

**WHAT ARE THE MAIN FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ELLS'  
PRONUNCIATION?**

by

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## WHAT ARE THE MAIN FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ELLS' PRONUNCIATION?

### **ABSTRACT**

Pronunciation is viewed as a difficult part in the English learning process of ELLs. This study aimed at exploring the factors that influence the pronunciation of ELLs. In this qualitative research, oral interview was a method for data collection. The sample of the study contained of 7 international students with age ranges between 18-25 from a State University in Western New York. The students were asked questions regarding their pronunciation difficulties. The results produced three general themes: personal reflection, difficulties and bias. Also, this study uncovered the implication of students' pronunciation problems towards the teaching and learning of English. The findings of this study have implications for administrators, ESL educators and students.

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“What are the Main Factors that Contribute to ELLs' pronunciation?”

### **Introduction**

Pronunciation is a salient factor in English teaching (Lin, 2014). It is necessary for teachers to emphasize the importance of pronunciation in their classes. There are many people with a strong desire to learn and speak English with correct pronunciation. However, English pronunciation problem is a big challenge to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners rather than native speakers. Indeed, most ESL learners regard English pronunciation as a major difficulty in their study of English. In addition to the learning process, poor pronunciation also creates a lot of obstacles for ESL learners in the job search process. For instance, Khalique (2019) recounted a humorous story in which an English reporter with a strong regional Yorkshire accent was found difficult to understand by a German tennis star, “Pinfield laughed it off, but told the BBC afterwards that he has to speak slowly when interviewing and is frequently misunderstood. The reality is that a thick accent can hamper our work prospects, and research shows that employers still favour standard versions of British and American accents over non-native accents for more prestigious or “higher status” jobs” (p. 1). Pronunciation problems also hamper the communication between people in a daily basis. For most of the time, ELLs are misunderstood by others because of their pronunciation mistakes. Herrmann (2017) said that, “When people have difficulty understanding another person simply due to the pronunciation, it can cause frustration on the part of the speaker and listener, and potentially cause misunderstandings or other unintended consequences” (para.5). In another words, if a listener pays a lot of effort on understanding the words, it will be more difficult to process the information from the conversation.

### **The challenges of English pronunciation**

Why is English so difficult to pronounce for ELLs? Hudson (2013) summarized five main difficulties in English pronunciation. Written English is not that closely aligned with spoken English.

For example, some letters can be pronounced different ways. Moreover, there are a variety of sounds variety in English with 19 vowel sounds and 25 consonant sounds. He stated that, “Many students speak languages with fewer vowels – a lot of modern languages (Spanish, Japanese, Arabic to name a few) have no more than 5 vowel sounds, for most learners, the 19 vowel sounds present an important area of study” (Para.5). Consonant sounds are also difficult for ELLs. He thought that, “nearly everyone needs to learn the ‘th’ sounds /θ/ & /ð/, the approximant ‘r’ sound often requires attention, and other sounds such as /h/, /w/ and /ŋ/ cause a lot of errors” (Para.6). Voicing and placement need to be mastered when ELLs try to pronounce the sounds accurately. Thirdly, English pronounces with different way of joining such as assimilation, elision, vowel and vowel joining as well as consonant and vowel joining. In addition, English not only has weak and strong sounds but also uses intonation and stress to indicate the meaning. This is some challenges for ELLs to learn English pronunciation and the difficulties that they are easily misunderstood.

The differences between English and ELLs’ first languages is also an essential factor. Zhang and Yin (2009) summarized: “learner’s first language influences the pronunciation of the target language and is a significant factor in accounting for foreign accents” (p.142). So called interference or interference from the first language is very likely to cause errors in aspiration, stress, and intonation in the target language. Similarly, a student’s native language is also likely to cause errors in aspiration, stress, and intonation in the target language (Gilakjani, 2011). The more differences in sounds between the two languages, the more mistakes the English Language Learners (ELL) would make. Indeed, most people tend to learn a new language based on their knowledge of their primary language. Accordingly, their understanding of a new language is likely to be different from native speakers. Correspondingly, when ELLs speak a new language, they tend to use their familiar sounds and sound patterns of their mother languages to imitate the new language in the process of learning. Therefore, their pronunciation

sounds generally different from that of native speakers (Al-Zayed, 2017). Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) stated that, “the difficulty of learning to pronounce a foreign language is cognitive rather than physical and that it has something to do with the way ‘raw sound’ is categorized or conceptualized in using speech” (p. 74). For example, Arabic-speaking students have difficulties in some specific pronunciation. They often substitute the sounds that they don’t use in their native languages with the sounds that are included in their native languages which are close to the new language in the place of articulation (e.g. they replace /p/ with /b/, /θ/ with /s/ etc) (Hassan, 2014). This problem is also common for ELLs from other countries.

ELLs are lacking practices of speaking during their English learning process in their home countries. According to Lin (2014), ESL students’ communication skills are poor because they are lacking satisfactory proficiency in pronunciation although they have learned English in classes. What's more, their lack of familiarity with standardized English pronunciation influences their ability of accurate English language proficiency. Particularly, due to their first language, the pronunciation convention of ESL students is different from that the native speakers. Gilakjani (2011) noted that learning pronunciation is also related to knowing the components of the words: “This goes not just for individual sounds, but for bigger elements of speech, such as syllables, stress patterns and rhythm” (p. 74). Pronunciation learning involves learning new movements and rules, and practicing them until they become second nature (Hassan, 2014; Lin, 2014). So, the ESL teachers should help ESL students to identify the pronunciation variation between the first language and English in the first place of English-language learning.

