

Mastering English Diphthongs: Phonological Challenges and Patterns Among Sikka Students in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the pronunciation of English diphthongs by Sikka students in Yogyakarta, focusing on the phonological challenges and patterns that emerge. The researcher used descriptive qualitative by employing interviews and observations. The participants were ten Sikka students aged 19-34 with varying English learning backgrounds. The researcher asked students to read a text that had diphthongs and compared students' English diphthong pronunciation with the Oxford Dictionary (1995) and Longman Dictionary (2008). The findings show that despite the duration of English language exposure, the participants had difficulties pronouncing English diphthongs correctly. The text contained eight diphthongs, which were included in nineteen words. The data demonstrate that most participants incorrectly pronounced eleven words, which were included in six diphthongs, whilst simultaneously pronouncing eight words, which were included in eight diphthongs, correctly. Analysis indicates that the mispronunciations stem from factors such as the absence of similar diphthongs in the Sikka language, unfamiliarity with English phonology, limited practice, and a lack of focus on diphthongs during language learning. The research addresses a gap in current literature by exploring the impact of the Sikka language, a prevalent local language, on English pronunciation.

I. Introduction

Most Indonesian students do not utilize the target language daily [1]. Pronunciation proficiency is the capacity to produce sounds and spellings that are shaped by direct engagement with the act of language use. [2] It is stated that English is perceived as challenging to pronounce due to the discrepancy between written symbols and spoken sounds. This is due to the significant discrepancy between understanding the appropriate spelling of a word and being able to spell it accurately. To illustrate, the vowels and consonants in English transform when they are incorporated into words. Conversely, Indonesian pronunciation does not distinguish the sounds produced after a word.

Then, according to Ramelan, there are three key pronunciation challenges Indonesian students face when learning English. 1.) The transfer of language habits, whereby learners often find it challenging to apply their existing linguistic patterns to a new language. In the case of English, this manifests in particular difficulties with speaking skills. 2.) Elemental differences between the native language and the target language. The English language has a multitude of sound patterns [3]. Furthermore, [4] defines pronunciation as follows: (a) how a language is spoken, (b) how a word is pronounced, and (2) how a person pronounces the words of a language. Two types of pronunciation can be distinguished. The first can be defined as 'good' pronunciation, characterized as speaking that all laypeople can clearly understand. 'Bad' pronunciation is a mode of articulation that is challenging for most individuals to comprehend [5]

[6] English diphthongs are a challenging aspect of pronunciation for non-native speakers, particularly those without similar sounds in their native language. Each diphthong involves specific tongue movements and transitions between vowels, such as /eɪ/ in words like ‘attack’, /aɪ/ in ‘mine’, /ɔɪ/ in ‘land’, /aʊ/ in ‘sow’, /əʊ/ in ‘go’, /ɪə/ in ‘afraid’, /eə/ in ‘hair’, and /ʊə/ in ‘sure’. We must comprehensively understand the correct pronunciation to avoid any potential misunderstandings between speakers and listeners. Nevertheless, some researchers, including have previously attempted to identify the factors that influence students’ pronunciation. These factors include the student’s mother tongue, age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, language identity and ego, and motivation and concern for good pronunciation ability [7]–[9]. These factors appear to influence teaching and learning pronunciation. It revealed that mother tongue interference can impact pronunciation in learners from regions like Sikka Regency in Indonesia, where residents from Flores Island may struggle with English diphthongs due to linguistic influences from their local language, Sikka Krowe [10]. Local linguistic features can affect Sikka students’ pronunciation patterns, highlighting the link between native language traits and English language learning. Understanding and improving EFL students’ ability to pronounce English diphthongs is essential, with reading challenges recommended for assessment and enhancement of this skill [11].

Nevertheless, previous studies have addressed the same topic: diphthong pronunciation. Firstly, research by [12] examines the pronunciation problems of English diphthongs encountered by Saudi Arabian students at Albaha University, Saudi Arabia—a case study in Almandag. The second research study [13] examines the mispronunciation of English monophthongs and diphthongs among Malay native speakers. Thirdly, research by [14] on the intelligibility of Thai English pronunciation in an English as a Lingua Franca context. Fourthly, [15] research on the monophthongization of oral falling diphthongs in Brazilian Portuguese is worthy of note—a systematic literature review. The fifth study, conducted by [16], examined students’ perception of English diphthongs. A phonological analysis is presented herewith.

