



A study on factors contributing to students' English pronunciation

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Abstract

One of the most important things in learning English as a second language is pronunciation. Having good pronunciation can lead to a successful Speech communication. However, many students find it difficult in learning pronunciation. Many studies have already been conducted to dig in the difficulties and try to overcome the issue. In fact, there are still many students who have good pronunciation, yet not many researchers have conducted studies on how to dig in the factors contributing to it. This study aims at finding the factors that may contribute to the students' good English pronunciation by applying a descriptive qualitative research design. Some instruments were used in collecting the data such as a pronunciation test, an observation checklist, a field note, and an interview guide. This study found that there were four big factors that contributed to the students' English pronunciation: education, exposure, environment, and motivation. Each factor has made a powerful contribution to the subjects' English pronunciation such as applying a reflective practice method, providing a lot of input about English, providing supportive family and friend, and providing a strong motivation to reach something. This study suggests that future researcher might use the pronunciation test with categorization of words in it.

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INTRODUCTION

In this globalization era, English is a very important language to be mastered because English is a lingua franca which means it certainly becomes the most widely used language for international communication today. For that reason, it has recently got a lot of attention from linguists across the board (Hülmbauer et al., 2008). There are many important elements of English that people from non-native English-speaking countries have to master in learning English, one of which is English pronunciation. According to Ikhsan (2017), pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning.

Pennington and Richards (1986) stated that there are three big components of pronunciation; segmental features, voice-setting features, and prosodic features. Segmental features are the minimal units of sound defined in phonetic terms. Phonemes and acquisition of the target language are traditionally the two most important aspects of pronunciation. Mastery of the phonemic differences encoded in its phonological inventory, as well as the phonetic variations of phonemes that occur in certain situations inside syllables and words, is considered as a phonological system. Meanwhile, segmental features refer to specific phonetic characteristics of individual sound segments and voice-setting features refer to general articulatory characteristics of stretches of speech. The other components of pronunciation are stress and intonation, the so-called prosodic, or suprasegmental, domain, together with the related coarticulatory phenomena of the blending and overlapping of sounds in fluent speech. Prosodic features involve the relative levels of stress and pitch within syllables, words, phrases, and longer stretches of speech.

Supported by Gilakjani (2012), it is also mentioned that the features of English pronunciation are segmental features and suprasegmental features as illustrated in figure 1.1.

