

Understanding English Phonology: A Beginner's Guide

Yani Lubis

State Islamic University Of North Sumatra
Korespondensi penulis: yanilubis@uinsu.ac.id

Ela Carmelia Mukti Sambas

State Islamic University Of North Sumatra
Email: ellsasambas007@gmail.com

Gilang Hizbullah

State Islamic University Of North Sumatra
Email: gilanghizbullah12@gmail.com

Abstract. *The purpose of this research is to provide understanding of English phonology to the learners who are new with English phonology. The method used in this research is literature review. This discussion explores the study of English sounds, known as English phonology. It covers important topics for beginners, such as understanding the basic units of sounds (phonemes) and their variations (allophones). The chat also introduces processes like assimilation, dissimilation, and deletion that affect how sounds change in spoken English. Additionally, it explains vowel and consonant reduction, which impact how certain sounds are pronounced. Lastly, the chat provides an overview of classifying consonant and vowel sounds based on their characteristics. By learning about these aspects, beginners can improve their pronunciation, understand different sound patterns, and enhance their overall communication skills in English.*

Keywords: *English phonology, Phonemes and allophones, Consonant and vowel classification*

INTRODUCTION

English phonology is the study of the sound system and patterns of the English language. It explores the intricate relationship between sounds and meaning, providing crucial insights into pronunciation, word formation, and communication. Phonology plays a fundamental role in language acquisition, teaching, and effective communication, making it essential for both native speakers and non-native learners (Pennington, 2014). When beginners embark on their journey into the study of phonology, it is crucial to start with the fundamental concepts that underpin English phonology. The first step is to introduce the notion of phonemes, the basic units of sound in a language (Potter, 1960). Beginners should learn to identify and differentiate between different phonemes in English, recognizing their significance in conveying meaning. Illustrating minimal pairs, where words differ in meaning by only one sound,

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* Yani Lubis, yanilubis@uinsu.ac.id

helps emphasize the importance of phonemes in English.

Moving on, learners should be introduced to the concept of allophones. Allophones are variations of a phoneme that occur in different phonetic contexts (Sproat, & Fujimura, 1993). Beginners should be guided in recognizing and distinguishing allophones in English, understanding how a phoneme's sound can differ depending on its surrounding sounds or word position.

Another crucial aspect for beginners is grasping the distinction between vowels and consonants. They should become familiar with identifying and producing the different vowel and consonant sounds in English. Visual aids, such as vowel and consonant charts, can be utilized to help beginners understand the placement and articulation of each sound (Lewkowicz, 1980).

Additionally, beginners should be introduced to common phonological processes in English, such as assimilation, dissimilation, and deletion (Mohamad, Hanafi, & Dako, 2021). Explaining how these processes influence word pronunciation and contribute to the natural flow of spoken English is essential. Providing examples and exercises that allow beginners to practice these processes will help solidify their understanding.

By focusing on these foundational aspects, beginners can establish a solid understanding of English phonology. This knowledge will serve as a strong foundation for further exploration and improvement in pronunciation and communication skills.

The purpose of this research is to provide learners with a comprehensive overview and insight into the sound system of the English language. By delving into the intricacies of English phonology, learners can develop a deeper understanding of the relationships between sounds and meaning, enhance their pronunciation skills, and improve their overall communication abilities. Through the exploration of phonemes, allophones, phonological processes, vowels, and consonants, learners can acquire the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of English phonology and become more proficient and confident in their spoken English.

RESEACRH METHOD

The research method employed in the study titled "Understanding English Phonology" utilizes a literature review approach. A comprehensive literature review involves a systematic examination and analysis of existing scholarly works, such as academic papers, books, and research articles, that are relevant to the field of English phonology. By conducting a thorough review of the literature, the researcher aims to gather and synthesize existing knowledge, theories, and findings in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Phonemes and Allophones

a. Explanation of phonemes and their role in language

Phonemes are the smallest units of sound that can differentiate meaning in a language. They are abstract representations of sounds and are essential in conveying meaning and distinguishing words from one another (Sensenbaugh, 1996). In English, for example, the difference in the initial sounds of "cat" and "bat" is determined by the phonemes /k/ and /b/. These two distinct phonemes change the meaning of the words, illustrating the role of phonemes in language Sensenbaugh, R. (1996).

Understanding phonemes is crucial because they serve as the building blocks of spoken language. They allow us to distinguish between words and comprehend meaning. The ability to identify and produce phonemes accurately is fundamental for effective communication and language acquisition Sensenbaugh, R. (1996).

Moreover, knowledge of phonemes is essential for various aspects of language learning, such as reading and spelling. By recognizing the specific phonemes that make up words, learners can decode written text and spell words correctly Sensenbaugh, R. (1996).

Overall, comprehending phonemes and their role in language provides a foundation for understanding the sound system of a language, enabling learners to develop accurate pronunciation, improve listening skills, and enhance overall linguistic competence.

b. The Difference between Phonemes and Allophones

Phonemes and allophones are related but represent different aspects of speech sounds. Phonemes are the basic units of sound in a language that have the ability to distinguish meaning. They are abstract representations and are typically represented by a specific symbol or letter in phonetic transcription. For example, in English, the phonemes /p/ and /b/ represent distinct sounds that differentiate words such as "pat" and "bat." (Yopp, & Yopp, 2000).

