

SLIPS OF THE EARS: STUDY ON VOWEL PERCEPTION IN INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRAK

Fenomena keliru dengar sering mengakibatkan keliru persepsi dan kesalahpahaman antara penutur dan si pembelajar atau lawan tutur, serta menghambat kelancaran dalam komunikasi antara kedua penutur. Hanya saja, penelitian mengenai fenomena keliru dengar ini belum mendapat perhatian dari para peneliti bahasa. Penelitian ini berusaha untuk mengidentifikasi bunyi-bunyi vokal yang sering menimbulkan salah dengar pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Tak hanya itu, penelitian ini juga membahas pengaruh konteks terhadap keliru dengar bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia serta penyebab terjadinya keliru dengar pada pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Metode penelitian ini dibagi menjadi tiga tahapan, yaitu metode pengumpulan data, metode analisis data, dan metode penyajian data. Data dikumpulkan dengan pengisian kuesioner oleh responden dan tes mendengarkan (menyimak). Analisis dilakukan dengan mengidentifikasi bunyi-bunyi vokal yang sering disalahdengarkan oleh pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia dan mencari mean (nilai rata-rata) dan persentase dari tes menyimak tanpa dan dengan konteks. Konteks terbukti sangat berpengaruh dalam memudahkan pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia memahami kata. Penyebab keliru dengar terbagi menjadi dua penyebab, yaitu penyebab antarbahasa (interlingual) dan penyebab ekstralingual.

Kata Kunci: bahasa Inggris, keliru dengar, persepsi bunyi, psikolinguistik

ABSTRACT

Slips of the ears leads to speakers' misperception and misunderstanding. It hints at communication failure between the speaker and the listener. Yet, linguists have not conducted full investigation on this matter. This research is designed to identify vowel sounds misperceived by Indonesian learners of English. Moreover, it examines the bearing of context and the causes of slips of the ears among those learners. A Questionnaire and listening tests were used for data collection. The questionnaire was employed to explore the respondents' personal information. Analysis of the data commence with the identification of vowel sounds that are misperceived by the respondents. It guides the research to find the mean and percentage of listening test with and without context. The research provides strong evidence that context has a positive influence on learners' comprehension of words. Accordingly, the research comes to the point that the causes of slips of the ear are interlingual and extralingual factors.

Keywords: English, psycholinguist, slips of the ears, vowel perception

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INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension tends to frighten learners. Whether they realize it or not, learners have built a bad assumption on this skill. An easy example can be seen when learners have to understand the speech of a native speaker in their interaction. They show difficulties in understanding the message a native speaker delivered. In listening, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) undergo a long winding process in their mind. The speech they hear is not directly grabbed by their ears.

Listening becomes complicated for non-native learners so they have difficulties in comprehending native speakers' utterances. There are processes involved in listening. First, the listener is presented with a raw speech containing phrases, clauses, cohesive markers, stress, intonations as constituents in his/her short term memory (Buck, 2001:27-28). Second, the listener tries to determine speech acts or event s/he encounters, whether it is a TV commercial, college lecture, news, friends' talk songs, and so on. Third, the listener determines the objectives of the speaker. The listener, in this step, tries to find out the illocutionary meaning or function of the speech act. Then, the listener tries to invoke background information or schemata that are related to the topic or the subject of discourse. In this process, the listener uses his/her background knowledge and life experiences and relates them with the topic. The listener then gives meaning to the utterance which forces him/her to dig beneath the sentence by interpreting the context of the discourse. At last, the listener transfers the received information from the short-term memory to long-term memory. The original linguistic forms such as sounds, words, sentences, grammatical relationships will be deleted. Mental models or images of the discourse stay longer in the memory (Brown, 2001:250).

The complexities of listening skills, differences in some linguistic characters and the nature of the speech, and cognitive process in listening often cause misperception of what is being said. The condition where listeners fail to recognize the

speakers' utterances results in erroneous perception of speech known as slips of the ears. Research on speech perception errors lacks systematic analysis. Compared with research on speech production, there is a paucity of systematic analysis of naturalistically collected speech perception errors.

Studies on speech errors especially on slips of the ears which involve rapid and fluent production of speech have been done by some researchers. Research on developing theories of speech perception has been done using data which are collected in laboratory situations. Experimental investigations of spoken language are carefully selected and balanced across several variables, recorded with high sound quality, and presented to participants under conditions that minimize extraneous noise. Moreover, lexical decisions were made of the task done by a model, whether sequences of phonological segments heard using headphones were real or nonsense words.