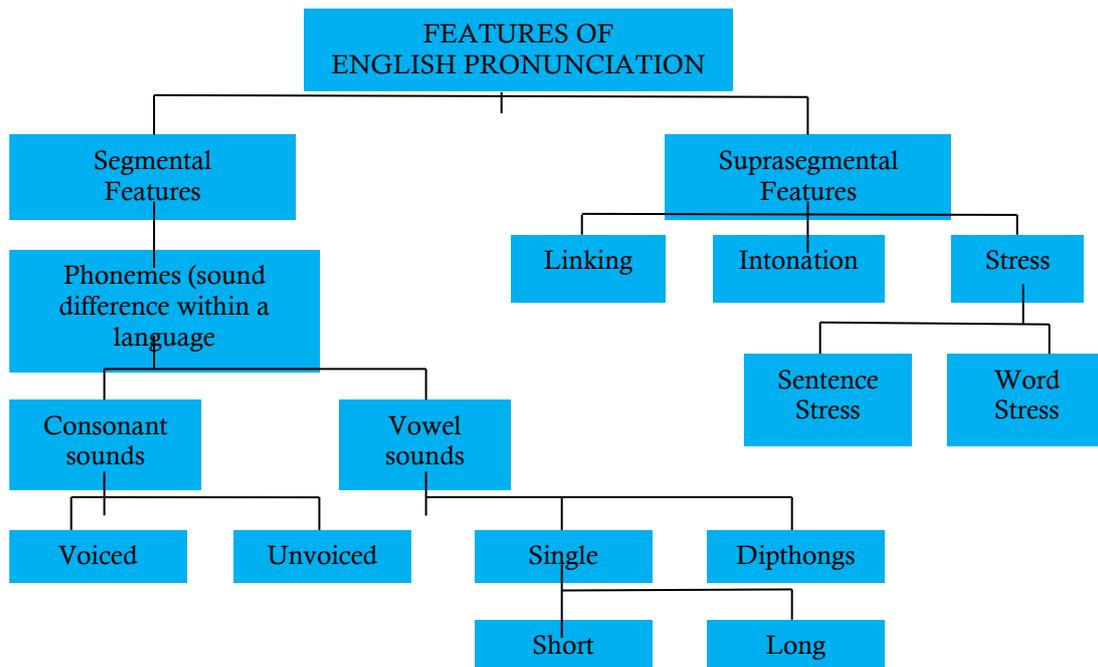


Figure 1. Various features of English pronunciation

People need communication to deliver messages to other people. The communication should be clear including the pronunciation so that it will run successfully. It is indicated successful if the audience or listener can decode what the speaker is saying. Communication needs understanding between the audience and the speaker. If the audience cannot get what the speaker is saying, it will lead to misunderstanding. According to Hismanoğlu (2006), the speaker and the listener should have a mutual relationship in communication. It means that one must be able to grasp what he hears in the target language and appropriately produce the sounds of the language he has learnt. He cannot encode a message to anyone or decode a message sent by another person unless he has sufficient understanding of the target language’s sound patterns.

There are many words in English that have similar pronunciation. For instance, a speaker wants to say, “Please help me bring the pan /pæn/ here” but pronounces it as “pen” /pen/. Those

words have almost the same pronunciation, but they are of totally different meanings. In some cases, it can be fatal because the wrong pronunciation may bring the speaker into a weird situation in which the listener may assume that the speaker is asking to bring him a pen. This is crucial for especially people from non-native English-speaking countries that must be aware and know how to pronounce each word correctly in avoiding misunderstanding.

Fraser (2000) stated that pronunciation is the aspect that most affects how the speaker is judged by others, and how they are formally assessed in other skills (e.g., ANTA 1999: A New Assessment Tool p.10 tells of a manager who severely underestimated workers' literacy levels due to their poor pronunciation). According to Burns & Claire (2003), clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication. They also added that even when learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar, they are more likely to be understood when they have good pronunciation and intonation.

In English as a foreign language (EFL) context, having good and correct pronunciation is not something that can be achieved from short time learning. EFL learners are drilled to learn it and usually take some time to get used to speaking with accurate pronunciation. There are many ways they can learn English pronunciation, one of which is through formal education because pronunciation teaching is a part of speaking when EFL teachers teach English to the students. Since sounds are crucial in communication, EFL teachers must give a proper pronunciation teaching to their classes (Hişmanoğlu, 2006). By drilling the students to practice good pronunciation, it will make them be more confident when they speak English because in the context of interactions between both non-native English speakers and native speakers in general, pronunciation teaching is essential for L2 learners. Also, improper pronunciation habits are difficult to change so that learning acceptable pronunciation is very crucial. According to Kelly (2002), learners who consistently mispronounce a series of phonemes will make it difficult for speakers of other languages to comprehend them. Therefore, pronunciation teaching really plays an important role in students' English pronunciation skill.

Unfortunately, pronunciation teaching has become a neglected element by EFL teachers in teaching English (Ikhsan, 2017). Pronunciation has long been considered as a challenging subject by teachers and it is frequently neglected in language teaching in favour of reading and writing, which are more likely to lead to success in examination. It is impossible to conduct a lesson that is only focused on pronunciation practice because it is often overlooked as a separate activity during the learning process (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). As cited from Gilbert (in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), there are two main reasons why people disregard English pronunciation. First, this is an inherently uninteresting activity, and the results tend to be discouraging. It requires a tremendous amount of effort on the part of the teacher to keep the class engaged. Second, teachers tend to conceive the subject as being extremely technical, since it is frequently taught that way in teacher training courses. Some teachers need to put much effort to teach pronunciation as if it is a phonetics course which can be discouraging for both teachers and students. Some course materials include impractical stress and intonation rules in which it burdens the teacher. Pronunciation instruction tends to be avoided due to several factors, among others, teachers frequently feel unprepared to teach it; pronunciation instruction is not sufficiently stressed in curricula, and appropriate tools for teaching pronunciation are frequently unavailable (Macdonald, 2002).