Individual factors of students also contributed to their pronunciation problems (Ota, 2013). For most ESL learners, they came to this community with new language with poor language proficiency and ability. They are struggling with the challenges such as culture shock, language challenges, social



isolation, identity confusion and a different educational system. All of these factors strongly impact them in both psychological and social perspectives (Liu, 2011; Ota, 2013). What is more, ESL learners may encounter discrimination from others because of their different pronunciation. This lessens their willingness to speak English in public. According to Wang and Aghajanian (2012), students' personalities is also an important factor. Outgoing and confident learners tend to communicate with native speakers and to practice their pronunciation more frequently. Conversely, some students are discouraged from talking in the classroom in their own cultures; thus, they are shy and feeling uncomfortable with speaking in class. Thus, when investigating ELLs' pronunciation problems, individual factors should be considered significantly as well.

### **Personal interest**

As an ESL learner, I had experienced and felt the importance and the difficulties in learning English pronunciation. As far as I am concerned, many ESL learners ignore pronunciation for some reasons. In my own experience, ESL students whose native language is Chinese or Japanese experience more difficult time than those whose native language is Spanish or French because of the differences between the language systems. They think their English-speaking skills are good enough since their oral skill is strong enough to support them to communicate in lessons. However, ESL teachers had been listening to poor English pronunciation for many years and they can understand ESL learners more easily than the most native English speakers. The consequences of poor pronunciation are tragic. If one has a strong accent, correct grammar and vocabularies using are not strong enough to support the understanding of others. Therefore, people are very likely to reduce communicating with one with strong accent. Also, pronunciation problems are going to influence the listening ability. If you have a non-standard pronunciation of a word, the cognition of this word may be incorrect too. Thus, when you hear this word, you will have difficulties recognizing the word very often. As an ESL educator, it is necessary

to help students overcome this pronunciation problem dilemma.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the main problems of learning pronunciation that ELLs will encounter. It will help to elaborate on the pronunciation and language structures to discover the factors that interfere with the effective communication in English. Also, this study aimed to discover the implication of students' pronunciation problems towards the teaching and learning of English. I conducted a qualitative study and used interviews as a primary data collection instrument. The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, including 7 male or female ELLs with age ranges between 18-25.

The research questions that drive this study are as follows:

What are the main factors that contribute to students' pronunciation problems?

How does a students' native language affect his or her pronunciation?

What are the implications of a students' pronunciation problems towards the teaching and learning of English?

In next chapter, the relevant literatures of ELLs pronunciation problems are reviewed.

### **Review of the Literature**

In the previous chapter, I introduced the issue of the pronunciation problems of ELLs. This chapter is intended to review the literature on this topic and to explore the kinds of research that has already been done on the topic. I will describe the purposes, procedures, and results of these studies, and I will suggest conclusions regarding implications for current and future ESL educators.

#### **The pronunciation problems and phonology**

Many researchers have investigated the importance of phonology and the relationship to students' native languages. (Al-Zayed, 2017; Gilakjani, 2011, Hassan, 2014; Lin, 2014). Some researchers have also summarized the literature regarding the ways that people's first language influences their English pronunciation. (Chan, 2006; Zhang & Ying, 2009). Also, they stated the needs of learners and made some suggestion on the methods with which to teach pronunciation. In a study conducted by Hassan (2014), for example, data were collected from 50 students and 30 university teachers from the University of Sudan of Science and Technology (SUST). The instruments used for collecting the data were observation, recordings and a structured questionnaire. The study revealed that Sudanese students had English vowels pronunciation problems when the vowels have more than one way of pronunciation. (e.g., /z/ and /ð/, /s/ and /θ/, /b/ and /p/, /j/ and /tʃ/.) According to Hassan, "The mispronunciation of the SSEs is due to lack of the problematic phonemes in Arabic. The phoneme contrasts affect many common English words, so poor production of these sounds will be very noticeable" (p. 41). Al-Zayed (2017) used a pronunciation test to as an instrument within 30 Jordanian students. The results showed that the absent sounds in Arabic and existing in English made students transfer the nearest sound from the Arabic phonemes to the English phonemes. Al-Zayed suggested that,

“English teachers should be more serious when they teach their students English and give their attention to the phonological language interference for the students during their speaking or reading. In addition, to test them periodically, to check their advance pronunciation” (p. 90).

These two articles showed that the differences in the two sound systems militated Arabic speakers and the ways that ENLs' first language influences the ways that they are pronouncing English words. The challenges might be the variation of students' pronunciation differences due to their diverse native languages.

