

## CAMBODIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING PRONUNCIATION

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of factors influencing pronunciation. The study was designed quantitatively. The purposive sampling method was used, and 50 Cambodian EFL students at the National University of Battambang were selected as the sample. The questionnaire was designed in a semi-structured format. The data was analyzed by SPSS. The result showed that most participants believed learning English from a young age leads to better pronunciation. Interestingly, it indicated that the mother tongue (Khmer) influences English pronunciation since learners find it difficult to produce some sounds, especially the /th/sh/f/v/ sound in English, as these sounds do not exist in the sound system of Khmer. Additionally, the majority of the respondents believed that being exposed to an English-speaking environment, including real communication with English native speakers or access to English-speaking learning media, can enhance pronunciation. Last but not least, it was also assumed that feedback on pronunciation errors and motivation contribute to a positive learning process. Therefore, this study provides insight into effective pronunciation instruction.

**Keywords:** EFL, perception, pronunciation

### Introduction

Pronunciation is key to effective interaction, especially in EFL or EFL contexts, because correct pronunciation can convey the exact meaning of the message between speakers and listeners. Therefore, they can understand each other well and use the right pronunciation. However, confusion or misunderstanding may take place if speakers are unable to produce the correct utterance (Srakaew, 2021). Similarly, although people have better grammatical knowledge, the problem of mutual understanding may still happen due to inappropriate pronunciation (Kobilova, 2022).

Pronunciation knowledge covers many features. It is not only about individual sounds but also includes knowledge of how to use speech sounds in verbal communication. It includes discourse strategies used to check, clarify, summarize, or adapt what has been said. Also, pronunciation can make people

manipulate the clearness of the message and influence how people turn in the conversation (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2019).

A lot of research acknowledges that pronunciation is an issue for EFL/ESL learners even though it is believed to be crucial. Gilakjani, Ahmadi, and Ahmadi (2011) stated that no matter how long the students have learned English, they still consider pronunciation difficult to master. According to Baily (1980, pp. 124–125), pronunciation is viewed to be a greater concern, which slows down the ESL learners' progress if compared to the study of vocabulary and grammar. Derwing and Munro (2009) (as cited in O'Brien, 2021) agreed that older ESL students are not likely to pronounce the words like native speakers. On the other hand, pronunciation is thought to be a challenge for those who learn English as a second language, specifically in the EFL/ESL context. Baily (1980, pp. 124–125) stressed that concerning a specific proficiency standard, pronunciation—rather than vocabulary or grammar—is the barrier that strongly impedes the EFL/ESL learning interaction. In addition, pronunciation usually distracts international communication (Jenkins, 2000). In Sudan, the majority of university students are seen to have an interest in learning English. Yet, they are said to encounter different problems in pronouncing English properly (Hassan, 2014). Hassan (2014) continued that errors in pronunciation of the students who study English as a second language are found in some other research (Hassan, 2014).

In a similar context, most Cambodian EFL students have been dealing with the same pronunciation problem. English native speakers find it hard to understand Cambodian English. Over 90% of foreigners who participated in his study claimed that they misunderstood Cambodian English because Cambodian English speakers tend to generate the additional and deletion of the 's' sound at the end of words, the 'dropping' of the final consonant sounds due to the distortion of non-Khmer consonant sounds, and the wrong word stress (Narith, 2008). Meanwhile, Seom (2019) proposed some suggestions for better pronunciation instruction in Cambodia's context. However, a study on learners' insights into factors influencing English pronunciation hasn't been conducted yet. Therefore, this study aims to explore Cambodian learner's perceptions of factors influencing English pronunciation. Also, the study aims to discover effective strategies that are applicable to improve pronunciation skills among Cambodian students so that they can communicate effectively.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Key concepts of pronunciation***

Pronunciation refers to the way a word is pronounced, while Dictionary.com defines it as the production of speech sounds. It includes how each sound is formed (articulation), the emphasis of sound (stress), and the rise or fall of voice (intonation). In the old days, pronunciation was infrequently taught in grammar-translation. Success in learning a second or foreign language is considerably more inconsistent than it is in learning a native language. Researchers who investigate second language development have recently urged for greater integrated studies on individual differences (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004).