Due to those assumptions, English teachers do not emphasize the pronunciation teaching, and as a result, many students do not get the right pronunciation learning. Some words may be pronounced incorrectly, and it will lead to misunderstanding. Then, it is important for EFL teachers to make the inclusion of pronunciation teaching in the class. However, training to enhance students' pronunciation may be ineffective if the students do not recognize the significance of such needs (Bakar & Abdullah, 2015). Therefore, EFL teachers should persuade their students that the goal of pronunciation is to help them pronounce correctly enough to be understood by other people, rather than to gain a native accent (Ur, 1984).

On the other hand, in EFL context, there are still many students who have good pronunciation and teachers who do not ignore the pronunciation teaching in the class. Most students who have good English pronunciation are students who are passionate in English. For example, those who are enrolled in English Department. Emaliana (2010) found that students in the English Department are more motivated to learn English so that is why they take English majors. They frequently use English in their daily conversation inside and outside the class. In other words, they have more exposure in English. According to (Ikhsan, 2017), there are some possible factors that contribute to their good

pronunciation such as education, age, accent or mother tongue, aptitude, attitude, exposure, and motivation. Those possible factors can be referral strategies for students who want to improve their English pronunciation.

Some studies have been conducted in exploring factors of students' English pronunciation. However, only a few studies have concern in conducting the research on factors that contributed to good pronunciation. Only a few research have looked at the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Studies by Brown (1992), Claire (1993), Fraser (2000) and Yates (2001 as cited in Macdonald, 2002) said that because they lack confidence, skills, expertise, many teachers avoid dealing with pronunciation.

Considering the importance of having correct pronunciation, this present study has been focused on completing the previous studies and exploring the factors that may contribute to students' good English pronunciation. More specifically, this study was conducted in English Language Education study program at Universitas Negeri Malang. The results of this study will give a practical contribution to EFL learners in knowing more about an effective method in learning English pronunciation. Furthermore, this study can be a reference for English teachers in giving effective strategy of pronunciation teaching in the classroom.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative research design which emphasizes on how things happen, and focuses on attitude, beliefs, and thoughts of the things that happen (Koh & Owen, 2000). All data were analyzed based on the procedure of qualitative method and displayed qualitatively. The study was conducted in the English Language Education Study Program in Universitas Negeri Malang, particularly in Speaking for General Purposes class B. This particular class was the closest resource that was suitable for the researcher's needs in this study. However, further step, a pronunciation test, was conducted to decide the subject of the study.

Adjusting to this pandemic of COVID-19, the test was conducted to all students using *Jotform* web-based software. The pronunciation test was in the form of *minimal pairs* and *read aloud*. The first part was the *minimal pairs* containing fifteen pairs of words. The last three parts were the *read aloud* section which focused on the correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation. The students were asked to record while they were pronouncing the words given on *Jotform*. Each item in the first part was valued four points, and the other last three parts were valued two points each item. In order to determine the correct pronunciation, the researcher used the latest Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. The test required the students to reach a score of 90-100. There were three students who were qualified to the score, but it could not be the only consideration to choose the subjects. The scores should be matched to the performances to be selected as the subjects of the study.

After getting the results of the pronunciation test, the researcher started doing the class observation to obtain the data and intensively monitor the three students who got the best scores. It was also conducted online via *WhatsApp Group* and also virtual meeting on *Zoom* or *Google Meet*. Observations were aimed at finding the strategy used by the lecturer in giving pronunciation teaching and the students' behavior in the classroom. The researcher recorded the learning process and also took notes. The researcher also listened to the students' recording tasks to check whether the scores matched their performance. After conducting observation for eight meetings, there were two students who were excellent at pronunciation so that they were qualified to be the subjects of the study.

Next, the researcher proceeded to in-depth interview to the two-selected two students. The interview process dug information related to pronunciation, interest and experience in learning pronunciation, habits and social life. According to Brounéus (2011), in-depth interviewing is used to know deeper about the information of the subjects. Therefore, in-depth interviewing was suitable for the researcher to dig information related to the factors that contributed to the subjects' English pronunciation. In the process of the interview, the researcher gently guided the conversation using validated interview guide that became an extended discussion. The researcher extended the conversation if there was something to be explored more (Rubin et al., 2011). This interview was performed in a semi-structured interview. Thus, the researcher developed an interview guide which had been validated by the experts. It contained a list of questions that needed to be covered during the interview. Another data was also collected from the lecturer to explore more about the factors that may contribute to their English pronunciation. The duration of conducting either interview or observation was as frequent as possible until it reached data saturation. According to Saunders et al. (2018), data saturation is the condition when there is no additional data are found by the researcher.