Chan (2006) found that 12 Cantonese participants in her study had difficulties dealing with the voicing contrasts of final obstruent, especially fricatives and affricates. Cantonese does not show voicing contrasts in its phonemic system, so the Cantonese English as a Second Language (ESLs) learners easily mispronounce the final obstruent. She explained: “Other problems included the non-release of final plosives and the inaccurate articulation of certain fricatives and sonorant consonants, especially the lateral /l/” (p. 296). What's more, it is suggested that ESL teachers should notice the preceding vowel environments of nasals and laterals problems in order to help students efficiently. In a similar study conducted by Zhang and Yin (2009), the researchers analyzed some problems concerning pronunciation of English learners in China. The factors that influenced the pronunciation of ENLs included learners' age, attitude, and their insufficient knowledge of phonology and phonetics systems of the English language, etc. The research analyzed the differences in phonemes, differences between tone language and intonation language, differences in juncture as well as phonetic and phonological differences comparing Chinese and English. According to the authors, “the presentations of distinctions between Chinese and English phonological systems may raise our awareness of the differences of the two sound systems to avoid errors in pronunciation” (p. 146). Actually, this is

a useful article for teaching pronunciation to ELLs. Teachers should distinguish the pronunciation difficulties of different students and reach the target of comfortable intelligibility.

Saito and Saito (2017) investigated the effects of instruction on the development of Japanese EFLs' comprehensibility, word stress, rhythm, and intonation. The subjects for this study included 20 Japanese ELLs and 4 native-speaking English teachers. Students were divided into two groups evenly and received different tasks. The teachers participated as experienced raters. The pre-/post-test data showed that form-focused instruction can be beneficial to improve ELLs spoken English as well as L2 suprasegmental learning. The researchers stated that, "The findings provide empirical support for the value of suprasegmental-based instruction in phonological development, even with beginner-level EFL learners with a limited amount of second-language conversational experience" (p.604). The finding of this research also provided ample pedagogical implications for ESL educators.

Collectively, Hassan (2014) and Al-Zayed (2017) discussed that ELLs' pronunciation problems from the perspective of language itself. Chan (2006) and Zhang and Ying (2009) compared the differences between students' native languages and English. Saito and Saito (2017) provided perceptions of the value of suprasegmental-based instruction in the EFL context. These researchers gave ESL educators an insight into the difficulties that ELLs may encounter as well as the way that they can help with ELLs pronunciation according to the findings.

### **Individual factors**

Some researchers also discussed about the individual problems of ESLs that also influenced their pronunciation issues. Ota (2013) showed an interest in the international students' transition into life in the United States. The study was qualitative research and it used semi structured interview. Eight Chinese students who enrolled in Level 5 participated in this study.

They were all full-time ESL students and undergraduate students. The findings revealed that international students always had a difficult time in the U.S. in the first place struggling with adjustments to cultural differences, new environments as well as different academic requirements and language skills. Students who had social connections with native speakers felt more confident to speak English, while others felt uncomfortable communicating with native speakers and to understanding American culture. Ota stated: "The finding can also offer critical suggestions on how to make strategic plans to facilitate the successful transitions of these Chinese ESL students" (p. 214). The study can also be useful for the instructional and curriculum development.

Derwing (2003) explored ESL students' perceptions of their own pronunciation problems. The study was based on qualitative research and consisted of interviews with 100 intermediate proficiency ESL students. The findings showed that most of the students agreed that their pronunciation played a role in communication problems. Some of them can distinguish their pronunciation difficulties while some cannot. The majority thought that if they can pronounce English well, they will be respected more. Derwing commented that, "Those participants who belonged to a visible minority were more likely to feel discrimination caused by accent than the others" (p.559). Lui (2014) shared his own experiences as an international student. He proposed that students should become autonomous language learners if they want to improve their oral English skills. In order to improve conversation skill and spoken English, the author suggested that international students can get involved in some actions such as volunteering, working at a part-time job, making presentations and participating in leisure activities. The author thought that his low English oral skills were due to lack of interaction with others. He explained that, "Because of my low self-esteem, I avoided speaking and interacting with other students in class,

and this prevented me from getting to know people and making friends. It also affected the development of my oral English skills” (p. 80). This article brings a different perspective from a student’s angle.

Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos (2014) examined the pronunciation instruction in the classroom and the way that pronunciation instruction impact ELLs’ confidence. This was a qualitative case study and the data collection instruments included class observation, a written text, and semi-structured interviews. Student subjects for the study were 29 students and only 8 students were chosen to be interviewed. Two male EFL teachers of English classes participated. Following the data collection and analysis, the researchers found that the instruction of pronunciation included drilling and “on-the-spot” correction of students’ mistakes (p.160). Also, student’s personal practice is an essential part for developing learner’s pronunciation skill since they lack confidence when pronouncing unfamiliar words. The researchers emphasized that, “all participants showed awareness as to how important the existence of a pronunciation course could be and that teachers give more instructions to their students during the class” (p. 160). The result of this study emphasized the importance of pronunciation instruction in the classroom. ESL teachers can learn the possible way that help ELLs to build confidence regarding English pronunciation.

In conclusion, this literature review suggests that there are mixed results coming from studies of English language learners (ELLs) who have pronunciation problem is related to their first languages and their individual practices. Research indicates that the awareness of distinctions between different phonological systems can reduce errors in pronunciation. Research also shows that practice for pronunciation related to voicing distinctions and self-motivation is a useful way for students to improve their pronunciation. Finally, research shows that

communicating with native speakers more can give students confidence in speaking language and corrective feedback can help with accurate pronunciation.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the main problems of learning pronunciation that ELLs will encounter. It will help to elaborate on the pronunciation and language structures to discover the factors that interfere with the effective communication in English. The primary research question that drives this study is: What are the main factors that contribute to students' pronunciation problems? The next chapter will describe the methods with which the study was conducted, the participants, setting and a description of the data collection and analysis procedures.



