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The English Pronunciation of EFL Learners with Different Javanese Language Backgrounds

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Abstract

This research involved forty-eight university students majoring in English Language Teaching. Viewed from their language background, they comprised two groups, namely (1) Javanese students with Indonesian as their mother tongue or first language (L1), while Javanese as a second language (L2) and (2) Javanese students with Javanese as their mother tongue, while Indonesian as a second language. The aim of this survey study was to compare which group pronounced the English sounds better. This study was also meant to examine the problematic sounds of English for both groups. The data was collected through interview and pronunciation test. The interview was conducted to identify the respondents' language background. Data from the test was analyzed using the inferential statistical tool T-Test and descriptive statistics. The main findings of this research were as follows: (1) despite the fact that students with Javanese as L2 achieved a greater average score, there was no statistically significant difference in pronunciation performance between the two groups being compared; (2) sounds /v/, /θ/, /ʒ/, /əː/, /ɔː/, /æ/, /eɪ/, /eə/, /iː/, and /aʊ/ respectively constituted top ten most problematic English sounds among the Javanese students learning English.

Keywords: *English pronunciation, first language, second language, English sounds, segmental features, Javanese language*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English plays an important role in people's life. It is essential that English be used all over the world for international communication. Therefore, sufficient communication skill is badly needed. With that in mind, any language learning including English aims to intelligibly communicate in the target language. For that reason, the term 'communication' has to be clearly defined. A simple definition writes "communication is to understand and be understood" [1]. Considering that language, by nature, is spoken then pronunciation becomes vital in communication.

Being skillful in pronunciation is regarded as an effort to be well understood in communication. In reality, however, the awareness of pronunciation in the teaching and learning of English is still poor. Many teachers tend to teach grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills without integrating English pronunciation. Critics and proponents of language pedagogy claimed that pronunciation might be the most marginalized in English language teaching and learning in spite of a key role this language aspect plays in spoken communication [2].

Apparently, pronunciation has big contribution to improve spoken English. First, pronunciation helps to achieve better English speaking [3]. Through pronunciation, students will gain a lot of information. Not only will they know sounds and sound features, but they also will improve their speaking. Another double benefit of pronunciation is it can guarantee an effective communication and create good impression in the part of the listener at the same time. The language spoken is expressed through a medium of sounds. What a speaker means to say (message) might be difficult to

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understand by the listener when the sounds produced are strange to him or her. A good pronunciation displays the quality of the speakers' language ability [4]. It is hard to deny an idea that as far as spoken language is concerned, better pronunciation gives prestige to the speaker.

Pronunciation in language covers segmental features (i.e. a single vowel, consonant, or diphthong) and suprasegmental features (larger than a single vowel, consonant, or diphthong, also known as prosody) [5]. Both properties are of significance. The current study deals exclusively with the former, with emphasis on accuracy rather than fluency. In the area of segmental features, no consensus has been made about the number of vowels and consonants in the English language.

Vowel sounds are produced when the air goes freely from the larynx to the lips. Vowels are produced when a voiced airstream is created using the tongue and the lips to alter the overall shape of the mouth [6]. Hence, all vowel sounds are voiced. Whereas the function of organs in mouth cavity is to modify the shapes and sizes of vocal tract that give different qualities of vowel sounds. Figure 1 displays the vowel sounds of English.