Brown and Rubenstein (1961) analyze the influence of word-frequency on spoken word recognition. In a variety of laboratory tasks, it has been shown that common words in the language are recognized more quickly and accurately than rare words. They argue that high frequency words are recognized less accurately than low frequency words.

Grosjean (1980) found that listeners proposed candidate words and were also able to correctly identify the word portions, even though they had not heard the entire words, suggesting that the initial portion of a word may play an important role in generating lexical candidates during spoken word recognition. Because a listener will most likely have correctly recognized a word before the entire word has been heard, any incorrect perception of phonemes near the end of the word will have relatively inconsequential effects on the correct recognition of the word. Grosjean argues that with the correct recognition of the word (despite the misperception of phonemes near the end of the word) there is no "slip of the ear" to observe. Together these naturalistic and experimental findings suggest that the initial part

of a word is important for quickly and accurately recognizing a spoken word.

Bond (1999) studied misperceptions made by 106 children and 784 adults. However, she decided to only analyze the data of adults misperceptions since the number of children misperceptions was relatively small. Bond (1999:59) found in her collection of slips of the ears that consonant misperceptions tended to occur in the initial position more than anywhere else in a word by a ratio of about 2:1. She concludes that if a listener misperceives the initial portion of a word, an incorrect lexical candidate will be retrieved because the set of possible lexical candidates is based on incorrect information about the beginning of the word.

Slips of the ears are misperceptions of an intended speech signal. This means that a listener reports hearing, as clearly and distinctly as any correctly perceived stretch of speech, something that does not correspond to the speaker's actual utterance (Bond, 1999:1). Slips of the ears should not be confused with slips of the tongue in which the speaker intends to utter one thing, but erroneously produces another. Speech production errors, for example, may result in phonological segments being disordered, such as saying *darn bore* while intending to say *barn door* in the substitution of whole words, or malapropisms, such as saying *monotonous* for *monogamous* (Fay & Cutler, 1977), or several other types of blends, reversals, or errors made by the speaker (Bock, 1996).

According to Field (2004:266-267), the data of slips of the ears can be analysed at the phoneme level, so called *phonemic slips*. Fromkin (via Laufer (1991:30) explained that *phoneme slips* are common errors in language use. There are three types of errors in slips of the ears, especially with consonants: (a) *deletions* where no consonant is heard, (b) *additions* where a consonant is inserted for which there are no cues in the signal. (c) *substitutions* where the reported consonant resembles the target one. With vowels, there is an assumption that stressed syllables are much

less prone to misinterpretation than the unstressed words.

In relation to slips of the ears made by Indonesia learners of English, this paper attempts to address the following questions: (1) what vowels are often misperceived by Indonesian learners of English, (2) what are the effects of contexts on slips of the ears, and (3) what are the causes of slips of the ears made by Indonesian learners of English?

The research procedure was divided into three steps: collecting, analyzing and processing the data. A questionnaire and listening tests were used for data collection. The questionnaire was employed to explore respondents' personal information. A two-part listening test containing 48 questions were administered on February 20 and 21, 2012, to 20 Indonesian college students in Yogyakarta, to measure the respondents' competence in listening and to answer the hypothesis. In the first part, the students were asked to choose one correct answer on the basis of the recording they listened to, and in the second part, they were asked to select one word that best completes the sentence they heard from the recording. Analysis of the data commenced with the identification of vowel sounds that were misperceived by the subjects. This was used to find the mean and percentage of the results of the listening test with and without context. Finally, the data were presented formally.

SLIPS OF THE EARS OF ENGLISH VOWEL PHONEMES

Identification of English vowel phonemes that are misperceived by Indonesian learners of English should become a great concern. The answers that the students gave to the questions in the listening test show percentages of slips of the ears at the phoneme level (see Table 1 below). 33.75 % of the respondents misperceived the sounds /I/ and /i:/, and 25% misperceived the sounds /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/. Moreover, 25% of the students showed slips of the ears in the sounds /ʌ/ and /ɒ/, and 15% of them misperceived the sounds /U/ and /u:/. Slips of the ears could not clearly be seen

in the phonemes /ɑ:/ and /ɒ/ , and also in /e/ and /ə/, both which amount equally to 10%. Indonesia learners of English do not seem to have much difficulty in distinguishing the phonemes /ɜ:/ and /e/ as their misperception of these phonemes is only 8.3%. Furthermore, they do not seem to have any problems at all in distinguishing the phonemes /ʌ/ from /æ/, /ʌ/ from /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/ from /U/, and /ɔ:/

from /A:/. Chart 1 below more clearly shows the percentage of the students' slips of the ears diagrammatically.