In terms of foreign language education, pronunciation is a crucial aspect that impacts the learning process as it influences people's linguistic performance and communicative competence (Gilakjani, 2012). Mispronunciation of words can lead to difficulty in understanding and sometimes misinterpretation. This is also supported by Abercrombie's *Book of Readings* (as cited in Cucchiarini et al., 2011), as accurate pronunciation in a second language is crucial for success in interactions, regardless of education or occupation and is increasingly important in today's globalized world. Rather than lexical and grammatical knowledge, accurate and clear pronunciation contributes to language proficiency as well (Lord, G.2008).

On the other hand, a lot of ESL learners still consider pronunciation an issue despite having learned English for many years (Gilakjani, Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 2011). Similarly, Kobilova (2022) pointed out that even though accurate pronunciation is challenging to master, ESL learners are still trying to obtain it. Based on Kenworthy (1987), there are several factors that strongly influence non-native learners' English pronunciation, such as L1 interference, the age factor, the amount of exposure and motivation, phonetic capacity, point of view, and identity. This research, however, emphasizes only four factors, which are known as the common factors affecting learners. Those factors are the age factor, the mother tongue influence, and the amount of exposure and motivation. Therefore, each factor is going to be greatly described in the following section.

### ***The age factor***

Commonly, we think that if somebody is able to use another language with good pronunciation like a native speaker, they may have begun to learn it since they were little children (Kenworthy, 1987, p.4). As supported by Zhang and Yin (2009), children seem to quickly learn accents, diminishing with age, and native language knowledge interferes with other language studies. Eventually, pronunciation is the most challenging part for adult learners. Kenworthy (1987) suggests that delayed language learning can hinder native accent acquisition despite vague syntax and vocabulary differences. Gilakjani, Ahmadi, and Ahmadi (2011) suggested that age influences language acquisition, particularly pronunciation, making older learners more challenging and unlikely to achieve native-like pronunciation. It is reasonable that adult learners learn sound systems laboriously due to the stage of their physical development, while young students learn it effortlessly (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

The correlation between age and pronunciation in language acquisition has become debatable and complex, with some academics and experts suggesting that post-puberty, lateralization is complete, and adults' native-like sound production decreases (Zhang & Yin, 2009). As cited in Kenworthy (1987, p.4), Oyama's study on Italian immigrants in America found that the younger a person is when learning English, the more native-like their accent becomes. However, many studies have proved that adults acquire pronunciation less effectively than children and are more likely not to reach a native-like level. The study suggests that learning English is difficult for all ages. Nevertheless, self-monitor and learning experiences, to some extent, will minimize these limitations (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

### ***Mother tongue influence***

The sound pattern of someone's native language can interfere with foreign accents in a second language. Mispronunciations by non-native speakers can affect

the sounds, rules, stress, and intonation of their L1. Researchers also suggest that mother tongue interference affects English-like stress alternation across phrases, affecting learners' pronunciation in three ways, as noted by Avery and Ehrlich (as cited in Avery & Ehrlich, 1987; Gilakjani, Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 2011). First, when a sound in the second or foreign language does not exist in the learners' L1 account, or vice versa, they may struggle to produce or perceive that sound. Second, phonotactic constraints, which are language-specific rules for sound combinations into words, can cause difficulties for learners when they are different between their mother tongue and the target language. Third, as the rhythm of a language directs its patterns of stress and intonation, people might transfer these patterns into the language that they are learning. The aspects reviewed above can help ESL/EFL teachers understand the challenges non-native speakers face, enabling them by offering effective pronunciation instruction and organizing teaching methodologies in line with learners' needs, overcoming foreign accents (Graham, 1994). This is agreed by Fatemi, Sobhani, and Abolhassan (2012), who believed ESL learners will encounter difficulties with words due to different phonological structures between the second language and their mother tongue (as cited in Ali Khan, 2019).

### ***The amount of exposure and motivation***

Two factors in language acquisition and age are taken into account to obtain native-like pronunciation. They are the inspiration in learning and the cultural group with whom learners have engaged because these elements contribute significantly to determining if learners can reach that pronunciation improvement level (Gilakjani, Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 2011). Many studies indicated that English learners who have specific learning goals either for a job or individual need can impact passion for native-like pronunciation (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). After reviewing many studies on adult acquisition of ESL, Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) have also drawn a conclusion that adult learners can have high proficiency and are possibly to become native-like speakers if they have motivation. This is supported by Dörnyei (2001), and Khamkhien (2010), who asserted that motivation plays a significant role that allows ESL students master the second language successfully or fail them (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, Namaziandost, & Ziafar, 2020).