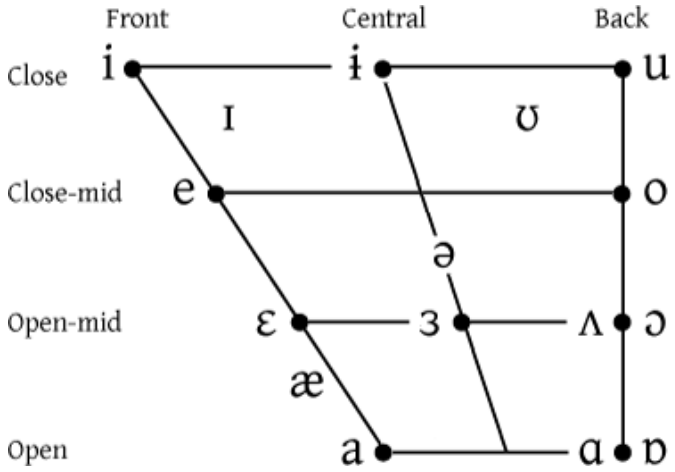

Figure 1. English Vowel Sounds

Each sound displayed in Figure1 is produced in a specific manner. Referring to the figure, sound /æ/, for instance, is articulated in an "unrounded open to half open front vowel sound" way as produced when saying the word 'man' or 'bad'. Closely related to vowel sounds are diphthongs. Diphthongs, basically, are two single vowel sounds/monophthongs that are produced by making a shift in position from one vowel position to another vowel position, e.g. sound /ʊə/, which is articulated in a "high back-centring" manner, as in 'poor' or 'sure'. Like vowel sounds or monophthongs, diphthongs are also monosyllabic. Diphthongs are not that simple, as simple as the concept. In reality, they have been troublesome [7].

All speech sounds are produced when there is some obstruction made by human speech organs against the airflow. With regard to consonant sounds, they are formed by interrupting, restricting or diverting the airflow in variety of ways such as place of obstruction, manner or obstruction, and the activity of vocal cords. English has twenty-four consonantal phonemes [8]. Those consonants are categorized by 3 variables: place of obstruction, manner or obstruction, and the activity of vocal cords. The English consonant sounds that have been grouped based on the three variables are displayed in Figure 2.

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PVM Chart: English			PLACE							
			LABIAL		CORONAL				DORSAL	
	MANNER	VOICING	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
OBSTRUENTS	Stop	Voiceless	p			t			k	ʔ
		Voiced	b			d			g	
	Fricative	Voiceless		f	θ	s	ʃ			h
		Voiced		v	ð	z	ʒ			
	Affricate	Voiceless					tʃ			
		Voiced					dʒ			
SONORANTS	Nasal	Voiced	m			n			ŋ	
	LIQUID Lateral	Voiced				l				
	LIQUID Rhotic	Voiced					ɹ			
	Glide	Voiced	w					j	w	

Figure 2. English Consonants

Based on Figure 2, some consonant sounds in English are quite different in nature from the consonant sounds in the languages associated with the context of the current study – Indonesian language and Javanese language. For example, according to Figure 2, sound /θ/ is a voiceless dental fricative. This sound as in 'think' or 'math' is normally not available in both aforementioned languages. To the authors, this sound is more similar to that of Arabic ث. Presumably, the Indonesian learners of English who pronounce the Arabic ث well will find it much easier to pronounce the English /θ/ than those learners who do not.

As what has been discussed above, some potential problems may face the Indonesian learners of English. The learners are likely to transfer the way in the source language to English when they learn or use it. Studies have shown, Javanese learners of English encountered challenges in pronouncing the language. First, Javanese students find it hard to move their speech organs, especially, to produce English sounds that do not exist in Javanese language [9], [10]. It results in incomplete acquisition. Secondly, there is a tendency to replace the target sounds with the Javanese sounds or to pronounce words as it is spelt [11]. Studies on the interference of ethnic group languages across the Archipelago, or Indonesian as the national language in the pronunciation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning also showed similar results [12], [13].

EFL students have been speaking their mother tongue since childhood. The students' speech organs have been deeply implanted to produce the speech sounds of their native tongue. Learners of a language learn and use the target language in different ways. It can be slightly different or, otherwise, highly different from the way how the native speakers of the target language do. True, the pronunciation teaching paradigm has shifted from native-like pronunciation to intelligibility teaching practices [14]. However, it does not necessarily mean that teachers and learners can neglect pronunciation accuracy, especially at the segmental level. When pronunciation largely deviates from the standard, then troubles come to the listener, and the communication is not effective, accordingly.

While potential problems may arise in attempts to learn and use the pronunciation of English, there is always a way to deal with them. Teachers may try every single way to help themselves and encourage their students. Some practice in the teaching of English pronunciation should be revisited [15], [16]. Attention should be paid primarily to the teaching and learning context, in this case ESL or EFL classrooms. Well-reasoned advices and strategies in solving the problems should be given priority.

2. Methodology

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This is a survey study. It involved forty-eight students in the Department of English Language Teaching, Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, in Central Java Province, Indonesia. They were sitting at different semesters (3, 5, and 7) and already passed Pronunciation and Phonetics courses. The participants were selected according to certain general data (purposive sampling), i.e. place of origin, place of stay, place of a longer stay, and daily language use.