On the other hand, allophones are variations of a phoneme that occur in different phonetic contexts. They are the actual, realized sounds that can be produced by native speakers. Allophones do not change the meaning of words but are influenced by factors such as adjacent sounds or the position of the sound within a word. For example, in English, the phoneme /t/ has different allophones such as the aspirated [t^h] sound in "top" and the unaspirated [t] sound in "stop." Although these allophones sound slightly different, they are perceived by native speakers as the same sound because they do not create a contrast in meaning (Song, JShattuck-Hufnagel, & Demuth, 2015).

Differentiating between phonemes and allophones is crucial because it helps learners understand the nuances of pronunciation in a language. Recognizing that native speakers produce different allophones of a phoneme in various contexts allows learners to improve their own pronunciation and develop a more accurate understanding of the target language.

By understanding the distinction between phonemes and allophones, learners can gain insights into how sounds vary in different contexts, appreciate the complexity of the sound system, and enhance their overall proficiency in the language.

2. Examples of phonemes and allophones in English

These examples help illustrate the concept and application of phonemes and allophones in practice. In English, there are numerous phonemes and their respective allophones. Here are a few examples (Shen, 1959):

- 1) The phoneme /p/: The phoneme /p/ is represented by the letter "p" in English. It has an unaspirated allophone [p] in words like "spin" and a slightly aspirated allophone [p^h] in words like "pin."

- 2) The phoneme /t/: The phoneme /t/ is represented by the letter "t" in English. It has an unaspirated allophone [t] in words like "stop" and an aspirated allophone [t̟] in words like "top."
- 3) The phoneme /æ/: The phoneme /æ/ is represented by the letter "a" in words like "cat." It has different allophones depending on the surrounding sounds. For example, it may be pronounced as [æ] in words like "cat," but it can be nasalized as [æ̃] before nasal consonants, as in "pan."
These examples demonstrate how the same phoneme can manifest differently.

As allophones based on the phonetic context. The specific allophones are influenced by factors such as adjacent sounds, word position, and individual speech habits.

Understanding these examples of phonemes and allophones in English allows learners to recognize the variations in pronunciation and develop a more accurate and nuanced command of the language. It enables learners to discern and produce the appropriate allophones in different contexts, contributing to their overall proficiency in spoken English.

3. English Phonological Processes

a. Overview of assimilation, dissimilation, and deletion processes

Assimilation occurs when sounds change to become more similar or assimilate to neighboring sounds. For example, in the word "impossible," the /n/ sound in "im" assimilates to the following /p/ sound, resulting in the pronunciation [ɪmˈpɒsəbəl]. The /n/ sound takes on the nasal quality of the following /m/ sound (Ali, 2012).

Dissimilation, on the other hand, involves the alteration of sounds to become less similar. It occurs when adjacent sounds are phonetically distinct and need to be differentiated. An example of dissimilation can be seen in the word "comfortable," where the /r/ sound in the second syllable dissimilates from the /m/ sound in the first syllable, resulting in the pronunciation [kɒmfəˈtəbəl] (Ohala & Jones, 1993).

Deletion refers to the omission or elimination of sounds in certain phonetic contexts. In English, certain sounds may be deleted to facilitate smoother or more rapid speech. For instance, in rapid speech, the /t/ sound in words like "can't" is often deleted, resulting in the pronunciation [kæn(t)]. Similarly, the /ə/ sound in unstressed syllables

may be deleted, as in "banana" pronounced as [b næn] (Menn, 1983).

Understanding assimilation, dissimilation, and deletion processes is essential for learners to comprehend the natural patterns and variations in spoken English. Recognizing and applying these processes contributes to achieving native-like pronunciation and facilitates effective communication.

b. Discussion of vowel and consonant reduction

In terms of vowel reduction, unstressed vowels often undergo changes and become less pronounced, resulting in a centralized and schwa-like sound, represented by the symbol / ə /. For example, in the word "banana," the second and third syllables contain unstressed vowels that are reduced to the schwa sound [ə], resulting in the pronunciation [b næn]. This reduction of unstressed vowels contributes to the rhythm and flow of spoken English (Crosswhite & Jun, 2001).

Consonant reduction, on the other hand, involves changes in the articulation or omission of consonant sounds in specific contexts. Common instances of consonant reduction occur in word-final positions or clusters. For instance, the final /t/ sound in words like "cat" may be pronounced as a glottal stop [ʔ] or may be completely omitted in rapid speech, resulting in the pronunciation [kæ] or even [kæ] (Van Son & Pols, 1999).

Vowel and consonant reduction are significant aspects of English phonology as they contribute to the natural rhythm and ease of spoken communication. Understanding and recognizing these reduction processes allows learners to develop more authentic and fluent pronunciation. Additionally, it aids in comprehending and adapting to the variations and contextual modifications that occur in spoken English, especially in informal or casual speech settings.