The diagram below suggests that Indonesia learners of English have great difficulty in distinguishing the vowel sounds /I/ and /i:/, /ɔ:/ / and ə//, and /ʌ/ and ə//. Therefore, they should pay more attention to them.

Tabel 1. Percentage of Slips of the Ears on Vowel Sounds

No.	Phonemes compared	Percentage of slips of the ears
1	/I/ vs. /i:/	33.75 %
2	/ɔ:/ vs. / ə/	25 %
3	/ɑ:/ vs. / ə/	10 %
4	/e/ vs. /ə/	10 %
5	/ʌ/ vs. /æ/	0 %
6	/U/ vs. /u:/	15 %
7	/ɜ:/ vs. /e/	8.3 %
8	/ʌ/ vs. /ɑ:/	0 %
9	/ʌ/ vs. / ə/	25 %
10	/ɔ:/ vs. /U/	0 %
11	/ɔ:/ vs. /ɑ:/	0 %

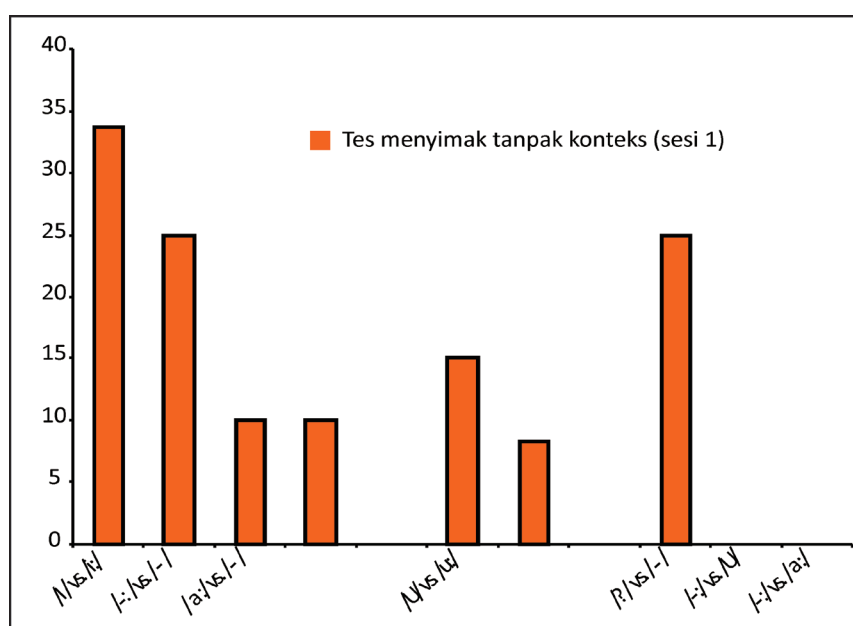


Chart 1. Percentage of Slips of the Ears on Vowel Sounds

EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON SLIPS OF THE EARS

In connection with foreign language learning, which includes the process of foreign language acquisition, context plays an important role since it helps learners understand the words easily. Context belongs to the syntactic component of language acquisition in which the learner does not only know the word obtained but are also able to understand and even produce the intended word into a sentence that is easily understandable and acceptable.

Comparison between listening test session 1 and session 2 results on a percentage comparing listening tests without context and using context.

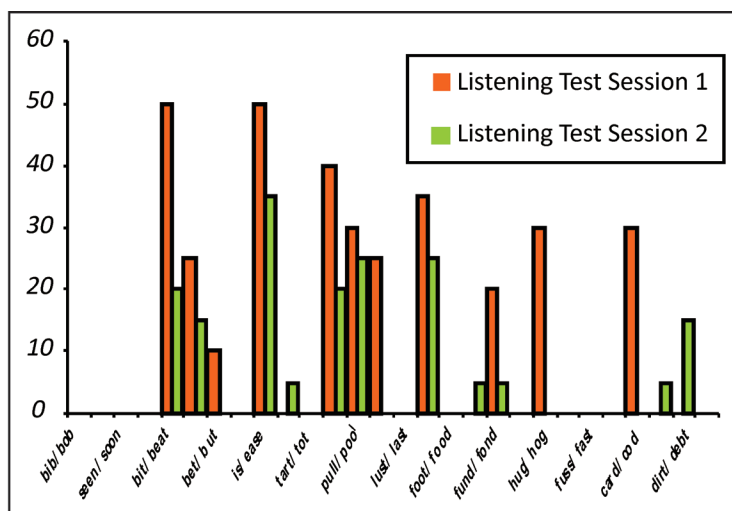
This reflects the percentage of learners who either perceive words or context words spoken by native English speakers. For the identification, it is proven that pair words such as *bit / beat, ox/ auks, bet/ but, up/apt, ease / is, tot/ tart, it/ eat, pool/ pull, bird/ bed, lust/last, pit/ peat, foot/ food, fund/ fond, heard/ head, hug/hog, cut/ cat, fast/ fuss, truck/ track, card/ cod, uncle/ ankle* are easily perceived by Indonesia learners of English when it is used in the context. Another case appears when pair of words such as *mask/ mosque, wall/ wool, cause/ cars, debt/ dirt*. These words show high percentage of slips of the ears as it is perceived by Indonesian learners of English, though not considered as significant.