According to Moyer (2007), better orientation toward the language and experience are crucial for developing native-like pronunciation. Concerning accuracy in Spanish, Shively (2008) revealed that age, formal education, interaction with people living in a Spanish-speaking country, and formal pronunciation instruction in class matter for improving accuracy. In linguistic theories, language acquisition depends mainly on comprehensible input, which is often limited in adult learners. Language acquisition in adults is difficult to acquire because they often settle in linguistic ghettos, leading to less exposure to their native language. It is quite challenging for foreigners to learn a new language, particularly speaking, since successful oral communication demands the appropriate language use in various settings. Therefore, more exposure to the new language is what makes adult learners need to acquire that target language and communicate effectively (Shumin, 1997).

Spoken or written communication impacts speech's supra-segmental elements like intonation, pitch, and stress, which cannot be learned through

textbooks or dictionaries. Non-linguistic elements like facial expressions, gestures, and body language convey meaning and can be acquired by experience within language use and cultural group interaction. In addition, adult English language learners often lack native-like pronunciation, idiomatic expressions knowledge, fluency, and cultural pragmatics because of minimal exposure to the target language (Shumin, 1997).

Like other learning aspects, pronunciation can be learned better through motivation. The more students are motivated to develop their speech, the more successful instruction will be. Based on Bian (2013), Chinese EFL learners primarily utilize Chinese for everyday interaction while studying English for higher-grade entrance exams. They access English mainly in class, but the Chinese prosodic system makes it difficult to obtain a native-like English rhythm. Motivation could be either real or stimulated, and real contact with native speakers is ideal. Classroom games designed for accurate speech contexts can be helpful in situations where real communication is needed. The communicative approach in language teaching allows for more meaningful and communicative practice in pronunciation teaching. Teachers' dedication and personality can motivate students to improve their pronunciation. The importance of communication and the teacher's interest in their students' pronunciation can also motivate them to make efforts to improve.

## **Method**

This study employed the qualitative method because Creswell (2003) and Zawawi (2007) mentioned that this method is appropriate for research relevant to numerical results. Furthermore, it is suitable for low-cost and limited resource approaches, including a small sample size. A semi-structured interview and purposive sampling method were also applied. According to Petrescu et al. (2017), the semi-structured interview is a great way to work closely with the community researchers who want to conduct the study, as the participants' feelings, experiences, and perceptions are crucial in explaining a phenomenon.

Fifty per cent (50%) out of 101 population who were students in year II and year III at the National University of Battambang (NUBB) majoring in English Literature at the Institute of Foreign Language (IFL) were chosen as the sample purposely to gain their perceptions on factors influencing pronunciation. Year II and year III students were specifically selected as purposive sampling since they were considered important respondents. They had better English proficiency and more learning experience compared to year I. Also, they have more available time compared to year IV. Therefore, the participants were expected to offer reliable responses. Regarding the ethical concerns of participants, the consent form was conducted and delivered to the head of the National University of Battambang for permission. Once authorized, the authors began the process of data collection from the participants. The information retrieved from the individual was kept confidential to respect the participants' privacy.

The research instrument was the survey questionnaire. It consisted of three main components relevant to factors influencing English pronunciation. The first component was the age factor, which contained three items. The second component was about mother tongue interference and included three items, too. The third component was related to the amount of exposure to English and motivation. This

last component contained six items. In addition, a five-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was applied to measure participants' perceptions.

The process of collecting and analyzing data was done in several steps. First, the researchers designed the questionnaire and asked two EFL teachers to help check to ensure consistency. Next, the researchers conducted a pilot project by asking a total of six EFL students from Year II and Year III to respond to the questionnaire to see if it was usable. Then, the researchers requested approval from the Head of the English Department for data collection from the students. After that, questionnaires were administered in class. The students spent about 25 minutes reading and responding to the questionnaire, which was designed in English. Meanwhile, the researchers also translated and explained each item using Khmer to ensure reliable data. Then, all responses were organized and analyzed using SPSS with percentages presented. Tables were used to illustrate the data. Finally, after the data analysis was done, relevant reviews were also included to ensure the reliability of the research. Overall, the research was conducted with careful attention.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The influence caused by age factor*

The results showed that most respondents agreed (45%) and strongly agreed (29%) that learners could pronounce English words or sentences clearly and accurately when they started learning English from a young age.