The data was collected through interview and test. A semi-structured interview to recruit participants was conducted [17]. Questions covering those above-mentioned were asked to identify the participants' language background. The interview was done to 236 students at first to find out their L1. Twenty-four out of that number were identified to have Javanese as L2, whereas 212 had Javanese as L1. Another twenty-four students from the latter were randomly selected for the study.

To compare the English pronunciation proficiency of those two groups and the pronunciation errors they made, a pronunciation test was administered [18]. Reading aloud technique was employed in the test and the participants were recorded.

Data elicited from interviews was discussed by the researchers to arrive at an agreement [19]. Normality checks were applied to confirm that the data collected from the pronunciation test was ready for applying the inferential statistical tool. The data then was analysed using the inferential statistical tool T-test (to answer research question 1 and descriptive statistics (to answer research question 2) [20]. The Received Pronunciation (RP) accent was applied as the basis for students' pronunciation performance analysis. Figure 3 shows the main steps taken in the research process.

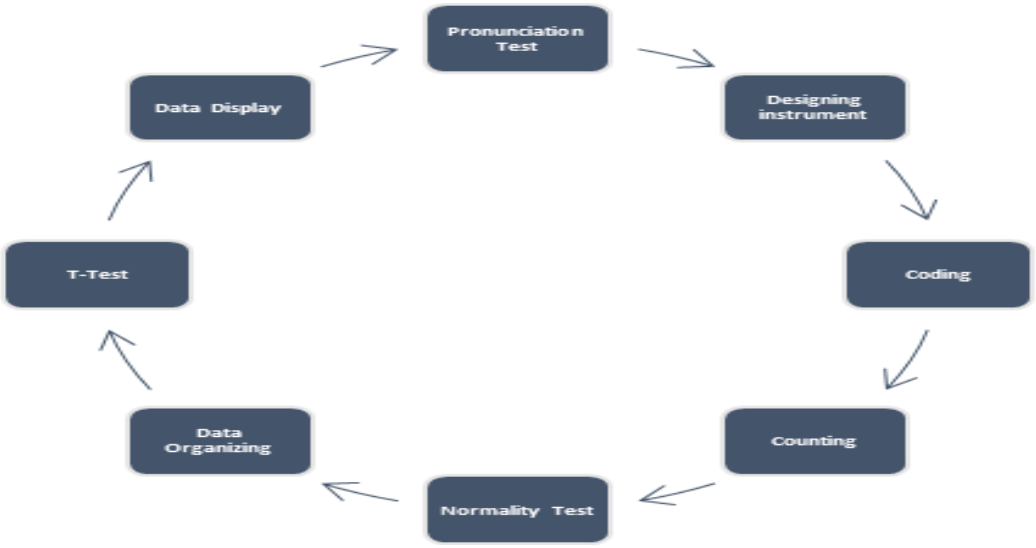

Figure 3. Main Research Steps

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The English Pronunciation: Learners of English with Javanese as L1 v. s. Those with Javanese as L2

The following are two tables displaying the individual scores of the participating students. Table 1 presents the pronunciation test scores of students who spoke Javanese as a second language.

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Table 1. Javanese as L2 Group Scores

No.	Resp.	Pct.	Score	No	Resp.	Pct.	Score
1	L10701	92.21%	11.450	13	L10313	94.74%	11.275
2	L10702	98.31%	11.700	14	L10314	95.79%	11.400
3	L10703	98.31%	11.700	15	L10315	95.16%	11.325
4	L10704	98.31%	11.700	16	L10316	95.16%	11.325
5	L10305	96.42%	11.475	17	L10517	93.69%	11.150
6	L10706	96.42%	11.475	18	L10318	89.91%	10.700
7	L10707	95.37%	11.375	19	L10319	96.42%	11.475
8	L10708	96.98%	11.250	20	L10320	94.32%	11.225
9	L10509	95.58%	11.375	21	L10521	95.37%	11.350
10	L10510	96.21%	11.450	22	L10722	92.43%	11.000
11	L10511	95.37%	11.350	23	L10523	96.21%	11.250
12	L10512	96.21%	11.450	24	L10724	93.69%	11.150

While, Table 2 displays the scores of students who spoke Javanese as the first language.