It would depend on the data obtained. When it reached the data saturation, then the interview or observation can be stopped.

After all data were collected, the researcher analyzed them through some steps based on Gay & Airasian (2000). These following three iterative or repeating steps is one way to continue with analysis: reading/memoing, describing what is happening in the setting, and categorizing the research data. The process focuses on (1) becoming familiar with the data and identifying potential themes (i.e., to get an initial sense of the data, the researcher read and wrote memos about all field notes, interview results, and observations and then when it came deeper into the analysis, the researcher began looking for recurring themes or common threads); (2) examining the data in depth to provide detailed descriptions (i.e., the researcher accurately represented the perspectives of the research participants so that the subsequent description could explain each factor that contributed to the students' English pronunciation.); and (3) categorizing and coding pieces of data and grouping them into themes (i.e., the researcher did the process of breaking down data into smaller units and then the pieces of data were categorized. The categories provided the basis for structuring the analysis and interpretation).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data presented here are the main findings of the factors contributing to students' English pronunciation. The discussion is also presented based on the findings of the study.

The students' ponunciation competence

The two highest scores of the test selected to be the subjects of the study, yet they were observed first by the researcher to make sure that the scores matched their performances. Student A and student B were qualified to be the subjects of the study because both of them had a score of 94 and 91 respectively that were qualified for the score range. Also, their performances during the classroom activities were excellent. It was proven by the lecturer's comments on their performances, saying that they had good English pronunciation.

In doing the pronunciation test of the first part, from fifteen pairs to pronounce, Student A could pronounce twenty eight words correctly. Whereas, the other two items were pronounced wrongly. For instance, Student A pronounced "write" /raɪt/ as /wraɪt/ and the word "idle" /'aɪdl/ as /'ɪdl/. In the second part which was full sentences form, she got two words pronounced wrongly. She pronounced "effect" /ɪ'fekt/ as /e'fekt/ and "development" /dɪ'veləpmənt/ as /de'veləpmənt. In the third and last part of the test, Student A got perfect scores; word stress and intonation focus.

Meanwhile, Student B in doing the pronunciation test got a little bit different results. In the first part, he could pronounced twenty eight items correctly. The other three items were pronounced wrongly. He pronounced the word "except" /ɪk'sept/ as /ek'sept/ and "give" /gɪv/ as /gɪf/. In the second part which was full sentences form, he got three words pronounced wrongly. He pronounced "effect" /ɪ'fekt/ as /e'fekt/, "wringkles" /'rɪŋkəls/ as /'wɪŋkəls/, and "development" /dɪ'veləpmənt/ as /de'veləpmənt. In the last two parts, he pronounced all words correctly as it was instructed; word stress and intonation. The following is the result of the first part of the pronunciation test.

Table 1. The result of the first part of the pronunciation test

No.	Words	SA	SB	Words	SA	SB
1.	Suite	✓	✓	Suit	✓	✓
2.	Borrow	✓	✓	Sorrow	✓	✓
3.	Sheet	✓	✓	Sit	✓	✓
4.	Poor	✓	✓	Pour	✓	✓
5.	Accept	✓	ɪk'sept	Except	✓	✓
6.	Hurt	✓	✓	Heart	✓	✓
7.	Greet	✓	✓	Great	✓	✓
8.	Lounge	✓	✓	Launch	✓	✓
9.	Force	✓	✓	Fourth	✓	✓
10.	Write	wraɪt	✓	Right	✓	✓
11.	Idle	✓	✓	Idol	ɪdl	✓
12.	Morning	✓	✓	Mourning	✓	✓
13.	Shore	✓	✓	Sure	✓	✓
14.	Give	✓	gɪf	Gift	✓	✓
15.	Sheep	✓	✓	Ship	✓	✓

Notes: S (A/B) = Student (A/B); ✓ = Correct item; [red box] = Wrong item

As mentioned earlier, the subjects' performance during the learning process in the class was also considered to be taken into account by doing some observations in order to know the subjects' development and made sure their performances matched their scores. During the observations which took eight meetings, the students were asked by the lecturer to make a voice recording of certain topics given. Altogether, there were four recordings. The assignments became the consideration of the researcher to decide the subjects of this study as well.