### **Methodology**

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature concerning the factors that contributing to ELLs' pronunciation problem. Based on my review of the literatures, the pronunciation problems of English Language Learners (ELLs) were mainly related to ELLs' different language system and their individual reasons. Overall the research gave effective factors that related to ELLs' pronunciation problems.

The following chapter will introduce the procedures of the proposed project. During the research, I interviewed 7 international students from a state university in Western New York. Through the interviews, students will be able to share their situations and perspectives regarding their pronunciation problems. The data collected from the interview is intended to explore ELLs' English pronunciation difficulties and gained a deeper understanding of the reasons for their problems.

### **Research frameworks**

During my investigation, I conducted a study based on qualitative research approaches in order to investigate the problem of pronunciation for ELLs. According to Johnson & Christensen (2017), "Qualitative research is used when little is known about a topic or phenomenon and when one wants to discover or learn more about it. It is commonly used to understand people's experiences and to express their perspective." (p. 33). In the education field, qualitative inquiry can be used to the teaching effect, examining whether a practice or strategy has a constructive impact to other similar situations or contexts. (Stodden, Yamamoto, Folk, Kong, & Otsuji, 2013). In this quantitative research framework, English language learning is always be viewed as a dynamic and free objective.

During my research, I collected data from individual interviews. According to Johnson and Christensen (2017), qualitative interview concludes open-ended questions and interviewer can ask follow-up questions that may emerge during the qualitative interview (p. 235). I found that face-to-face interviews allowed me to monitor the conversation in order to get the better understanding of each participant, capturing verbal and non-verbal clues from the participants as well. Likewise, I was able to ask follow-up questions for additional information. Thus, I had sufficient information such as participants' attitudes and perceptions collected through the interview process which support my following data analyses in the next chapter. This framework was helpful for me to get deeper understanding of the pronunciation problem about ELLs.

### **Research setting and participants**

This research study was conducted on the campus of a small, state institution in Western New York and was aimed at investigating the pronunciation difficulties of ELLs. Considering that the conversation between participants and me couldn't be interrupted and needed to be recorded clearly, I found some quiet places on the campus. For the participants' convenience, my interviews finally took part in different places such as the lounge in the university common and library.

The research participants were all volunteers and they were notified that compensation would not be provided in any form. Seven international students were interviewed in this investigation. In the university, a large percentage of international students are either Korean or Chinese. So Chinese ELLs and Korean ELLs represented the largest participant pool in the research. The participants of this interview included 2 Korean speakers, 2 Mandarin speakers, 1 Cantonese speaker, 1 Japanese speaker and 1 Arabic speaker. The age group of the participants was 18-25. There were six female and one male participants. Most of them are undergraduate

students, only a Chinese student and an Arabic student are graduate students. All of them were involved in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program housed at the university before they were officially enrolled in the university. As ELLs with limited language proficiency, they all struggle with English improvements.

### **Data collection procedure**

For this study, the purpose was to observe the pronunciation difficulties of ELLs currently studying at SUNY Fredonia. Therefore, the interview to students aimed at exploring their English pronunciation difficulties and gaining a deeper understanding of the origins of their problems (see Interview Protocol in Appendix A). After getting approval from the university's Human Subjects Review Committee (see HSR Approval memo in Appendix C), participants were contacted verbally at first. Later on, the interviews were scheduled on weekends. In the first place, the participants only included international students from Asian countries. In an attempt to achieve student's ethnic and pronunciation diversities, I contacted the Arabic speaking student through friend and asked if she was able to participate in my study. Fortunately, she was available and agreed to be participate in the interview. Finally, the data were collected from the face-to-face interview individually with 7 international students including Mandarin speakers, Cantonese speaker, Korean speakers, Japanese speaker as well as Arabic speaker.

Johnson and Christensen (2017) stated that, "Qualitative interviews are also called depth interviews because they can be used obtain in-depth information about a participant's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivation, and feeling about the topic" (p. 235). Moreover, the advantages of standardized open-ended interview are described by Johnson and Christensen (2017) as "increasing comparability of responses; data are complete for each person on the topic

addressed in the interview” (p. 236). Thus, I designed a standardized open-ended interview because it is beneficial to my research study.

Before the actual interview, the students were told the purpose of the study and the protocol of the interview. The participants were all agreed to sign the informed consent form (see Informed Consent Form in Appendix B). I told them they can ask questions that don't understand during the interview. They were also allowed to look up the dictionary in the phone to help them communicating in English better. The question I designed included three parts: personal reflection (ELLs' English learning process and their opinion to pronunciation, as well as personal factors that influence their English pronunciation), their difficulties or challenge regarding English pronunciation and bias (if they were discriminated against or misunderstood by others according to their pronunciation). I took notes on the question sheet about participants' answers according to these three parts. I also asked some additional question in order to guide the participants to give more details when I was interested in the points they mentioned. The duration of interviews were around 15-20 minutes. The whole interviews were recorded via smartphone. In order to protect the subjects, they were anonymous during the research process. No other information was disclosed except their nationalities.

