

# Students' Perception toward the Use of IPA Symbols in Pronunciation Class: An Empirical Study in EFL Classroom

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**Keywords:** The IPA symbols, students' perception, EFL classroom.

**Abstract:** The IPA symbol is one of the key elements in studying English. Being able to recognize the symbols is generally acknowledged can help the EFL students in identifying word at the level of pronunciation. This paper attempts to present the comprehensive pictures of what students, who are taking English education as their major at one of teacher training institution in Bandung, have in their mind toward the use of IPA symbols when they took Pronunciation class. It also aims to depict the students' knowledge in regard with the IPA symbols, and its function according to their own perspective. This study will employ a qualitative descriptive research design embracing the characteristics of an empirical study. The data were obtained from two stage of questionnaires; close-ended and open-ended questionnaires and retrospective interview. The findings were expected to provide insight and suggest EFL lecturer to give more exposure on teaching IPA symbols to prospective EFL teachers. Teaching IPA symbols comprehensively will equip them with better pronunciation and help them in teaching pronunciation to their students in the foreseeable future.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Introducing the IPA symbols as the key element in teaching English is considerably important in EFL classroom (Lintunen, 2013; Mirza, 2013). Due to its statue, the IPA symbols particularly in English language enable students to grasp hints of how a word should be uttered in accordance with universal consensus.

A word generally consists of two basic element namely vowel and consonant sound. By knowing the characteristic of each vowel and consonant sounds, the student may be able to pronounce the word correctly and succinctly. Therefore, the discussion or at least a diagram describing about the IPA symbols usually encloses at the front page of English textbooks.

Despite of its importance in EFL setting (Lintunen, 2013), the IPA symbols generally do not have much exposure in the classroom, they are sometimes utterly ignored (Mirza, 2013). It may due to time limit of the course, for example, in one of local campus in Indonesia, pronunciation course generally consist of 14 meeting in one semester, excluding mid and posttest. The IPA symbols discussion is sometimes taken up only one or two meeting. It is

embedded to the course not as the independent course itself.

Therefore, the students who are primarily expected as prospective EFL teachers don't get sufficient understanding about what IPA symbols are. The symbols are only comprehended at the surface level. They studied about vowel and consonant very shallow, these elements, vowel and consonant, become their common knowledge, yet never been studied in depth.

This study focuses on students' perception toward the IPA symbols that being introduced to them in pronunciation class. The class had been taken when the students were as the first year of their study. This study is an empirical study as the students are asked about their experience studying and dealing with the IPA symbol and the IPA symbol's position throughout their journey as EFL prospective teachers, and its importance for their carrier as EFL teachers.

## 2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The International Phonetics or known as the IPA symbols is a universal transcription system for phonetics and phonology. McMahon(2002:23) argued that The IPA symbol have considered essentially as an alternative writing system which allows us to express a larger range of sound than the English spelling system would .

The IPA transcription will not tell the students the meaning of a word from a particular language, and knowing the transcription does not result in native like pronunciation. However, it will comfort them, the students, how the native pronounces and helps them raising sort of awareness which can lead to other activities that focus on pronunciation (Mirza, 2013)

English language consist of twenty different vowel sounds including eight different diphthongs and twenty four consonant phonemes. Each consonant and vowel has its own feature, in which has hierarchy of difficulty to master (Kelly, 2000; Mirza, 2013). Both vowel and consonant phonemes, regardless its level of difficulty, have to be studied by those whom primarily work as EFL teachers or other related field.

There are several previous researches in regard with the topic of IPA symbols in the context of English as a foreign language or second language such as Muhibunir (2013), and Mirza (2013). Both research mainly focused on English consonant sounds as part essential elements in IPA symbols that is necessarily to be introduced to the EFL students.

Muhibunir (2013) conducted the research on Teachers' perspective on Error in English consonant sounds made by Saudi EFL teachers. It attempted to investigate the teacher's opinion regarding the error made by EFL students in Saudi Arabia. The participants were the EFL teacher who were teaching in the preparatory year program in the researcher's campus, Najran University, the study revealed that the error were made due to several reasons one of which is lack of proper attention toward the subject. It was then suggested that teaching sound system should give more highlight in EFL context.

In line with Muhibunir, Mirza (2013) investigated the introducing the IPA symbols to Bangladeshi students. The aim of the study was to uplift and help the EFL learner to have a better pronunciation through introducing the symbols by developing self-correcting mechanism.th condition where the students were able to revise the pronunciation's error they made. The study revealed that learners heavily rely on their prior knowledge of English letters while

reading English word in transcription. It was also found out that all the IPA symbols for English consonant phonemes were not equally difficult for them to master.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research study methodology which embraced a characteristic of empirical study as the method and approach since the researcher conduct the research based on what has happened to the participants and gain the information from it scientifically.