While the studies above share some similarities, it is essential to recognize their significant differences. The first research examines the challenges Saudi students face at Albaha University, Saudi Arabia, in accurately pronouncing centering and closing diphthongs. The second study discussed the difficulties encountered by native speakers of Malay in pronouncing the monophthong/u:/ and diphthongs // and //, which are attributed to the assimilation and substitution of sounds that do not exist in the Malay phonological system. The third study examined the pronunciation features of Thai English, as collected from 30 students of a private university in Thailand. The results demonstrated that the identified problematic features included diphthongs. The fourth study examines monophthongs and diphthongs in Brazilian Portuguese, indicating that monophthongs exhibit acoustic transitional features between preserved diphthongs and simple vowels. The fifth study sought to investigate the difficulty level of diphthongs for students and their perception of English diphthongs, considering their challenges.

This research stands out from previous studies because it specifically investigates the pronunciation of English diphthongs among Sikka students, a group that has received minimal attention in existing literature. While earlier research has widely explored pronunciation issues in various linguistic contexts, such as among Saudi, Malay, Thai, and Brazilian learners, these studies focus on national-level trends or general EFL populations, rather than on localized ethnic groups within Indonesia. Consequently, this study will address the key research question: What are the phonological challenges and patterns in the pronunciation of English diphthongs among Sikka students? Given the absence of previous research that examines how Sikka students pronounce English diphthongs, this study will enhance pedagogical strategies for teaching pronunciation by identifying challenges, empower Sikka students by addressing a critical aspect of their English language development, and serve as a valuable updated reference for future researchers in this field.

II. Method

This research employed qualitative methods, specifically qualitative descriptive methods, to obtain the data needed. According to Cresswell, qualitative research explores social or individual problems to gain understanding through specific methods [17]. This method aims to understand the situation that happened, analyze it, and interpret it in depth. [18] added that the nature of qualitative research methods is interpretive and constructivist. Being interpretive means that qualitative research aims to make sense of social phenomena and interpret them. On the other hand, the nature of constructivism means qualitative research views knowledge as equally created through interactions

and individual experiences that emphasize being subjective and shaped by personal perspectives. Therefore, this research employed a qualitative method to investigate, understand, and explain the phonological challenges and patterns faced by Sikka students in Yogyakarta.

A. Settings and Participant

The study was conducted in Gejayan, an optimal setting for students to investigate the pronunciation of diphthongs. The subjects of this study are students from Sikka, currently pursuing their studies in Yogyakarta. The total number of participants is 10 students from Sikka, aged between 19 and 34. The participants hail from diverse family, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. Some participants are enrolled in full-time studies, while others are engaged in gainful employment while pursuing their studies. The participants were divided into two groups of five males and five females. The participants for this research were selected using purposive sampling. As [19] outlined, purposive sampling is designed to choose targeted respondents who are most likely to provide relevant and valuable information. The participants were selected because they use their native language in everyday life, which allows for insight into the effect of a person's native language on their pronunciation, comprehension, and interpretation of English. This criterion enables the researchers to examine the students' pronunciation of diphthongs or patterns that emerge when individuals from disparate linguistic backgrounds interact with the English language. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants, the names of all participants in this research will be replaced with "Participant 1, Participant 2, etc." The researcher also shared the informed consent letter with the participants via Google Form. This alteration was implemented to guarantee confidentiality and to adhere to the ethical standards of research.

B. Data Analysis

Once the requisite data has been gathered, the subsequent phase of the research process is data analysis. In this research project, the researchers will employ the following techniques: familiarisation, coding, data reduction, and data display. The initial stage of the data analysis process is familiarisation. As Creswell asserts, to understand and become acquainted with the data gathered, the researcher needs to repeat reading of the notes and transcripts and repeated viewing of the video and audio recordings. This stage is essential, as it may lead to discovering new insights from the recorded data [20]. The researchers will analyze the questionnaire responses to ascertain the participants' opinions on the statements presented. It is essential to conduct a meticulous review of the interview data and frequently listen to the recordings to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives.