The factors contributing to students' English pronunciation

Education

The data collected from the observations were analyzed to identify the pronunciation teaching in the class. As learning pronunciation is crucial for the ELT students to know and even master it, pronunciation teaching cannot be neglected anymore. From the observations that the researcher collected, it could be summed up that the teacher employed reflective practice methods. In applying this method, the lecturer helped the students to improve their English pronunciation skill by analyzing their own pronunciation after making a voice recording. The lecturer used this method from the first until the sixth meeting. The students were asked to speak about some topics provided by the lecturer such as COVID-19, likes and dislikes, giving opinion on issues, and live after the pandemic by recording it. Then, they were asked to re-listen to their own voice recording and made an audio version as the reflection of the previous audio. The lecturer recommended the students to use monolingual dictionaries in checking their pronunciation, but she also gave them necessary feedback. By using this method, they were expected to be able to analyse their own pronunciation in the future.

In addition, the subjects said that their skills were improved by implementing this method instead of the other method they have got when they were in elementary to high school which was repetition method. It is a method where the teacher repeats a word as often as possible so that the words will stick to the students' memories (Wirawan, 2019). By recognizing their own mistakes, as they said in the interview, it made them remember more the mistakes and took them as valuable experience that later would not be repeated anymore.

Exposure

Based on the results of the interview, both subjects of the study had similar exposure in learning English pronunciation by watching movies, TV show, or cartoon films in English, listening to music or podcast; joining English competitions, looking for the pronunciation of words through *Google Translate*, and repeating the pronunciation of words right after listening to some new words. As Student A was interviewed, she said that almost every day she watched movies, TV shows, or cartoon films when she was a child yet now she does it once a week.

In addition, both subjects believed that English pronunciation can be learned by having much exposure. Even sometimes many people find it difficult in learning English pronunciation because of their mother tongue, they said that it could not be the reason why people cannot pronounce English words correctly. Moreover, they said it would not significantly influence someone's English pronunciation skill because every skill can be sharpened by having a lot of exposure to English such as watching movie, listening to music or podcast, talking in English, repeating English words, and any other related English activities. Thus, both subjects suggested that these activities can be the references to those who want to learn or even master English pronunciation.

Environment

Both subjects had very supportive environment in learning English such as family and friends. Based on the interview to Student A, she said that her mother had a good background knowledge in English. Her mother liked to use English in all daily activities they had at home or outside the house. One of the examples that Student A gave was when her mom asked her about something in their daily life, she would use English: "Al, where did you put the salt?", said her mom, and then she answered it using English as well, "on the small table, Mom". Besides, she also has a friend from Australia when she was in junior high school that she still kept in touch with. They always used English to communicate and Student A learned a lot from him. Even though she did not know exactly the phonemic transcription of the words, but she could speak English in correct pronunciation because she already familiarized herself with the correct pronunciation.

Meanwhile, Student B also has a brother that helped him improve his English pronunciation. He liked to have a discussion with his brother using English, for instance discussing the meaning of a new word. This kind of habit could gradually improve his English pronunciation.

Motivation

Another important thing in learning English is a strong motivation coming from inside. Based on the interview, Student A said that she learned English because of her ambition to have an opportunity to study abroad. That is the reason why she was eager to master all skills in English, including pronunciation. On the other hand, student B said that he was always eager to learn a new language, especially English. He also mentioned that it made him more confident if he could master English. Both of them had their own motivations that drive them to learn English pronunciation seriously.

Discussion

Based on the results of the data analysis above, the researcher interpreted the factors that can seriously improve the students' English pronunciation. The researcher summed up that reflective practice method can be another alternative to improve the students' English pronunciation skill. A lot of input or exposure to English can also help them to be more advanced in English pronunciation.

