the Indonesian phonetic system. These sounds are often articulated as /t/ or /d/. Therefore, explicit attention to pronunciation in language instruction is not merely an aesthetic concern but a functional necessity that supports successful oral interaction and global

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communication. In conclusion, this paper examines the effect of introducing pronunciation, especially vowels, to young learners.

2. METHOD

The community service activity employed a quantitative approach, focusing on a pre-experimental design. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), quantitative research uses a formal process for testing of objective theories through analysis of the relationship between variables that can be measured and the use of statistical methods to analyze the numbers generated from those measurements. Similarly, Lim (2025) asserts that quantitative research involves the formal measurement and analysis of numbers to study a phenomenon and provide empirical evidence to support a conclusion. In the context of this community service, this means the instructor is not just observing the participants; she is systematically measuring the impact of phonetic symbol drills on their vowel pronunciation accuracy to see if a statistically significant relationship exists. By comparing the students' performance before and after an educational intervention, this method is helpful for assessing learning outcomes in English language teaching (ELT), such as pronunciation accuracy. More precisely, this activity adopted a pre-experimental design. A pre-experimental design involves implementing an intervention with limited experimental control, commonly without a control group. Creswell & Creswell (2018) identify several forms of pre-experimental design, including the one-shot case study and the one-group pretest-posttest design. In this activity, the instructor applied a one-group pretest-posttest design. This design was intended to evaluate participants' vowel pronunciation performance following phonetic symbol drills. If pretest and posttest scores were collected, the differences between the two measurements could be analyzed to assess changes in pronunciation accuracy. However, any improvement should be interpreted cautiously because other factors may also have influenced participants' performance.

Then, a convenience sample was used to select twelve participants, all of whom were female and aged 13 to 18 years. Salkind (2010) asserts that convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which involves selecting participants from a population based on their accessibility and availability. In addition, Etikan el al. (2016) explain that convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method used when participants are selected based on their convenient accessibility to the researcher.

This community service activity was held at one of the orphanages in Palembang, South Sumatra. There were some procedures before conducting this activity as follows: (1) the *PKM* (*Program Kemitraan Masyarakat*) team held a meeting and decided on the topics they were going to cover, (2) the *PKM* (*Program Kemitraan Masyarakat*) team proposed a letter to the Aisyiyah Humairah Orphanage Board, (3) the *PKM* (*Program Kemitraan Masyarakat*) team prepared the pretest and posttest, learning materials, teaching aids, and other supporting kits, (4) the PKM team set the schedule for implementing the community service, (5) on the day of giving community service, the *PKM* (*Program Kemitraan Masyarakat*) team of UIGM *(Universitas Indo Global Mandiri)* carried out their job.

In addition, the teaching procedures for introducing English pronunciation to young learners were also done as follows: (1) the instructor welcomed the activity by greeting the participants, (2) the instructor made a short introduction, (3) the instructor gave some questions related to the topics, (4) the instructor introduced the phonetic symbols of vowels by showing them through PPT (Power Point Presentation), (5) the instructor exemplified on how to pronounced those vowels properly, (6) the instructor asked the students to do individual repetition, (7) the instructor asked the students to do choral repetition, (8) the instructor showed some vocabularies through PPT (Power Point Presentation) and asked the participants to repeat them one by one, (9) the instructor made gentle correction if the participants mispronounced the words, (10) the instructor reviewed all the learning materials, (11) the instructor assigned the participants to do some exercises. Some activities are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

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Before and after the intervention, participants were assigned to complete the test using the given materials. A pretest was administered to assess the participants' initial skill. Then, a post-test was assigned to see their progress toward pronunciation mastery, especially vowels. The instructor created the test in relation to the material that had been studied. The test consisted of five questions in the form of English vowel phonemes' recognition. Three out of five consisted of two vowels each, and the rest consisted of three vowels each. The instructor provided the phonetic symbols. Then, the participants had to select which word best suited the phonetic symbols. To figure out their correct answers in the pretest and posttest after being taught using vowels, the instructor scored and analysed them by using descriptive analysis with SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Two statistical analyses were computed to get the results, such as the descriptive analysis and the progressive analysis. Following all statistical studies, a detailed and itemised interpretation was presented methodically.