According to Creswell in [17], the subsequent stage is the coding process, in which the data is analyzed and the information is gathered into segments, assigning a shared meaning to each part. In this process phase, the researchers attempt to categorize the collected data. The researcher classified the participants according to their membership in one of eight diphthong categories. Coding allows the researcher to reduce the vast quantity of data to a more manageable and accurate subset.

The third stage is data reduction, which offers benefits in summarising, revising, and displaying data [20]. Subsequently, the data that has been acquired and coded must be reduced. Eliminating data is essential for highlighting the most pertinent information and removing superfluous data. Participants who have made similar mistakes in diphthong pronunciation will be included in the data set, thus eliminating unnecessary data.

The final stage is data display, once all the data has been processed. The presentation of data enables researchers to elucidate the data set and plan the subsequent phase of the investigation. [21] asserted that data display is the foundation for reporting information in textual, tabular, chart, or detailed map formats. The objective of data display is to facilitate the interpretation of the data, focusing on identifying the types of diphthong errors prevalent among students in Sikka.

III. Results and Discussion

At this stage, the part of the data analysis technique validates the research findings. This research will answer the research question by exploring students' brief background and how students pronounce the diphthongs based on a text as part of the qualitative data.

Table 1. Data of the participants

No.	Participants	Age	Year of learning English	Daily Use of English
1.	Participant 1	20	I started learning English when I entered 7th grade in middle school until the 4th semester of college.	Only during lessons.
2.	Participant 2	20	11 years, but I did not take it seriously.	Very rarely. Only during English lessons or courses.
3.	Participant 3	22	6 years	Rarely, except when meeting foreigners.
4	Participant 4	19	12 years	Only during the English lessons.
5	Participant 5	20	12 years	Rarely, except during classes.
6	Participant 6	22	Since elementary school	Sometimes
7	Participant 7	20	Since elementary school.	When meeting friends who understand English and during English lessons, I use English.
8	Participant 8	21	Since elementary school.	Very often.
9	Participant 9	20	I started liking and learning English in middle school.	Rarely/not often communicate in English.
10	Participant 10	34	Never studied it specifically	Not often.

As illustrated in the above table, the participants' data, including their age and the duration of their English learning, significantly influenced their ability to pronounce the words correctly. In this research study, ten students from Sikka Students were observed and interviewed. The interviews were conducted to gain insight into the participants' backgrounds, with the participants ranging in age from 19 to 34 years. As illustrated in Table 1 above, most participants have encountered English learning at various stages of their education, with the majority commencing their studies during their school years. Participant 1, aged 20, initiated their English learning in the 7th grade and persisted until the fourth semester of their undergraduate studies. Similarly, Participants 6 and 8 commenced their English learning in primary school. Participants 9 and 10, aged 34 and 20, reported no formal English learning experience. The duration of English learning among participants varies widely, with some, namely Participants 4 and 5, having been exposed to English for 12 years and another,

Participant 3, having learned the language for six years. Participant 2, despite having studied English for 11 years, admitted a lack of serious engagement. Participant 10, despite their age, reported no structured learning experience.

Regarding daily use, most participants rarely engage with English outside formal education contexts. Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5 only use English during English lessons or classes, while Participant 3 uses it occasionally when interacting with foreigners. Participant 6 also reported using English sporadically, whereas Participant 7 uses it in conversations with friends familiar with the language or during English lessons. Participant 8 stands out for frequent English usage, contrasting with Participant 10, who rarely uses the language. Where numerous factors influence pronunciation, including the native language, age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity, language ego, motivation, and concern for proper pronunciation [7]–[9].