4. English Vowels

Vowels are speech sounds produced with an open vocal tract, allowing the free flow of air without obstruction. English vowels can be classified based on several features, including height, backness, and roundedness.

- 1) Height: Height refers to the vertical position of the tongue in the mouth when producing a vowel sound. English vowels can be categorized into three main heights (Lindau, 1978):

- High vowels: These vowels are produced with the tongue positioned high in the mouth. Examples of high vowels in English include /i/ (as in "see") and /u/ (as in "blue").
 - Mid vowels: Mid vowels are produced with the tongue positioned at a medium height in the mouth. Examples of mid vowels in English include /e/ (as in "bed") and /o/ (as in "boat").
 - Low vowels: Low vowels are produced with the tongue positioned low in the mouth. Examples of low vowels in English include /æ/ (as in "cat") and /ʌ/ (as in "father").
- 2) Backness: Backness refers to the horizontal position of the highest part of the tongue when producing a vowel sound. English vowels can be classified into two main backness categories (Lindau, 1978):
- Front vowels: These vowels are produced with the highest part of the tongue positioned towards the front of the mouth. Examples of front vowels in English include /i/, /e/, and /æ/.
 - Back vowels: Back vowels are produced with the highest part of the tongue positioned towards the back of the mouth. Examples of back vowels in English include /u/, /o/, and /ʌ/.
- 3) Roundedness: Roundedness refers to the rounding or protrusion of the lips when producing a vowel sound. English vowels can be classified as either rounded or unrounded (Lindau, 1978):
- Rounded vowels: These vowels are produced with rounded lips. Examples of rounded vowels in English include /u/, /o/, and /ʊ/ (as in "book").
 - Unrounded vowels: Unrounded vowels are produced with the lips in a neutral or unrounded position. Examples of unrounded vowels in English include /i/, /e/, /æ/, and /ʌ/.

Understanding the classification of English vowels assists learners in accurately producing and distinguishing between different vowel sounds. It allows for the development of clear and natural-sounding pronunciation, aids in recognizing vowel patterns in words, and enhances overall oral proficiency in English.

a. English Consonants

This part focuses on two key aspects of consonant classification: manner of articulation and place of articulation. These factors contribute to understanding how consonant sounds are produced and categorized in the English language.

1) **Manner of Articulation:** Manner of articulation refers to how the airflow is modified or obstructed during the production of a consonant sound. English consonants can be categorized into several manners of articulation (Ashby & Maidment, 2005):

- **Stops:** Also known as plosives, stops are consonants produced by completely blocking the airflow and then releasing it. Examples of stops in English include /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, and /g/.
- **Fricatives:** Fricatives are consonants produced by narrowing the airflow, creating a turbulent noise. This is achieved by partially blocking the airflow and allowing it to pass through a narrow gap. Examples of fricatives in English include /f/, /v/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ (as in "shoe"), and /ʒ/ (as in "measure").
- **Affricates:** Affricates begin with a stop closure and then transition into a fricative sound. English examples of affricates are /tʃ/ (as in "church") and /dʒ/ (as in "judge").

Nasals: Nasals are consonants produced by lowering the soft palate (velum), allowing the airflow to pass through the nasal cavity. Examples of nasals in English include /m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ (as in "sing").

- **Liquids:** Liquids are consonants produced with a partial closure or constriction in the vocal tract. English liquids include /l/ and /r/.
- **Glides:** Glides are consonants produced with a slight movement of the articulators. English glides include /j/ (as in "yes") and /w/ (as in "we").

2) **Place of Articulation:** Place of articulation refers to the specific location in the vocal tract where the airflow is modified or obstructed during the production of a consonant sound. English consonants can be classified into various places of articulation (Hewlett & Beck, 2013):

- Labial: Sounds produced by involving the lips. Examples include /p/, /b/, /m/, and /w/.
- Dental: Sounds produced with the involvement of the teeth and the tongue. An example is the /θ/ sound in "think."
- Alveolar: Sounds produced with the tip or blade of the tongue against the alveolar ridge, which is the ridge behind the upper teeth. Examples include /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /n/, and /l/.
- Palatal: Sounds produced with the body of the tongue against the hard palate. Examples include /j/ (as in "yes") and /ʃ/ (as in "she").
- Velar: Sounds produced with the back of the tongue against the soft palate (velum). Examples include /k/, /g/, and /ŋ/ (as in "sing").

Understanding the manner and place of articulation is essential for accurate pronunciation and differentiating between consonant sounds in English. By grasping these concepts, learners can effectively produce and distinguish between the various consonant sounds, leading to improved clarity and proficiency in spoken English.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding English phonology is crucial for learners aiming to improve their pronunciation and oral proficiency in the language. Through the discussions in this chat, we have explored various aspects of English phonology, including phonemes, allophones, assimilation, dissimilation, deletion processes, vowel and consonant reduction, as well as the classification of consonants and vowels. By grasping these concepts, learners can develop a strong foundation in phonology, enabling them to accurately produce and distinguish between different sounds, comprehend variations in spoken English, and enhance overall communication skills. A solid understanding of English phonology empowers learners to express themselves effectively and navigate the complexities of the language with confidence.

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