Table 2. Javanese as L1 Group Scores

No.	Resp.	Pct.	Score	No	Resp.	Pct.	Score
1	L20301	95.79%	11.400	13	L20513	94.74%	11.275
2	L20302	93.06%	11.075	14	L20314	94.95%	11.300
3	L20503	92.43%	11.000	15	L20315	94.74%	11.275
4	L20504	92.62%	11.025	16	L20316	95.08%	11.315
5	L20505	95.37%	11.350	17	L20517	93.90%	11.175
6	L20706	97.47%	11.600	18	L20318	95.58%	11.375
7	L20707	95.58%	11.375	19	L20319	92.43%	11.000
8	L20708	96.84%	11.525	20	L20320	94.28%	11.220
9	L20509	95.37%	11.350	21	L20521	94.95%	11.300
10	L20510	94.53%	11.250	22	L20722	96.42%	11.475
11	L20511	95.58%	11.375	23	L20523	96.63%	11.500
12	L20512	96.21%	11.450	24	L20724	98.10%	11.675

To see if one group was superior over the other in pronouncing the sounds tested, the inferential statistical analysis using T-test was applied. Data and additional data from those two tables above were then further processed using the inferential statistical tool T-test to obtain the t-counted. Table 3 presents the data analysis result.

Table 3. T-test Result Summary

	Language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Javanese L2	24	11347.92	220.168	44.942
	Javanese L1	24	11319.17	178.116	36.358

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	0.05 Sig. Interval of the Diff.	
							Lower	Upper

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.197	.659	.497	46	.621	28.750	57.807	-87.609	145.109
		.497	44.078	.621	28.750	57.807	-87.746	145.246

As can be seen in Table 3, the data analysis revealed that the t-counted was 0.621. The value then was consulted to the value of T-table. The value of T-table was 2.021 (two-tailed; $\alpha = 0.05$). Therefore, $0.621 < 2.021$. It means there was no statistically significant difference between those two groups. Looking at the mean score alone, the mean score of students with Javanese as L2 was greater, meaning that they pronounced better. Nevertheless, the statistic test has shown that the difference was insignificant. This result most probably was attributable to the small gap between two mean scores or the small sample size (N). With a higher sample size, it is expected to increase the significance level of this finding. This is to be expected because the larger the sample size, the more accurately it is expected to mirror the behaviour of the whole group. The reasons for taking a small sample then were: 1) lack of students with Javanese as L2 in the population (only 24 out of 236); 2) extra time and energy for administering pronunciation test.

3.2. The Dominant Pronunciation Problems Encountered by EFL Learners with Different Javanese Language Backgrounds

Below is the table displaying the top ten most errors made by the students when pronouncing either vowel or consonant sounds.

Table 4. Top Ten Pronunciation Errors Made by the Learners

No.	Sound Tested	Word Tested	Correct	Percentage (%)	Incorrect	Percentage (%)
1	/v/	**V**ast	6	12.50	42	87.50
2	/θ/	Brea**th**	6	12.50	42	87.50
3	/ʒ/	**G**enre	6	12.50	42	87.50
4	/ə:/	Occ**ur**	10	20.83	38	79.17
5	/ɔ:/	D**aug**hter	13	27.08	35	72.91
6	/æ/	**A**pple	14	29.16	34	70.83
7	/ei/	**A**che	17	35.41	31	64.58
8	/eə/	Unb**ea**rable	23	47.91	25	52.08
9	/i:/	Sl**ee**p	25	52.83	23	47.91
10	/aʊ/	**Cow**	27	56.25	21	43.75

The table shows that Javanese students faced difficulties in pronouncing the English sounds. In ranking order, most vowel pronunciation errors were made when pronouncing the sound /ə:/, whereas consonant sound pronunciation errors were made most frequently when pronouncing the sound /v/. The following are the error analyses per sound in more details.

3.2.1. Consonant sounds

1) Sound /v/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to examine students' performance in pronouncing the sound /v/ with different distribution. The three words put in the sound /v/ in initial position as in 'vast', medial position as in 'souvenir', and final position as in 'positive', respectively (Figure 4). All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students of English. Inaccuracies were found in initial (mostly), medial, as well as final positions. In other words, to Javanese students,

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pronouncing the English sound /v/ in initial position was quite difficult, much more difficult than pronouncing it in the other positions.