### **Data analysis procedure**

The interviews were accurately transcribed and carefully analyzed. Johnson and Christensen (2017) explicated: “Transcription is the process of transforming qualitative research data, such as audio recordings of interview or field notes written from observation, into typed text.... Transcription involves transferring data from a less usable to a more usable form” (p. 570). In order to analyze my data, I listened the recordings carefully and transcribed the data into usable information. The findings were developed based on three themes categorized from the

transcription. Then I identified supporting relevant data excerpts for each theme. These transcriptions gave me an understanding of the ways that the participants thought and the problems that they face when pronouncing English words. This information helps me explore the factors that contributed to ELLs' pronunciation difficulties.

As Johnson and Christensen (2017) noted: "The researcher uses a code or category name to signify or identify that particular segments" (p. 571). The audio recordings were coded in order to help examine the factors that contribute to ELLs' pronunciation problems. Data included all the ELLs' responses from the interviews. Initial coding was based on the perspectives of each participant according to their answers of interview questions. After coding data process, I searched for themes with broader patterns of meaning and reviewed themes in order to make sure they fit the data. The data was organized according to the themes.

### **Alternative Approaches**

When I was considering the research method, I had planned to conduct a mixed method research with questionnaire and interview together in the first place. I wanted to use a test to value the correctness of participants' pronunciation. However, it's difficult to find the suitable test and the correctness of pronunciation is hard to tell. After many discussions with my thesis professor, and a deep reflection on the type of study that would benefit the most. In the end, I decided to conduct my currently interview to observe ELLs pronunciation difficulties. My current research can give an insight to ESL educators from the perspectives of ELLs' experience and perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the methods used during this research helped me to conduct my study and allowed me to explore the factors that influence ELLs' pronunciation problems. The interviews gave me

insights into the ELLs' perspectives and the real situation of learning English pronunciation and the difficulties that they met in the daily life. I was also able to categorize and analyze the data I got from the interviews.

In the next chapter, I am going to discuss the results of this research study. The interview data shows students' perspectives and the problems they encountered. I will use the transcription in order to analyze whether the pronunciation problems are related to their native languages or not.

## Results

The previous chapter discussed the methods taken to obtain results for my study. I interviewed 7 international students in order to examine their pronunciations about learning English pronunciation, and the roots of their difficulties and problems. In this chapter, I will break down the data into three subthemes: personal reflection, difficulties and bias. In this section, the names of students are excluded from the results for the sake of their privacy.

### Personal reflection

In this part of the interview, I asked some questions about the students' English learning process in their countries, the way that they think of learning English pronunciation, and their individual reasons that influence their English pronunciation. The Chinese participants said that they studied English since elementary school. Most of them have studied English for over 10 years. They learned simple English such as the alphabet and basic vocabulary in their primary school. In their middle school and high school, they mainly learned reading and writing English skills for the examinations. One student told me that he thought his English pronunciation was very good when he studied in China, because he can communicate well with his English teacher. However, when he went to the United States and started the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, he found that he had difficult time understanding what teacher said in the class. Even though he had learned the words, he could not recognize them by listening the words pronounced by native speakers. This means that he cannot understand by native speaker either. He said that,

Because in China, we, we learned listening usually by the recording, like the record. The teacher plays the recording of... I don't know.. Maybe the people who speaking English in the recording... might be not that standard. It sounds like Chinglish.

He thought that this was the reason that he had poor listening skill, and it was also related to his pronunciation difficulties.

Similar to Chinese students, the Korean students in my participant sample also studied English since primary school, and they took English class three times a week. The story of the only Japanese student I interviewed was different. She mentioned that she learned English from the time that she was 3 years old and she went to the English language institution for English learning. Yet, when I asked about English learning situations in her regular school, she said that she just had English class once a month in primary school and learned some basic English as well. For the Arabic student in my participant sample, the English learning started even later. She studied English from the level of high school for just one hour a week. In high school, she only learned English alphabet, read simple words and wrote simple paragraphs. She mentioned that she didn't have a chance to practice speaking in the school at all. She has studied English in the United States for one year. However, her classmates are mostly Saudi Arabian, and they talked in Arabic often, which was not helpful for improving her English pronunciation.

They all agreed that English pronunciation is important in English study. One student talked about her travel experience and showed what an essential part English pronunciation played during her conversations with others. All ELLs in my participant sample thought it's helpful to communicate with native speakers with standard English pronunciation. They can be understood well. Another student stated that,

I think nobody will laugh at you if you pronounce differently. But I also think that if you have a good pronunciation, you will feel confident, and you will get more respect. Because my American friends told me the international student speaking as a native speaker is a really cool thing.



The individual reason that influenced English pronunciation varied. One student told me she learned British English in the primary school, and she was taught American English in college. She thought that did influence her English pronunciation. One student mentioned that “I tend to speak inside of my throat. It’s my bad habit. It could be influencing my English pronunciation.” Another interesting story was that the student had been an exchange student to Italy for a year when she was in high school. After she came back to her country, and her teacher said that her English pronunciation sounded like Italian. She remarked:

Even though Italian is not my native language. So, like, at that time, like I thought it was interesting that even the third language the second language can affect my English pronunciation. So, it’s so interesting for me.

It had also surprised me that I had never thought about it. It is possible that languages can influence each other, and the environment can deepen the influence.