Tabel 3.3. Percentage of slips of the ears when listening to context and without context

No.	Compared words	Compared phonemes	Percentage of Slips of the ears in Listening Session 1	Percentage of Slips of the ears in Listening Session 2
1	bib vs. bob	/i/ vs. /ɒ/	0 %	0 %
2	fell vs. full	/e/ vs. /u/	0 %	0 %
3	seen vs. soon	/i:/ vs. /u:/	0 %	0 %
4	maul vs. meal	/ɔ:/ vs. /i:/	0 %	0 %
5	bit vs. beat	/I/ vs. /i:/	50 %	20 %
6	ox vs. auks	/ɔ:/ vs. /ɒ/	25 %	15 %
7	bet vs. but	/e/ vs. /ə/	10 %	0 %
8	up vs. apt	/ʌ/ vs. /æ/	0 %	0 %
9	is vs. ease	/I/ vs. /i:/	50 %	35 %
10	mask vs. mosque	/ɑ:/ vs. /ɒ/	0 %	5 %
11	tart vs. tot	/ɑ:/ vs. /ɒ/	0 %	0 %
12	it vs. eat	/I/ vs. /i:/	40 %	20 %
13	pull vs. pool	/U/ vs. /u:/	30 %	25 %
14	bird vs. bed	/ɜ:/ vs. /e/	25 %	0 %
15	lust vs. last	/ʌ/ vs. /ɑ:/	0 %	0 %
16	pit vs. peat	/I/ vs. /i:/	35 %	25 %
17	foot vs. food	/U/ vs. /u:/	0 %	0 %
18	wall vs. wool	/ɔ:/ vs. /U/	0 %	5 %
19	fund vs. fond	/ʌ/ vs. /ɒ/	20 %	5 %
20	heard vs. head	/ɜ:/ vs. /e/	0 %	0 %
21	hug vs. hog	/ʌ/ vs. /ɒ/	30 %	0 %
22	cut vs. cat	/ʌ/ vs. /æ/	0 %	0 %
23	fuss vs. fast	/ʌ/ vs. /ɑ:/	0 %	0 %
24	truck vs. track	/ʌ/ vs. /æ/	0 %	0 %
25	card vs. cod	/ɑ:/ vs. /ɒ/	30 %	0 %
26	cars vs. cause	/ɔ:/ vs. /ɑ:/	0 %	5 %
27	dirt vs. debt	/ɜ:/ vs. /e/	0 %	5 %
28	uncle vs. ankle	/ʌ/ vs. /æ/	0 %	0 %

The comparison between listening test with and without context in order to see the influence of context to Indonesian learners is as follows:

addition, the Indonesian language pronunciation system tends to pronounce the sounds one after the word clearly in which this can affect



Grafik 3.1. Percentage of slips of the ears when listening to context and without context

From the diagram above, it appears that the respondents were helped by listening tests using context. There is a decrease in the percentage of respondents prior to listening without using context and with context. Listening test session 2, which contains the command to complete context based on the text carried by native English speakers in the recording tests shows various results, however, most of the respondents felt very helpful. Of 28 (twenty eight) statements made by native speakers, there are 12 (twelve) word partner that correctly perceived by respondents and do not show the phenomenon of slips of the ears.

CAUSES OF SLIPS OF THE EARS

Slips of the ears are caused by two factors: interlingual and extralingual. The early stages of language learning is typically characterized by **interlingual** process which is the transfer of the elements of the first language or mother tongue or a second language to the language being studied

learners. Error removal of these elements are often called first language interference errors in the target language. In this study, the interference between the mother tongue with a foreign language learned is clearly felt. This can be evidenced by the phenomenon of slips of the ears. Learners experienced some sounds that do not sound the same as found in their mother tongue. For example, the comparison of sound /I/ with /i:/. The percentage of error is high enough when respondents hear this sounds in a word. The main reason of the cause of the phenomenon of slips of the ears in this sound is because Indonesian language is not familiar with the long vowel sounds such as the sound /i:/ as well as several other similar sounding long vowel /u:/, /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/.