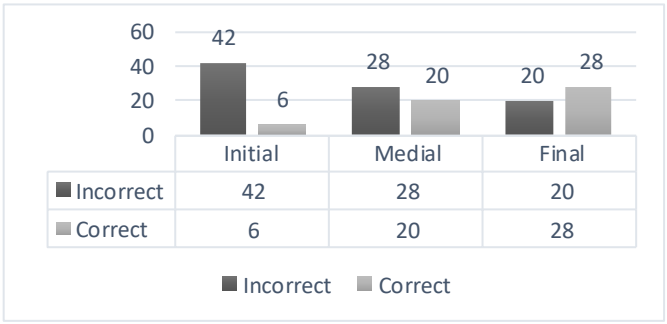

Figure 4. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /v/

2) Sound /θ/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to study students' performance in pronouncing the sound /θ/. The three words included the sound /θ/ in initial position as in 'think', medial position as in 'mathematics', and final position as in 'breath', respectively. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. Inaccuracies were found in initial, medial, as well as final positions (Figure 5). The students found it hard to pronounce the sound in all positions with severe problems in final position.

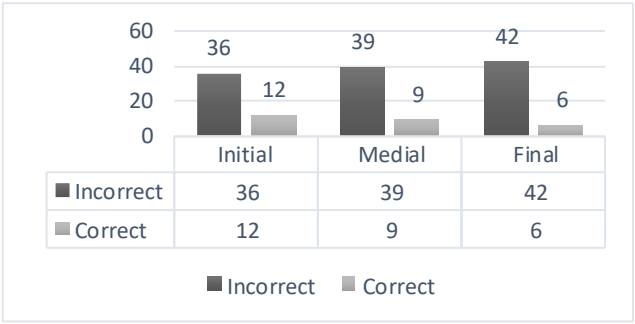

Figure 5. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /θ/

3) Sound /ʒ/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to study students' performance in pronouncing the sound /ʒ/. The three words contained the sound /ʒ/ in initial position as in 'genre', medial position as in 'measurement', and final position as in 'garage', respectively. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found in initial position, which seemed to be very serious, and medial position (Figure 6).

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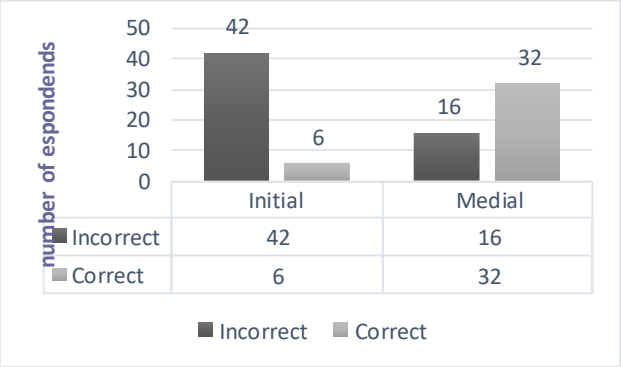

Figure 6. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /ʒ /

Consonant sounds of this type, including the two discussed earlier, seem problematic for learners of English in Indonesia and even Asian countries. Sound /θ/, for instance, has been investigated nicely in Malaysia to compare the pronunciation of it by Chinese learners of English from Malaysia and China [21]. Another study has showed that Thai students had a hard time pronouncing such consonant sounds in final position [22], [23].

3.2.2. Vowel sounds

1) Sound /ə:/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to investigate students' performance in pronouncing the sound /ə:/. The three words included the sound /ə:/ in initial position as in 'early', medial position as in 'dirt', and final position as in 'occur', respectively. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found in final position only (Figure 7).

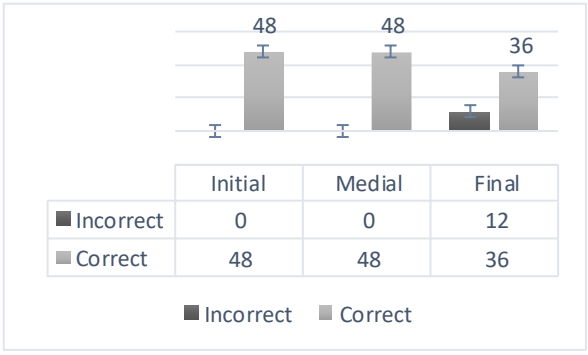

Figure 7. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /ə:/

2) Sound /ɔ:/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to investigate students' performance in pronouncing the sound /ɔ:/. The three words included the sound //ɔ:/ in initial position as in 'daughter', medial position as in 'applause', and final position as in 'shore', respectively. All the words given were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found in medial position only, and this seemed serious (Figure 8).