From the information I collected in this part of the interview, I found that spoken English is not emphasized during ELLs’ learning processes. Students learned English in order to pass the examination, with curriculum and instruction merely related to reading, writing and listening. They didn’t have many opportunities to practice their conversation skills. Lacking practice is the main factor that contributes to students’ pronunciation problem. Besides this, the teacher’s English pronunciation is often not standard, which misleads students’ in terms of pronunciation. Something related to culture is that some Japanese think it’s embarrassing to speak with standardized English pronunciation, while others speak “Japanglish,” a combination between Japanese and English. People in Japan tend to present the way most other people behave.

### **Difficulties**

In my interviews, I asked students about difficulties or challenges that they had regarding English pronunciation. They strongly agreed that their pronunciation differences are related to their native languages. They also gave me some examples of the sounds and words that they felt were difficult to pronounce.

The Chinese students in my participant sample said that they have problems in pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/, /r/ and /l/. One student told me that she always pronounced “thank you” as “sank you,” in which she used the sound /s/ to replace /θ/. Also, the sound /ð/ was replaced by the sound /z/. One Mandarin speaker said that her friend added the /r/ sound at the end when pronouncing the word “beautiful.” It was similar to pronounce the /r/ sound when she saw the /l/ at the end. Besides, it's easy for Cantonese speakers to confuse about the sound /n/ with /l/. In Cantonese, speakers don't distinguish between the /n/ and the /l/ sounds. One student also discussed about the problem of end sound omission. She explained that,

Because the different language has different pronunciation rules, as a Chinese speaker, I often ignore the last syllable of many words. Although I have learned English for a long time, it is difficult to remember.

It's common that Mandarin speakers and Cantonese speakers share some of the same pronunciation differences, although they have their own problems.

The Japanese student in my sample told me that she cannot pronounce the /r/ and the /l/ sounds very well, such as with “rude,” “really” and “sorry.” Also, she mispronounces the words “ship” and “sheep.” She mentioned that in Japanese, the consonants are always connected to vowel. So, when the Japanese speak English, they tend to add some vowels after English words which end with consonants. For example, Japanese speakers pronounce “plastic /'plæstɪk/” as

“plasticu/'plæstiku/.” The vowel sound /u/ is attached to the final syllable in the word /k/. She said that,

And mostly, Japanese is \_\_\_ language. The consonant is always connected to the vowel.

Do you know what I mean? Like, we have letter, but each letter is connected to vowel.

And consonants and vowels. Like \_\_\_\_\_. Like we always \_\_\_ vowels, so that's why

Japanese tend to pronounce last consonant too weakly.

When I asked this participant whether she uses this sound in their native language to replace the similar sound in English, the Japanese student said,

When I just started to study English, I used to do that. But now, I understand that there is like, Japanese 'r' pronunciation and English 'r,' 'l' pronunciation is different. I tried, I kept in my mind that I have to be careful.

It can be seen that her pronunciation was affected by her native language and she has put effort into eliminating this influence.

One Korean student in my sample said that she cannot pronounce the word “vanilla” very well. When she ordered a vanilla coffee in the Starbucks store on campus, she had a hard time communicating with the staff. Most Koreans, for example, pronounce the word “vanilla” as “banila” and “coffee” as “coppe.” Another Korean student found that it's difficult for her to distinguish different pronunciation between vowels. She complained that,

They, even though they're having same A letter, it could be /a/, it could be /e/, it could be /ae/. Or it could be /a/ but dark /a/ or bright /a/. It makes me crazy a little bit. Because in Korean, if you write A, it just /a/, not /e/, /ae/, never, just /a/. In, about this part, I have a lot problem, trouble to distinguish which one is right one.

This problem is also bothering other ELLs in my sample.

The Arabic student in my sample told me that she always confused about spoken English. For example, when people say “wanna” and “gonna,” she cannot understand at first. It’s difficult for her to connect spoken English with written English. She also has difficulties presenting the /p/ sound and the /b/ sound in words such as “pencil” and “baby.” When /a/ and /e/ come in the middle, it’s also difficult for her to pronounce.

From the information I collected from this part of the interview, most ELLs have difficulties pronouncing the /r/ and the /l/ sounds, the /a/ and the /e/ sounds as well as long vowels and short vowels. Their first languages don’t insist on these sounds, so they used instituted sounds when pronouncing words with these sounds. However, these sounds are very common in American English. It’s a problem that contributes to ELLs’ pronunciation differences with native English speakers. Furthermore, one student thought intonation was the biggest problem in being misunderstood by others. Overall, the aforementioned pronunciation problems of ELLs mirror the interference of first language.

### **Bias**

Many students in my participant sample agreed that they felt embarrassed because of their pronunciation. In my interviews with participants, many students shared their stories about being misunderstood by others. One student, for instance, told me that,

I am embarrassed when I cannot express clearly the word. Last week I go to Walmart to buy the Vitamin, the stuff cannot understand my meaning until I use the dictionary and show her the word, I am very embarrassed at that moment.

One of the students said that her friend thought that her pronunciation was funny, but they never teased her. One student mentioned that she had an unhappy experience in the airport. She complained that,

When I was in airport, when I was speaking English, they kind of, ignore, because my pronunciation, I feel like that..... They speak again: "what?" And their face not really kind, rude. So, I feel discriminated. Because I'm not a native, I don't have to speak like that way.