Table 2. Participants' pronunciation of diphthongs

No.	Diphthongs	Word	Participants' Pronunciation	Oxford Dictionary	Longman Dictionary
1.	/eɪ/	day	[deɪ]	[deɪ]	[deɪ]
		stay	[steɪ]	[steɪ]	[steɪ]
		café	['kæfē]	['kæfeɪ]	['kæfeɪ]
2.	/aʊ/	Sky	[skai]	[skai]	[skai]
		hideaway	['heədəwei]	['haɪdəwei]	['haɪdəwei]
3.	/ɔɪ/	noise	[nɔɪz]	[nɔɪz]	[nɔɪz]
4.	/əʊ/	Glow	[gləʊ]	[gləʊ]	[gləʊ]
		low	[laʊ]	[ləʊ]	[ləʊ]
		cozy	['kʊzi]	['kəʊzi]	['kəʊzi]
5.	/əʊ/	around	[ə'raʊnd]	[ə'raʊnd]	[ə'raʊnd]
		about	[ə'bʊt]	[ə'baʊt]	[ə'baʊt]
		sound	[sʊnd]	[saʊnd]	[saʊnd]
6.	/ɪə/	Hear	[heər]	[hɪə(r)]	[hɪə]
		Near	[,neə']	[,nɪə'baɪ]	[,nɪə'baɪ]
		nearby	[nərbai]		
7.	/eə/	Chairs	[tʃeə(r)]	[tʃeə(r)]	[tʃeə]
		share	[ʃər]	[ʃeə(r)]	[ʃeə]
		air	[eɪr]	[eə(r)]	[eə]
8.	/ʊə/	purely	['pjʊərli]	['pjʊəli]	['pjʊəli]

The data provided in Table 2 shows that the diphthong /eɪ/ as in "day," "stay," and "café," the participants consistently pronounce these words as [deɪ], [steɪ], and ['kæfē], which aligns with both the Oxford and Longman dictionary pronunciations. However, the Oxford dictionary includes

['kæfer] for "café," while the Longman dictionary uses ['kæfeɪ] for a slightly different sound. The diphthong /aɪ/, as found in "sky" and "hideaway," is pronounced by the participants as [skar] and ['hædəwer], with Oxford and Longman both listing [skar] and ['hædəwer]. The /ɔɪ/ diphthong in "noise" is pronounced as [nɔɪz] by all participants, and this matches the pronunciations in both dictionaries. For the diphthong /əʊ/, as seen in words like "glow," "low," and "cozy," the participants use [gləʊ], [laʊ], and ['kuzi], while both the Oxford and Longman dictionaries provide [gləʊ], [laʊ], and ['kəuzi], with slight variations in the spelling and stress in the dictionary listings. The diphthong /aʊ/, used in words such as "around," "about," and "sound," is pronounced as [ə'raʊnd], [ə'buɪt], and [səʊnd] by the participants, with both the Oxford and Longman dictionaries listing [ə'raʊnd], [ə'buɪt], and [səʊnd] for these words. For the diphthong /ɪə/, in words like "hear," "near," and "nearby," the participants pronounce them as [heər], [neə'], and [nərbəɪ], while the Oxford and Longman dictionaries list [hɪə(r)], [nɪə'baɪ], and [hɪə] with slight variations in spelling and pronunciation. The diphthong /eə/ in "chairs," "share," and "air" is pronounced by participants as [tʃeə(r)], [ʃeə(r)], and [eər], which aligns closely with the dictionary pronunciations of [tʃeə(r)], [ʃeə(r)], and [eə(r)] in the Oxford and Longman dictionaries. Finally, for the diphthong /ʊə/ in the word "purely," the participants pronounce it as ['pjʊərli] and ['pjʊəli], which corresponds to the pronunciations in the dictionaries, showing some variations in vowel sound representations.

For the /eɪ/ diphthong, the words "day" and "stay," as previously stated, are consistently pronounced as [deɪ] and [steɪ] by participants. The pronunciations were matching the standard pronunciations. However, six participants pronounced "café" as ['kæfe]. It was slightly different from the Oxford and Longman versions. Regarding the /aɪ/ diphthong, all participants pronounced the word "sky" as [skar], which aligns with the dictionaries. However, the word "hideaway" was pronounced as ['hædəwer] by four participants, which was slightly different from the Oxford and Longman standard of ['hædəwer].

For the /ɔɪ/ diphthong in "noise," participants' pronunciation [nɔɪz] aligns perfectly with both dictionaries, showing no variation. The participants did not misspell the word and used the diphthongs perfectly. In the case of the /əʊ/ diphthong, the words "glow," "low," and "cozy" are pronounced by participants as [gləʊ], [laʊ], and ['kuzi], respectively. However, for the word "cozy," the participants have pronounced it as ['kuzi], which differs slightly from the dictionary standard of ['kəuzi], where the first vowel is pronounced with the /əʊ/ diphthong.