The researcher accepts the data without any attempt to manipulate it and develop a good relationship with the research participants. This study is also categorized as a descriptive case study since the study describes a phenomenon in the real life. The phenomenon was found in the research site, specifically in class speaking for professional context in one of the Teacher Training Institution in Bandung.

The researcher involves 15 participants of Teacher Training Institution students majoring English Education. They are taken as the research participants in voluntary bases. There are some criteria in selecting the participants. The first is the participants should have taken pronunciation class or Introduction to Phonology since the study aims to find out their perception toward the class they have taken in previous semester, the second criteria is the students are willingly to share their perception without having a feeling of being judged or assessed. These criteria are paramount important to meet as it will increase the reliability of this paper.

The data are obtained from two stage of questionnaire; open-ended and closed-ended questionnaire given to the participant, consisting of 15 different questions with agree and disagree option and interview which was addressed to each participant individually. It aims to gain the data deeply and reveal the valuable information that doesn't reveal in questionnaire.

This study will apply retrospective interview with semi structure mode. The data gain from both sources; questionnaire and interview will be discussed and interpreted in the following section.

## 4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result of Questionnaire and Interview

The data of this research was gained from questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was

used as the first data, whereas interview was used as the comparative data to support the questionnaire result in providing validity and reliability of this study. The questionnaire consist of 15 different questions, the result of the questionnaire are presented as follows.

Table 1: The Result of Questionnaire.

Statement	Agree		Disagree	
	Total	(%)	Total	(%)
I know about what the IPA symbols are	14	93	1	7
The IPA symbol recognition is very important for word pronunciation	15	100		
The IPA symbol helps me pronouncing a word better.	14	93	1	7
By knowing the IPA symbols, I can read the phonetic transcription of a certain word.	15	100		
The IPA symbol helps me identify the word phonetic transcription.	12	80	3	20
I feel confident pronouncing an English word after studying the IPA symbols	14	93	1	7
I can study and understand the concept vowels and consonant by myself.	6	40	9	60
The IPA symbols are quite complicated to be understood.	10	67	5	33
Lecturer's explanation really help me in understanding the IPA symbol concept	15	100		
I need an assistance to understand the concept of the IPA symbols.	15	100		
I need more time to understand the concept of the IPA symbols.	8	53	7	47
IPA symbol can be taught to senior high school students.	2	13	13	87
If am a teacher, I will teach my student the IPA symbols.	10	67	5	33
IPA symbols must be studied independently as a single course not embedded to e.g. pronunciation class.	12	80	3	20
The IPA symbol must be studied more than one semester.	11	73	5	27

### 4.2 Discussion

Based on the result of the questionnaire administered to the respondents, more than 60 % of the respondent out of 15 students (93%) believed that they knew the IPA symbols. Even more, 100 % of the respondents believed that the IPA symbols recognition was very important for word pronunciation. More 70 % respondents agreed that The IPA symbols also helped them to have better word pronunciation, and helped to recognize phonetic transcription of certain word (93% and 100% respectively).

This finding indicated that the respondents were fully aware of the vital status of IPA symbols for their pronunciation skill. This result was supported by several respondents in the interview, such as;

*"IPA symbol will make every student having better pronunciation and increase their speaking skill "*

*"I think the IPA symbols are important in speaking or pronunciation class, because we can't speak English well without knowing the symbol of sounds "*

Besides helping the students in pronunciation. Learning the IPA symbol was able to elevate students

'confidence. As it can be seen from the result questionnaire number 6 in which 93 % of the respondent felt confident in pronouncing English word. It is probably due to the expand knowledge of the student on the concept of the IPA symbol that they never studied before.

The finding was also in line with study from Lintunen (2013), Lucaz (2013), and Mirza (2013) which also showed that students who were able to recognize the IPA symbols had better confidence than those were not. It was also supported by the interview result below;

*"I think I have better pronunciation now, and feel confident to speak English after learning the IPA symbols in introduction to pronunciation class "*

Some students also clearly stated that they could read the word transcription after learning the IPA symbols. They also stated that they could make use of English dictionary to find a new word without worrying of mispronounce it.