Education

There are many ways or methods that can be used to teach or learn English pronunciation. Based on the findings, the subjects said that repetition is one of the methods that they were familiar most since they were in elementary school until senior high school. During the learning process in the class for eight meetings, reflective practice could be another method that also gave contribution in teaching or learning English pronunciation. This method is worth for teachers to implement in the classroom as the subjects said that reflective practice method was preferable than the previous learning methods such as repetition. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one action in order to engage in a continual learning (Mathew et al., 2017). They also added that one of the most compelling arguments for reflective practice is that experience alone does not always imply learning since deliberate reflection on experience is essential. Having the experience only is not enough to be a lesson, yet it is needed to reflect on what have been experienced in learning then it will be a valuable lesson. It is in line with the statement that prior pronunciation experiences may have an impact on students' ability to succeed in English pronunciation (Florez, 1998). It means that having a lot of experience in the knowledge of English will give influence to the students in mastering English pronunciation. Experience is the foundation and source of learning because noteworthy individual learning experiences can be a capable drive in learning (Boud et al., 1993).

Exposure

According to Al Zoubi (2018), exposure is defined as the interaction that the learners have with the target language that they are aiming to learn. Based on the findings, the subjects often did activities that helped them to improve their English pronunciation, either inside or outside the class. According to Benson (2013), outside-of-class language exposure term as any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom and involves self-instruction, naturalistic learning or self-directed naturalistic learning. It means that it is not enough to get exposure from the institution or school only. Students should have more exposure outside the class by having a lot of input such as listen a lot, practice a lot with either native or non-native speakers, and get feedback from peers or teachers. It is in line with Murcia et al. (2010)'s statement that it will be easier to learn good pronunciation when you have a lot of exposure to the target language.

Environment

Based on the results of the study, the environment factors are divided into two aspects, family and peers. The students' first environment is their family, and it has an impact on them as individuals. The students will receive influence from how their family educate them. This is in line with Kurniawan et al. (2018)'s statement that parents play a big role because they are directly related to children and give influence on children's learning success. In this context, the more family give the knowledge about English, the more the students get better understanding in English, for instance English pronunciation. It is also supported by Kurniawan et al.'s (2018) findings that the students' learning performance is also influenced by their family environment. Thus, a good family environment will significantly encourage students to achieve more. It serves as a motivation that will drive students to do something they are passionate in, thus students will be more driven to do well in their learning process.

In addition, the fact that the subjects have very supportive friends also contribute to their improvement. It is in line with Wentzel (1998)'s statement, relationships with peers certainly can have

a significant impact on the students' overall emotional well-being at school. It was proven by the opinions from the subjects on the interview that they were more comfortable to have an English conversation with friends, especially with friends who had good English background knowledge, and discussed it if there were something unclear. By doing that conversation, it could improve their confidence in speaking English with correct pronunciation.

Motivation

The other factor that may contribute to students' English pronunciation is the internal motivation. Dehkordi (2017) mentioned that motivation as one of psychological factors that has always played a crucial role in language teaching and learning. It gives a significant simultaneous effect on students' learning motivation (Kurniawan et al., 2018). It is proven by Student A who has strong ambition to go abroad, which gives her strong motivation to master English, especially the pronunciation. It makes her always practice in pronouncing words and do any other activities related to English that makes her pronunciation get better. It shows that the higher motivation leads to higher language achievement. But in the data, the researcher also found that not having strong motivation does not always mean people cannot master English, as what student B experienced in learning English pronunciation. It is different from what Student A wants to achieve; Student B thinks that having a good pronunciation will make him cool. It also makes him indirectly learn English pronunciation by doing some activities the same as Student A.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that there are four big factors contributing to the students' English pronunciation: education, exposure, environment, and motivation. Those factors come from either internal or external contributions. Having a lot of input is the key to be successful in learning English pronunciation. One of the effective ways is that implementing suitable learning method such as reflective practice. The subjects proved that reflective practice method can give them better experience in improving their English pronunciation skill.

Thus, it is suggested for other teachers to implement this method in the learning process to help the students improve their English pronunciation. Moreover, those who want to master English pronunciation can apply the method as their daily routine activity. This study also suggests that future researcher might explore further about the effectiveness of implementing reflective practice method in improving the students' English pronunciation skill, using the pronunciation test to assess the students's English pronunciation skill, and categorizing the words used in the test.

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