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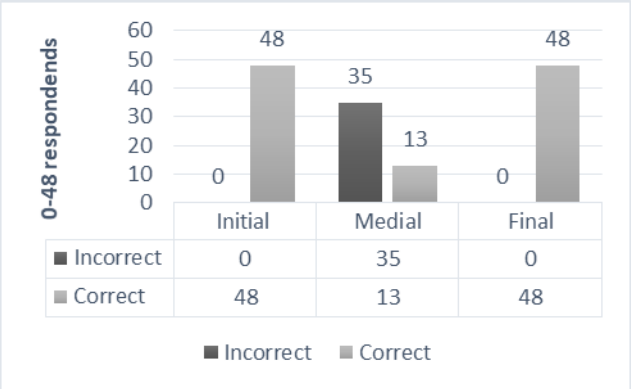

Figure 8. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /ɔ:/

3) Sound /æ/

Two words were used in the pronunciation test to examine students' performance in pronouncing the sound /æ/. The three words involved the sound /æ/ with different distribution, each in initial position as in 'apple' and medial position as in 'man'. All the words given were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found in initial position and medial position. Errors seemed to be quite serious in medial position (Figure 9).

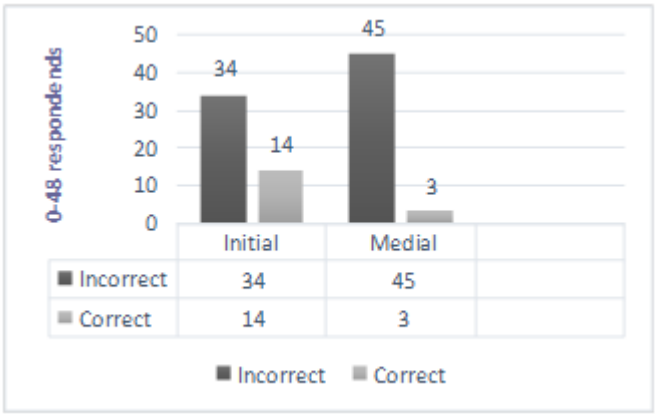

Figure 9. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /æ/

4) Sound /eɪ/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to research students' performance in pronouncing the sound /eɪ/. The three words had the sound /eɪ/ with different distribution, each in initial position as in 'ache', medial position as in 'potato', and final position as in 'say'. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found mainly in initial position. Errors also occurred in medial position and final position (Figure 10).

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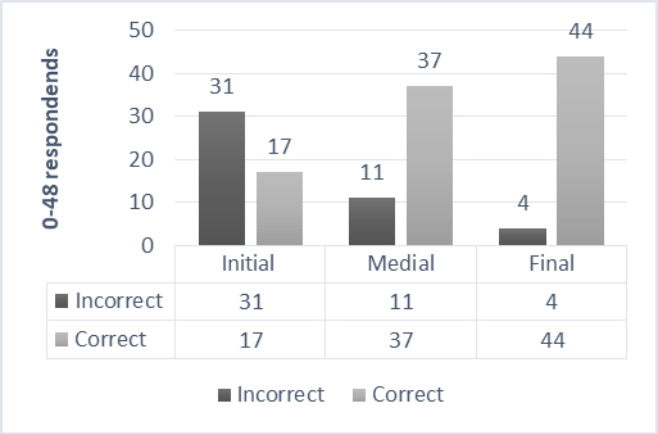

Figure 10. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /eɪ/

5) Sound /eə/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to study students' performance in pronouncing the sound /eə/. The three words included the sound /eə/in initial position as in 'airspace', medial position as in 'unbearable', and final position as in 'share', respectively. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found mostly in medial position (Figure 11). There seemed to be no problem for the students to pronounce this sound in final position and a little ignorable problem in the initial position.

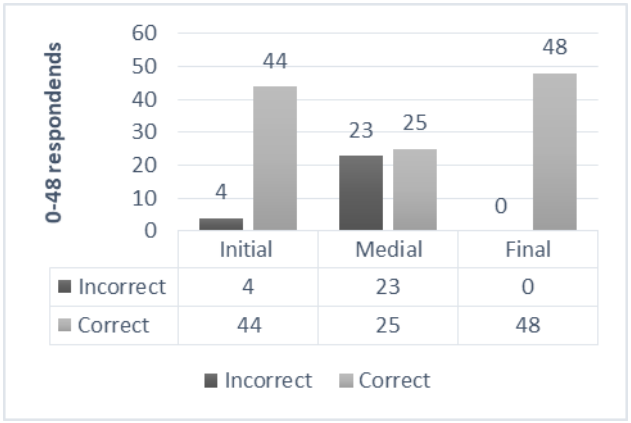

Figure 11. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /eə/

6) Sound /i:/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to study students' performance in pronouncing the sound /i:/. The three words included the sound /i:/in initial position as in 'eat', medial position as in 'sleep', and final position as in 'fee', respectively. All the words presented were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. Similar to the previous finding, the inaccuracies were found mostly in medial position (refer to Figure 12). There seemed to be no problem for the students to pronounce this sound in final position and somewhat easy in the initial position.