She supplied that it's the reason that she wanted to have more native pronunciation. It is funny that one student shared his communicating experience with his professor. He told that,

When I saw a lot of international students coming here, and talk to the professors, and talk to their English teacher, I found when the professor and teachers ask them some question. They didn't even answer the question. And I don't even, I can't even understand what they trying to say. So, at that moment, I saw the professor and the teacher has some some "question face". It happened when I just came here.

He said he didn't notice he had same communicating problems with professor until he saw the conversation between a new international student and his professor after few months. Another student brought up the point that the environment also related to people's perspectives on pronunciation differences. She said that, "Cause we usually in the school, right? They already know that they have international students. So, they're more acceptable." However, one student said that although he didn't encounter the discrimination so far, he did afraid that will happen in the future.

From the question related to this part of the interview, most students didn't have the experience of having been discriminated again, but they did feel embarrassed when they were misunderstood by others. It's also a factor that pushed them to correct their English pronunciation.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the stories and perspectives of 7 international students which participated in my study. There major themes-personal reflection, difficulties and bias – emerged from the results of the interviews. The interviews gave me the insights into ELLs' personal experience with English learning and pronunciation difficulties.

In the next chapter, I will analyze and discuss the implication of my results. From the interviews, a number of significant factors related to ELLs' pronunciation difficulties and differences emerged, which point toward important instructional directions. I will also address the limitations that the research had and discuss the possibilities for future research in this area.

### Discussion

From the results presented in the last chapter, the factors that contributed to English Language Learners' (ELLs') pronunciation differences and difficulties not only mainly related to their own English learning experiences, but also influences by their native languages. By looking at the interview of ELLs about their pronunciation problems, I realized that most of the ELLs knew their pronunciation problems since they can name some sounds and words that are difficult for them to pronounce. For an instance, there is a very common mistake that can be easily found in my sample group. Most of ELLs in my participant samples have difficulties pronouncing /r/ and /l/, /a/ and /e/ as well as long vowel and short vowel sounds. These results can be profoundly linked to the previous research, which had shown the way that ELLs' first languages influenced their English pronunciation (Al-Zayed, 2017; Chan, 2006; Cho & Park, 2006; Hassan, 2014; Ohata, 2014; Zhang & Yin, 2009).

All the participants involved in my interview had shown that their English learning at their home countries did make a negative impact to their pronunciation. English, as a second language for non-English speakers, the construction of English language courses of local schools in their countries mainly emphasize the skills of reading, writing and listening rather than of speaking. Thus, ELLs are lacking opportunities to practice and to use English in real life. In another word, ELLs didn't have the best environment to practically train their oral skill. On the other hand, the local English teachers' poor pronunciation is also a significant element that causes the issues with ELLs' pronunciation. Basically, the speaking of English teachers is one of the mainly input resources in the classroom. Since local English teaching courses not focus on English speaking, English teachers are not required to have standard English

pronunciation. Accordingly, ELLs always influenced by teachers' non-standard pronunciation and they mispronounce some sounds as well.

Moreover, there are numerous studies have also link ELLs' pronunciation problems to some personal factors. (Derwing, 2003; Lui, 2014; Ota, 2013) The ELLs' perspectives were telling, although they generally didn't feel that they had been discriminated against; however, they did feel that their accents carried weight in their communication with native speakers. All the ELLs participated in my research said that they felt embarrassed when they were misunderstood by others. For this reason, the ELLs are more willing to and pressing to make their pronunciation better. In the following section, I am going to assess and analysis the significance of my findings about ELLs' pronunciation issues further along.

### **Implications**

The results of the study are mostly in harmony with earlier claims about ELLs' pronunciation problems, and they have some practical and pedagogical implications. Administrators and faculty members may come up with strategies that can help international students to adjust their lives in the college and universities in the United States. For an instance, departments such as international student service office can hold more activities that provide opportunities for the ELLs to get in touch and make friends with native speakers, which may help to gain experiences of the custom, norms and procedures that American students take for granted.

In order to build confidence to communicate with others, the ESL teachers may come up some strategies to help international students to speak out during class as the first step. To start with, it is necessary to provide more oral assignments in groupwork so that they don't feel embarrassed. Moreover, teachers may give instruction of words and expressions for everyday



use and teach them communication strategies. In addition, ESL teachers may develop a section integrating pronunciation objectives into the course syllabus. Considering international students' lack of knowledge of phonetic symbols and pronunciation practice, it is important for ESL teachers to help ELLs to build the foundation of spoken English. Also, ESL teachers should choose the teaching materials that best suit the students' needs and are of most benefit to their development of spoken English.

Specifically, ESL teachers may pay more attention on the students' needs and abilities, incorporating pronunciation into their oral skills (Fu & Weng 2018; Gilakjani, 2011). It may be helpful if ELLs have an understanding of the interrelationship of different languages and phonological differences. Teachers should give students daily assignments in order to practice their pronunciation regarding their pronunciation difficulties. Last but not the least, if a student is facing discrimination issue, teachers should encourage the student to go to a counseling center to look for help. To achieve the objective of straightening out pronunciation problems, ESL teachers and ELLs should collaborate hardily with the same aim. As a result, there will be a remarkable improvement in students' spoken English.