Table 1. Age factor

No.		1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)
1	I thought students tended to pronounce English words or sentences clearly and correctly when they started English lessons from a young age.	-	-	26	45	29
2	I thought young learners tend to receive better pronunciation inputs than adult learners quickly.	-	-	10	62	28
3	I thought adult learners don't feel it convenient to pronounce English words/sentences.	-	3	19	45	33

1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: unsure, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree

Similarly, related to pronunciation learning input, the majority of the participants agreed (62%) and strongly agreed (28%) that young students quickly receive the input better than adults. None of them disagreed. Likewise, a large number of participants (agreed=45%, strongly agreed=33%) believed that learners experience the inconvenient feeling of adult learners when pronouncing English words or sentences, while only a few of them disagree (3%). In short, learning English from an early age can develop pronunciation effectively as learners can obtain learning input rapidly and express utterances easily.

The first finding indicated that learning from a young age can assist EFL learners in pronouncing correctly because it leads to clearer and more accurate pronunciation of English words or sentences. This result aligned with Zhang and

Yin (2009), who claimed that children are more likely to acquire accents potentially while this potential will reduce with age and the knowledge of their L1. This phenomenon leads to undesirable interference with their L2. A similar study by Shively (2008) expressed that English pronunciation accuracy of Spanish was concerned with the age at first exposure to the language. In addition, this study showed that young learners receive pronunciation inputs better and adult learners have an inconvenient feeling when reciting English words or sentences. This finding is in line with a study by Gilakjani, Ahmadi, and Ahmadi (2011) claiming that age matters in language acquisition, including pronunciation, because older learners find it more challenging and seem not to reach native-like pronunciation if compared to younger learners. It is also consistent with Mayberry and Lock (2003) and Larsen-Freeman (2008), who said that young learners can acquire pronunciation of the second language they are learning faster and easier than old learners (as cited in Gilakjani, Namaziandost, & Ziafar, 2020). In addition, Kenworthy (1987) also said learning L2 later in a lifetime can make it challenging to receive the accent of a native speaker, as some linguistic features, including syntactic and lexical systems, may be vague. Briefly, age really matters when acquiring pronunciation.

***The mother tongue influence***

Table 2 revealed that 41% of the participants strongly agreed that their mother tongue, Khmer, has influenced their English pronunciation. However, only 2% strongly disagreed, 12% disagreed, and 24% were unsure.

Table 2. Mother tongue (Khmer) factor

No.		1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)
1	I think the sounds/accents in the Khmer language have influenced my English pronunciation.	2	12	24	41	21
2	I think the sounds/accent in the Khmer language has influenced my pronunciation most on the sounds of /th/sh/f/v/.	2	7	36	41	14
3	I think the sounds/accents in the Khmer language have influenced my pronunciation of most word and sentence stress patterns.	-	5	25	60	10

1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: unsure, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree

Moreover, most of the respondents (41%) agreed that English sounds, including /th/sh/f/v/, are influenced by the Khmer accent, while 14% strongly agreed, 36% were unsure, 7% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. A similar result found that the Khmer accent also influenced word or sentence stress in English. 60% of participants agreed, and 10% strongly agreed. However, 25% of them were unsure, and only 5% disagreed. To sum up, the findings highlight the importance of understanding the impact of the Khmer language on English pronunciation and the potential impact of the Khmer accent on pronunciation.

The study found that the sounds and accents in the Khmer language influenced learners' English pronunciation. It revealed that native language sounds

and accents significantly influenced students' pronunciation, particularly on the sounds of /th/sh/f/v/. Similarly, the finding also proved that the sounds and accents of Khmer significantly influence word and sentence stress patterns. These findings were in line with the studies by Avery and Ehrlich (1992) and Gilakjani, Ahmadi, and Ahmadi (2011) that showed that incorrect pronunciation in L2 affects the rules, sounds, intonation, and stress of their L1 vice versa. Speakers find it difficult to produce or recognize the sounds that are absent between the native language sound system and the target language sound system. Also, the mother tongue's sound patterns may influence foreign accents. The results are supported by a study by Denizer (2017), which found that besides speaking skills, the native language interferes with the target language in many aspects, including grammar, tenses, and the use of articles. Furthermore, Ali Khan (2019) stated that ESL learners depend on the ways their mother tongue is structured to help them produce the language they are learning, either writing or speaking. Finally, it can be concluded that, like other languages, Khmer interferes with English pronunciation.