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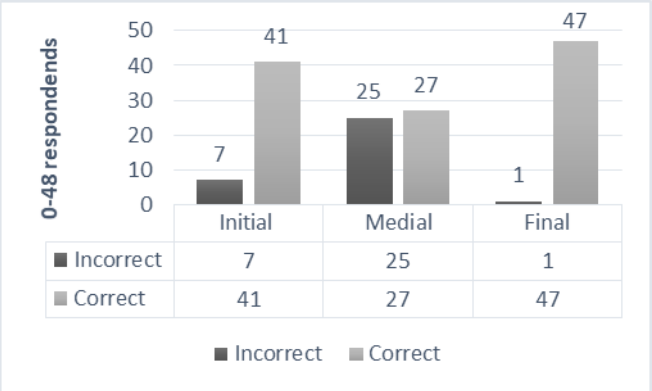

Figure 12. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /i:/

7) Sound /aʊ/

Three words were used in the pronunciation test to study students' performance in pronouncing the sound /aʊ/. The three words included the sound /aʊ/ in initial position as in 'outlet', medial position as in 'mountain', and final position as in 'cow', respectively. All the words provided were read aloud by all the sample of forty-eight Javanese students learning English. The inaccuracies were found mostly in medial position (Figure 13). In final position, this sound seemed to be potentially problematic for the students to pronounce. In initial position, however, nothing ever mattered to them.

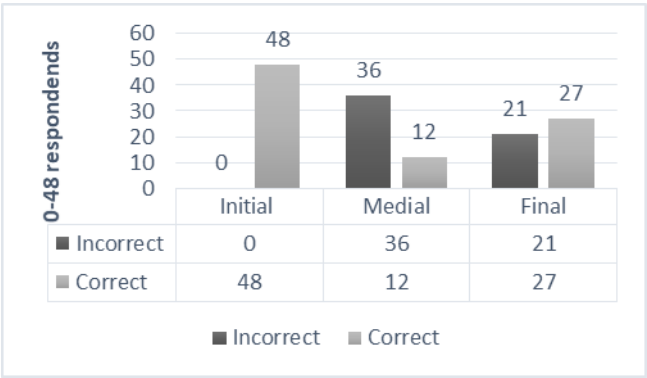

Figure 13. Javanese Students' Performance in Pronouncing the Sound /aʊ/

Overall, as to the present research findings and discussion, it can be said that much of this research result has been consistent to the previous research studies in the literature. A couple of points are exciting to get to know about from this research study, namely the answers to the research questions alone.

4. Conclusion

Despite the fact that the average score of students with Javanese as L2 was greater, there was no statistically significant difference in pronouncing the sounds of English at the segmental level between students with different Javanese language backgrounds, i.e. students with Javanese as L2 and those with Javanese as L1. It was likely that students with Javanese as L2 would perform significantly better statistically if the sample size was increased. The current research sample size was considered small.

Concerning the dominant errors made by the Javanese students in pronouncing the English vowel and consonant sounds, three consonant sounds /v/, /θ/, /ʒ/ and seven vowel

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sounds /ə:/, /ɔ:/, /æ/, /eɪ/, /eə/, /i:/, /aʊ/ respectively constituted top ten most problematic segmental English sounds (phonemes) of English. Errors, in this case, pronunciation inaccuracies occurred in different distribution. Of the top ten most problematic sounds, errors mostly took place in medial position.

Based on the research results, suggestions and recommendations are as follows. First, future similar research should use a greater sample size to arrive at confirmation as to the assumptions built. The students weaker in pronunciation should be treated properly in order to keep pace with their stronger counterparts. Secondly, those ten sounds occurring in medial position identified as most problematic for Javanese students learning English should be given emphasis or priority in teaching and learning.

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