### **Limitation**

Although the present findings were generally positive and significant, the researcher is aware of the limitations of this study. First of all, the sample size of this qualitative research study was too limited, with only 7 participants. Such a small number of participants may not be representative enough for ascertaining the main factors that contribute to ELLs' pronunciation problems. Secondly, the participants were mainly from Asian countries, with only one participant from an Arabic speaking country. This implies that the findings from this study would not necessarily represent any other areas such as Europe, South America or Africa, thus

the study is not comprehensive enough. Thirdly, because of communication problems, the Arabic speaking students misunderstood some of the interview questions. This confusion did lead to negative effects on the data collection process. Another limitation of this research was that it focused only on international students from one setting, a state university in Western New York. The results of the study cannot thus be generalizable and may not be applicable to other ELLs in the United States. Based on the limitations of this study, future investigation for the further study are presented.

### **Further research**

Further research is needed to replicate and extend the findings reported in this study. Although there is an abundance of literatures that explore the relationship between ELLs' English pronunciation problems and their native languages, there is a limited number of researches that elaborate from the ELLS' perspectives that are based on interviews. Thus, this study attempted to bridge this gap. It also gives ESL educators a reference guide when they are dealing with and solving the ELLs' pronunciation problems. Obviously, there is a great capacity of potential on this critical topic. Regarding the limitations of the project, enlarging sample sizes would make the results more representative, and give more depth to the theory and argument. If there were more time and funding support in the future, the researchers would be able to present a pronunciation test for ELLs, so that more pronunciation problems may come to the surface, which may develop the research with more reliable and comprehensive data base.

### **Conclusion**

In essence, this study examined the main factors that contribute to ELLs' pronunciation problems and provided several suggestions for the improvement of language courses and services for ELLs in English speaking countries. The results showed that ELLs' pronunciation

difficulties influenced by their first languages, formal English practices and their personal factors. Obviously, they all realized the significance of English pronunciation learning. Multiple solutions are addressed, including administrative support, professional development, curriculum development, literacy materials and psychological help. Promoting the significant role of pronunciation teaching among ESL institutions is absolutely needed. By doing so, the general awareness of this issue can be raised, and more changes will be made to amend the pronunciation problem. It is hoped that the findings will shed light on the relative gravity of pronunciation difficulties of ELLs and inform ESL teachers of the goals of pronunciation teaching.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Interview protocol**

#### **Background/personal reflection**

1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Describe an interesting or something that left an impression on you while studying English pronunciation.
3. Do you think English pronunciation is an important part of English study? State your reason.
4. Do you think there are other individual reasons that influence your English pronunciation

#### **Difficulties**

5. Do you have any difficulties or challenges regarding English pronunciation?
6. Describe a sound that is difficult for you to pronounce. Do you think it is related to your native language?

#### **Discrimination/bias**

7. Do you feel discriminated against because of your pronunciation?
8. Do you think you are always misunderstood by others because of your pronunciation?



**Appendix B: Consent Form:**

Title: The main factors that contribute to ELLs' pronunciations

Department: Education

You are being asked to take part in a research study of the main factors that contribute to ELLs' pronunciations at SUNY Fredonia. The purpose of this study to observe the pronunciation difficulties of ELLs currently studying at SUNY Fredonia. The investigator plans to interview the students to explore their English pronunciation difficulties and gain a deeper understanding of where their problems lie.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study. If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include some questions about your English pronunciation difficulties and your feelings. The interview will take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. With your permission, I would also like to record the interview. You might not get any benefit from the participating in the study, but the research will help you distinguish your English pronunciation difficulties and may improve your spoken English. This research is also beneficial to the ELL educators for helping them to know more about their students.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you should always remember that you can withdraw and stop participating in the study anytime you wish. You will not be penalized in any way if you withdraw and stop participating in the study.

Your answers will be kept confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we tape-record the interview, we will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed.

If you have any questions about the study or if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can call the Education Department of SUNY Fredonia at (716) 673-3311.

**Whom to contact if any questions arise about this study:**

Haiying Xiao, Principal Investigator

Email: xhy441900@gmail.com

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in this study:**

Dr. Judith Horowitz

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies, Sponsored Research and Faculty Development

Maytum Hall 805

judith.horowitz@fredonia.edu

(716) 673-4708

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.**

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of person obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: IRB Human Subjects Approval**

19 January 2019

Haiying Xiao  
c/o Robert Dahlgren, Ph.D.  
Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education  
Thompson Hall  
The State University of New York at Fredonia

Re: Xiao —What are the Main Factors that Contribute to ELLs' pronunciation?

Your research project using human subjects has been determined Category 1, Exempt, under the United States Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Public Welfare, Part 46 Protection of Human Subjects, 46.101, Subpart A (b) (1) and/or (2). This document is your approval and your study titled "What are the Main Factors that Contribute to ELLs' pronunciation?" may proceed as described, beginning on **January 19, 2019 and ending May 18, 2019.**

Thank you for keeping the high standards relating to research and the protection of human subjects under the auspices of the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Judith M. Horowitz".

Judith M. Horowitz, Ph.D.  
Associate Provost, Graduate Studies, Sponsored Programs  
and Faculty Development  
Human Subjects Administrator

**Appendix D: CITI certificate**