Figure 1. Instructing the Participants to do the Test



Figure 2. Explaining the Vowels

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After completing the community service, the instructor collected the data and analyzed it using SPSS. The data in Table 1 show that participants demonstrated significantly low proficiency in English pronunciation before the intervention. The overall mean score was 33.258, with all 12 participants (100%) falling into the lower achievement categories. Specifically, 9 participants (75%) scored below 50, classified as "Fail," while 3 participants (25%) scored between 50-59, categorized as "Poor." No participants achieved scores in the Sufficient, Good, or Very Good ranges. The standard deviation of 4.7920 for the Poor group and 10.9680 for the Fail group indicated considerable variability within these lower performance bands, suggesting heterogeneous baseline abilities among participants despite uniformly poor outcomes. It could be concluded that the participants' prior

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knowledge of pronunciation practice, especially of vowels, was still pathetic. The complete scores can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. The Participants' Scores before being Introduced to Vowels

Score Range	Level of Achievement	Pretest		
		Mean Score	**SD**	**Frequency and percentage**
85-100	Very good	-	-	-
70-84	Good	-	-	-
60-69	Sufficient	-	-	-
50-59	Poor	52.767	4.7920	3 (25 %)
Below 50	Fail	26.756	10.9680	9 (75 %)
Total		**33.258**		**12 (100%)**

In contrast, Table 2 shows the improvement of the participants' knowledge. Following the intervention, the overall mean score increased to 49.608, representing a gain of 16.35 points (approximately 49% improvement). More importantly, the distribution of scores shifted meaningfully toward higher achievement levels. While 4 participants (33.3%) remained in the Fail category, this represented a reduction from the initial 75%. Similarly, 6 participants (50%) moved into the Poor category, up from 25% at pretest. Most notably, 2 participants (16.6% combined) achieved scores in the Sufficient (8.3%) and Good (8.3%) ranges—categories that were not represented on the pretest. This emergence of participants in higher achievement brackets indicates that the intervention successfully enabled some learners to transcend their initial limitations.

Table 2. The Participants' Scores after being Introduced to Vowels

Score Range	Level of Achievement	Posttest		
		Mean Score	**SD**	**Frequency and percentage**
85-100	Very good	-	-	-
70-84	Good		0	1 (8.3 %)
60-69	Sufficient		0	1 (8.3 %)
50-59	Poor			6 (50 %)
Below 50	Fail			4 (33.3%)
Total		49.608		**12 (100%)**

Regarding the results of this community service, there was a slight improvement in young learners' pronunciation, especially of vowels. Some reasons might have caused this. First, the young learners were exposed to the vowels specifically by showing the phonetic symbols through the slides. This activity can improve their pronunciation and help them memorize each phonetic symbol. Second, the young learners were shown a big and colourful picture for each phonetic symbol. This activity stimulated the young learners' prior knowledge of the proper use of vowels in daily activities. Third, the young learners were directed to pronounce and spell all vowels in turn to activate their awareness of the correct pronunciation. This is in line with Suryaleksana et al., (2022, p. 10), who found that teaching pronunciation by showing phonetic symbols using IPA helped students pronounce words correctly. Besides, the instructor asked the young learners to give an example of a word that consists of vowels. This activity lets the young learner know that pronouncing the word properly is an essential component of communicative competence. This statement is supported by Caleffi, (2023), who found that teaching pronunciation is crucial for young learners, as it is one of the components they should acquire.

Apart from that, the instructor drilled minimal pairs featuring the vowels such as /ɪ/-/iː/ and /æ/-/ʌ/ to activate their critical thinking. This is supported by Nur, I., & Rahman (2018), who found that minimal pairs can activate students' critical thinking through vowel comparison. Having the same thought, Chen (2022) and Creel. & Frye (2023) also revealed that phonemic contrast comparison can activate EFL Learners' critical thinking. In addition, the instructor gave corrective

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feedback once she found the young learners mispronounced the words. It is useful for young learners to have qualified input and receive teachers' feedback to help young learners self-correct their mistakes in pronunciation practices (Saito & Lyster, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The community service program made a noticeable difference in the children's English pronunciation. The data showed clear improvement, and practically speaking, nearly 50% of participants advanced to a higher achievement level. These results support earlier research on pronunciation teaching, but they also push the conversation forward by showing how important it is to start early and teach systematically. We still face some obstacles, like accommodating different learning speeds and making sure progress sticks over time. That said, the "LISTEN, REPEAT, FOSSILIZE" model has real potential as a practical tool that could be expanded to other community-based English programs for young learners.

Additionally, this program emphasizes how important it is to give young learners in community-based learning settings easily accessible and interesting English pronunciation education. Young learners can increase their awareness of English vowel sounds and confidence in their ability to pronounce English words by using phonetic symbols in conjunction with repetition exercises. Future programs should include frequent practice, tailored feedback, and regular evaluations to track students' development over time in order to maintain these gains. To guaranty that pronunciation practice continues after the intervention time, cooperation between instructors, volunteers, and community organizations is particularly essential.

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