*"I can't read the word transcription confidently, I was blank about it, but now, not anymore "*

*"I can find unfamiliar word on dictionary without worrying of mispronounce the word"*

Even though the most of the respondents agreed upon the importance of IPA symbol for their pronunciation and speaking skill, they disagreed if studying the IPA symbol was fun or enjoyable. It can be seen from the percentage related to this questionnaire. 13 students (87%) agreed that the IPA symbol was not easy matter to study, and most of the respondent didn't enjoy learning about it. It might be because the level of difficulty. It can be perceived from the questionnaire related to their perception toward IPA symbol's difficulty.

These perception can be drawn on questionnaire number 7 (seven) in which 10 students (67%) of the respondents felt that IPA symbol was quite complicated when it comes as a self-study subject. It was supported by the result of interview below

*"I have no Idea what the IPA symbols were, I thought it was science subject in Indonesian"*

*"I never understand the IPA symbol mostly, if I learn it at home, it was just bunch of symbols"*

This finding is in line with the questionnaire number 9 (nine). All respondents agreed as it shown in 15 students (100%) of the result that they needed an assistance in understanding the concept of IPA symbols. Therefore, all respondents agreed that lecturer's explanation help them in understanding the IPA symbols concept. Furthermore, some of the respondents clearly stated that the lecturer's presence and the explanation was very important for them.

*"When I learn the IPA symbol, I really depended on my lecturer's explanation "*

*"I didn't know what to do, I don't understand what I read until my lecturer came and explain about it"*

It is also in line with Mirza (2013) in which Bengali Students the same experience in comprehending the IPA symbol had. For them, the level of difficulty of each vowel and consonant phonemes was not the same, or on the other word, it had hierarchy of difficulty. It was further stated below by first year student of this study.

*"I think some (symbols) are easy, other is difficult, or even there are very difficult to understand "*

*"I don't understand when there is very similar symbols or when there is long and short sound "*

It can be understood that there are some subtle concepts in the IPA symbol, which sometimes make the students fail to comprehend its concept such as between long and short phonemes, or among consonant or vowel that orthographically different but slightly different when they were pronounced.

As prospective EFL teachers, they were also asked their opinion toward the implementation of the IPA symbols to Indonesian students, 73 % agreed that IPA symbol could be taught to senior high school students. Furthermore, 10 students (67%) would teach the IPA symbol given that they were EFL teacher.

This finding indicated that even though the IPA symbols concept might not easy to follows, they could see the fruitfulness of comprehending the IPA symbols either for them as prospective teachers or for their future students. Furthermore, it might indicate that the IPA symbol should be taught or incorporated to lower level of curriculum such as senior high school. This finding was also supported by the result of the interview as follows;

*"I wish I had learned about the IPA symbol when I was as senior high school students "*

*"I think I would have better pronunciation, if I had known about it long before I study here (at STKIP)"*

Finally, although the idea of placing the IPA symbol as an independent subject was hypothetically untrue, it received positive respond. 80% of the respondents agreed that the IPA symbol should be study independently, and more than 50 % of the total respondents agreed that the IPA symbol can be studied more than one semester. Therefore, studying the IPA symbol more intensively can help the respondents to understand the concept better.

By placing the IPA symbol as an independent subject, it will gradually eliminate the myth surrounding the IPA symbol itself in which many students from different years consider it as important element to be studied but hard to comprehend.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The data obtained from two different instruments reveal certain tendency as follows:

Firstly, the students is aware of the importance of the IPA symbol in increasing their pronunciation

skill. Further, it also helps to improve their speaking skill. However, they don't have sufficient prior knowledge about it. Therefore students need more time to study about what the IPA symbols are and their features.

Secondly, Teacher has an important role in teaching the IPA symbol to the students, it is in line with Lucaz (2013) who stated "needless to say." it is also the teaching style, teacher student rapport, manner of correcting error, determining classroom dynamic. Therefore, before teaching, an EFL teacher should equip himself/herself with decent and sufficient knowledge of the IPA symbols. He/she also needs to be a role model and simplify the IPA symbols concept.

Thirdly, learning about the IPA symbol does not make students having native like pronunciation, but it at least help them acquire the basic and vital concept of other activities that lead to other pronunciation activities and elevate their confidence when pronouncing an English word.

Lastly, the idea of making the IPA symbols as independent subject can be an alternative solution. The more time provided will certainly make them, the prospective EFL teachers, have more chance to understand the concept, and help them in teaching pronunciation to their students in the foreseeable future.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank to my lecturer, Dr Lia Maulia Indrayani, who has been willing to be the co-author of this paper, and has been willing to assert valuable assistance and suggestion in conducting this research. The sincere thankful is also address to all STKIP Persatuan Islam students who have been willing to participate in this study.

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