### *The effect of exposure and motivation on students' pronunciation*

The outcomes revealed that most students strongly agreed that they would improve their pronunciation if they practised it frequently (71%), spoke with a native English speaker (62%), and were exposed to English materials such as listening to songs or watching English movies (48%).

Table 3. The amount of exposure and motivation factor

No.		SD(%)	D(%)	U(%)	A(%)	SA(%)
1	I think the pronunciation might have been better when the students practice it more often/frequently.	-	-	-	29	71
2	I think the pronunciation might be better when the students can frequently speak with a native English speaker.	-	-	7	31	62
3	I think pronunciation will improve when students frequently listen to English materials, such as songs or watching English movies.	-	-	12	40	48
4	I think pronunciation will improve when they access online websites such as YouTube for pronunciation lessons/practices.	-	2	9	66	21
5	I think the pronunciation will get improved once the students are motivated by their teachers to do so.	-	2	14	58	26
6	I think pronunciation will improve when someone helps correct mistakes.	-	-	4	55	41

1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: unsure, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree



Interestingly, the majority of students agreed that their English pronunciation improves when they access online websites such as YouTube for pronunciation lessons/practices (66%), are motivated by their teachers to do so (58%) and when someone helps them correct mistakes (55%).

The study found that students' pronunciation can be improved by regularly listening to English materials like songs, watching movies and speaking with native English speakers. These findings are consistent with a study by Seom (2021), which claimed that technology, including smartphones, websites, applications, or pronunciation software, provides students with rich pronunciation learning resources and trains them to become independent learners. The outcome also demonstrated that pronunciation improvement can be achieved when someone assists learners in correcting mistakes and teachers motivate them. This result is in line with a study by Arianto (2019), which argued that teachers' feedback on pronunciation errors offers learners self-reflection so that they can observe, analyze, evaluate, and motivate themselves. Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) also concluded that motivation can enable adults to be proficient, even native-like speakers. Similarly, Bian (2013) also agreed that motivation can be real or stimulated. Real communication with native speakers in authentic settings is great, but classroom games designed to provide accurate speech contexts can also be fruitful. More authentic and communicative practice within pronunciation instruction has been conducted, and teaching aids are generated following the tendency toward a communicative approach.

## **Conclusion**

The study explores the perceptions of Cambodian EFL students on factors influencing their pronunciation. Specifically, it investigates age factors, mother tongue influence (Khmer), and the amount of exposure and motivation. The results showed that learning English from a young age can help learners achieve better pronunciation because they can acquire the input rapidly and produce verbal language easily. However, mother tongue interference is a major problem for many Cambodian learners because the knowledge of the sound system of Khmer is predominant over English. This phenomenon causes difficulties in pronouncing the /th/sh/f/v/ sound in English as there is the absence of these sounds in Khmer; therefore, learners may use Khmer sounds that are similar to these sounds instead. The findings also revealed that real interaction with native English speakers or engagement with English learning media in the form of verbal communication can improve pronunciation. Similarly, motivation from people around learners and feedback on error correction in spoken language is required to develop pronunciation.

The limitation is that this study only focuses on students' perceptions of pronunciation at the university level, while students' voices at lower levels cannot be heard. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be used to generalize all settings. Another limitation is that the study only emphasizes learners' viewpoints on pronunciation, whereas teachers' perceptions are ignored. Last but not least, classroom observation of pronunciation instruction cannot be done due to time constraints.

Further studies should focus on young learners' pronunciation because people acquire better pronunciation at a young age. Through the study, students' needs and

lack will be identified. Moreover, teachers' perceptions of pronunciation teaching should be conducted to discover the challenges and expectations in their teaching. Along with the study, classroom observation should be included to identify what factors affect pronunciation learning, how much teachers can help students develop pronunciation, or what teaching materials are used and required.

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