Because of differences in the sound system in English and Indonesian. Indonesian learners of English tend to be difficult to distinguish the sound of a long and short vowel sounds and difficulty understanding the sounds [ɒ]. In

the perception of learning English. They got difficulties perceiving pair word *bird/bed*. When the *bird* sounds are pronounced by native English speakers, Indonesian learners of English can not easily distinguish the sound of *bird* to *bed*. The fundamental cause is because the pronunciation system of the Indonesian tends to spell word in accordance with the existing letter.

Frequency of using words also has a strong influence as the cause of the phenomenon of slips of the ears. There are some words that are often heard in this study, such as *foot/food*, *wall/wool*, *cat/cut* that goes into the category of words that are often used and heard. English language learners in Indonesia has not experienced significant difficulties in perceiving the sounds of these words and phrases that contain the word pair. By contrast, learners in this study had difficulty in perceiving some couples who rarely heard words like the word *ox/auks*, *pit/peat*, and *hug/hog*. There are several English language learners misperceived these words.

Neighborhood density becomes the factor of interference to the language studied. In listening, learners listen to and perceive the word delivered, as a result the words heard on the target language learners is in accordance with the words accepted.

Extralingual factor can be seen in this study. On the phenomenon of slips of the ears, the first language has an influence in second language learning. With the knowledge and mastery of the first language, Indonesian learners of English will receive a second input language by first selecting the input language. Selection is done as an effort of understanding the target language based on an existing language comprehension in the first language. From this study that 40% of their native language is Indonesian, 40% of his native language is Java and the rest are other languages covering Sundanese and Sulawesi shows the influence of the mother tongue for learning English in Indonesia. The influence of the mother tongue of the learner is clearly seen in situations where learners fail to understand the word in question in this study.

Learners' motivation also affect the learning of foreign language. Nonlinguistic aspects can be clearly demonstrated in this study. Regarding the cause of this motivation, 85% of data obtained shows that learners do not like listening lessons and 15% liked listening in English. It can be seen that there are many learners who do not have high motivation in learning listening skills.

CONCLUSION

Some vowels are often misperceived and lead to the phenomenon of slips of the ears by Indonesian learners of English. They are difficult to distinguish the pair sound /I/ with /i:/ with a percentage of 33.75% mistakenly heard, the couple phoneme /ɔ:/ with /o/ is at 25%, with the sound of the phoneme pair /ʌ/ with /ɒ/ by 25% and comparison /U/ with /u:/ by 15%. The phenomenon of slips of the ears that is not too high seen in comparison phoneme /ɑ:/ with /ɒ/ and comparison / e / with /ə/, which percentage is equally at 10%. From the results, it is identified that Indonesian learners of English does not have trouble distinguishing sounds in comparison phoneme /ɜ:/ with /e/ a rate of 8.3%, the sound /ʌ/ with /æ/, /ʌ/ with /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/ with /U/, and /ɔ:/ vs. /A:/ with the percentage of slips of the ears is 0%.

The context is very influential in facilitating Indonesian learners of English to understand the word. Based on the word pairs compared in the two tests which tests listening, and listening tests in the context of the word or phrase, it is shown the decrease of false numbers in slips of the ears.

Causes of slips of the ears are divided into two causes. First, inter-language which consists of the difference in the sound system that has the tendency to be difficult to distinguish the sound of a long and short vowel sounds and understand sound [ɒ], differences in word pronunciation, word usage frequency (word frequency), the degree of similarity of words (neighborhood density). Second, ekstralingual factor that consist of first language influence and motivation of learners.

Studies on the phenomenon of slips of the ears, especially second language or foreign

language learners can be performed on consonant phonemes and diphthongs. This is because phonemes and consonant sounds and diphthongs between different languages are different one another. Further research could also aim to get the difference in the time (Voice Onset Time/ VOT) that takes native speakers of foreign languages and foreign language learners in perceiving vowel phonemes.

The study of the phenomenon of slips of the ears can also be done on a day-to-day informal conversations, in the listening material to improve or measure of English competency such as TOEFL (*Test of English as Foreign Language*) or IELTS (*International English Language Testing System*). The study will be identified in all level of linguistics; phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In the end of the research, it is reveal the perfect strategy to increase listening competence. Perceptions about a word can be measured by the ability of learners to produce the intended word, whether it is in accordance with the intended pronunciation by native speakers, or much different from the speech of native speakers due to a misperception in the process of listening to the word.

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