For the /aʊ/ diphthong, all of the participants pronounced "around," "about," and "sound." While "around" aligns with the dictionary standards of [ə'raʊnd], variations are seen in the words "about" and "sound." Three participants pronounced the word "about" as [ə'buɪt], and four participants pronounced the word "sound" as [səʊnd], respectively. For the /ɪə/ diphthong, the words "hear," "near," and "nearby" show differences in participants' pronunciations. The word "Hear" is mispronounced as [heər] by five participants, diverging from the Oxford and Longman pronunciation [hɪə(r)]. Similarly, the word "near" is inconsistently pronounced as [neə'] by five participants, differing from the dictionary's [nɪə'baɪ]. For the word "nearby," three participants used [nərbəɪ], which does not match the standard [nɪərbəɪ].

For the /eə/ diphthong, participants pronounced "chairs," "share," and "air" as [tʃeə(r)], [ʃeə(r)], and [eɪr], respectively. While the word "chairs" aligns with the standard dictionary pronunciation [tʃeə(r)], variations are noted for "share" and "air." One participant used [ʃeə(r)] and [eɪr], respectively, deviating from the Oxford and Longman standards of [ʃeə(r)] and [eə(r)], where the diphthong is more pronounced. Regarding the /ʊə/ diphthong in "purely," participants pronounce it as ['pjʊərli], differing slightly from the Oxford and Longman versions, which both list ['pjʊəli].

The text contains eight diphthongs, which are included in nineteen words. The data demonstrate that most participants incorrectly pronounce eleven words, which are included in six diphthongs, whilst simultaneously pronouncing eight words, which are included in eight diphthongs, correctly. This finding underscores the complexity of perfect pronunciation, which challenges learners due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing aspects such as grammar, vocabulary,

intonation, pronunciation, and stress. It is aligned with [4], who states that good and bad pronunciation. The first can be defined as 'good' pronunciation, characterized as speaking that all laypeople can clearly understand. 'Bad' pronunciation is a mode of articulation that is challenging for most individuals to comprehend. Sikka students hail from various cities, each with its unique way of producing sound. Regardless of their English learning duration, students invariably encounter challenges in producing accurate pronunciation, even after extensive study and practice. Acquiring a second language inevitably entails encountering multifaceted challenges encompassing assimilating a novel sound system, vocabulary, and sentence structure. In the following discourse, the emphasis will be directed towards the issue of pronunciation.

The interview with the participants also revealed that students pay no attention to diphthongs. They recognize that English distinguishes between the written form and the pronunciation of a word; therefore, as learners, they primarily focus on reading the sentence. The students' incorrect pronunciation of diphthongs can be attributed to various factors, including their unfamiliarity with English, a lack of practice and knowledge, motivation, the influence of their social environment, and the difficulty in memorizing the correct pronunciation [11]. A further difficulty may be posed by similar sounds in two languages that differ only slightly in their phonetic features. In considering the nature of pronunciation problems involved in learning a foreign language, it becomes evident that each issue is distinct and requires a unique approach from the student. According to Ramelan, these problems can be categorized as follows: One problem concerns identifying foreign sounds. This necessitates retaining their acoustic properties to be distinguished directly in speech. Another challenge pertains to the production of foreign sounds by speech organs [3]. The capacity to discern and identify the acoustic qualities of foreign sounds is a prerequisite for their output. A separate challenge of a different nature pertains to the production of stress, length, pitch, and intonation. Students cannot disregard these characteristics, as they vary significantly across various languages. Students of spoken English or any other spoken language are confronted with five distinct challenges related to pronunciation from the outset [5]

IV. Conclusion

This study investigates the phonological patterns and challenges in pronouncing English diphthongs among Sikka students. Where the results of the study revealed that despite varying levels of English language exposure, participants consistently mispronounced specific English diphthongs like /aɪ/, /ɪə/, /eə/, /əʊ/, and /ʊə/, these errors stemmed from the influence of their native Sikka language, which lacks similar diphthongs and has different phonological patterns. A lack of focused instruction on diphthongs, limited practice, and unfamiliar English pronunciation rules also contributed to these challenges. However, the study also found that participants successfully produced certain English diphthongs, particularly /eɪ/, indicating that not all diphthongs posed equal difficulty. Due to time constraints and a small sample with only ten students, which makes it hard to generalize the findings, future researchers should explore these findings with larger and more diverse samples to ensure these patterns are consistent and gain a more comprehensive understanding of English diphthong pronunciation.

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