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EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN USING YOUGLISH FOR PRONUNCIATION LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is a fundamental aspect of communicative competence, yet it remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners to master. Recent technological advancements have introduced self-directed digital tools, such as YouGlish, which provide authentic multimodal input to support pronunciation learning. However, empirical studies investigating learners' experiences with such tools remain limited, especially in the Indonesian EFL context. To address this gap, this study explores university students' perceptions of using YouGlish to improve their English pronunciation and examines the challenges they encountered while engaging with the platform. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving six English department students from a state university. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. The findings revealed that students perceived YouGlish as a motivating and effective tool for developing pronunciation, particularly because of its multimodal features and access to real-life examples of native speech. They reported increased confidence, enhanced phonological awareness, and greater engagement in autonomous practice. However, they faced several challenges, including physical fatigue, phonetic complexity, and limited time. These findings highlight the need to integrate supportive strategies when using self-directed digital tools for pronunciation learning.

Keywords: Learning Challenges, Pronunciation Practice, Student Perception, University Student, YouGlish

A. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a fundamental component of language acquisition, playing a significant role in students' communicative competence and overall language performance. Poor pronunciation can hinder effective communication, lower self-confidence, and negatively

impact how speakers are perceived in terms of credibility and competence (Akyol, 2013). Mastering pronunciation involves more than just articulating individual sounds; it includes elements such as stress, intonation, and rhythm, all of which are essential for conveying meaning in English (Yangklang, 2013). Researchers agree that pronunciation significantly contributes to comprehensibility, and intelligibility should be prioritized over achieving native-like accents, especially considering the role of English as a global lingua franca (Zoghbor, 2018; Çimenli, 2015). In this context, the goal of pronunciation instruction should be to achieve clear and understandable speech rather than native-like precision.

Effective pronunciation teaching should address both segmental features, such as individual sounds, and suprasegmental features, including stress, rhythm, and intonation, as these aspects greatly influence how easily students are understood (Suzukida & Saito, 2022). Both teachers and students have increasingly acknowledged the effectiveness of communicative pronunciation instruction, which integrates listening and speaking activities to develop phonological awareness and oral fluency (Nguyen & Hung, 2021). Explicit feedback and consistent assessment are also essential in helping students improve their pronunciation, with an emphasis on comprehensibility rather than perfection (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2013).

Accurate pronunciation is important not only for students but also for non-native English teachers, as mispronunciation may negatively affect their professional image and teaching effectiveness (Demirezen & Kot, 2016). Despite its importance, pronunciation often receives limited attention in adult English language programs and is frequently dependent on the teacher's focus and instructional priorities (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010). Nevertheless, intelligible pronunciation remains a crucial skill. Students with clear pronunciation are more likely to be understood even if they make grammatical errors, while students with poor pronunciation may struggle to communicate effectively despite correct grammar (Abdolmaleki & Mohebi, 2014). In today’s interconnected world, improving students' pronunciation not only facilitates effective interpersonal communication but also contributes to broader goals such as cross-cultural understanding and global cooperation (Wu & McMahon, 2012). Therefore, pronunciation should be an integral part of language instruction to support students’ speaking abilities and promote confident, intelligible communication.

However, many university students face persistent challenges in mastering English pronunciation due to gaps in instructional approaches and the complexity of the skill itself. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that pronunciation is often neglected in language instruction, overshadowed by a greater emphasis on grammar, writing, and spelling (Wu & McMahon, 2012). External and internal factors both contribute to the persistent pronunciation problems among students. Large class sizes, inadequate access to language laboratories, and insufficient instructional hours reduce the effectiveness of pronunciation training at the university level (Şimon et al., 2015). Internally, many students lack the necessary metalinguistic awareness and phonological knowledge to identify and self-correct their errors, making autonomous learning difficult (McCrocklin, 2016). The inconsistency of English spelling-to-sound correspondence also contributes to mispronunciation, especially when students encounter unfamiliar written vocabulary (Dzormeku et al., 2024). Furthermore, students may experience reduced confidence and self-efficacy when they struggle to pronounce words correctly, especially during reading aloud or classroom teaching, which may impact both their academic performance and professional identity in the long term.

Pronunciation improvement is further hampered by a lack of exposure to natural spoken English and authentic interactions. Students often receive limited practice in conversational settings and struggle to understand natural, reduced speech forms commonly found in real-life communication (Wanrooij & Raijmakers, 2021). Even advanced students may fail to comprehend or produce naturally reduced phrases without sufficient exposure and training. Although pronunciation generally improves with age and increased language exposure, this progress is neither automatic nor guaranteed without guided instruction (Vallauri, 2020). The development of pronunciation skills requires focused practice, individualized feedback, and strategic learning interventions that empower students to become autonomous and confident speakers. Students need exposure to various pronunciation elements such as segmental features, word stress, and prosodic aspects like intonation and rhythm to enhance their spoken fluency and intelligibility (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2013). Additionally, multimodal and task-based strategies, which combine auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements, have been shown to significantly improve students' pronunciation and oral proficiency (Galimberti et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024). Pronunciation teaching must also foster student autonomy, motivation, and engagement through technology-enhanced instruction (McCrocklin, 2016; Akyol, 2013). In summary, digital tools play a vital role in modern language education, offering students the flexibility and immediacy required in today's fast-paced, tech-driven environment.

Research underscores the value of e-learning platforms and mobile technologies in supporting language acquisition, especially pronunciation (Wu & McMahon, 2012; Mahmood, 2024). Innovative resources such as multimodal input, task-based practice, authentic video materials, and gesture integration contribute to better pronunciation, fluency, and overall communicative competence (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024). Furthermore, digital platforms enable students to access varied accents and speech patterns, which is crucial in navigating global English varieties. With the increasing preference for student-centered and flexible instruction, technological tools provide an effective means to enhance pronunciation instruction beyond traditional classroom limitations (González & Ferreiro, 2024; Alsuhaibani et al., 2024). Ultimately, technology-assisted instruction empowers students to personalize and extend their learning, making pronunciation practice more effective and accessible. YouGlish emerges as a practical and innovative solution within this evolving instructional context. Unlike traditional dictionaries that rely solely on phonetic transcriptions, YouGlish delivers authentic video clips of native speakers using target words in real-life contexts. By combining visual and auditory input, syllable breakdowns, and contextual usage, YouGlish promotes active learning and supports the development of pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary skills (Fu & Yang, 2019). It also aligns with the lexical approach, encouraging students to infer meaning from context while improving articulation. As a video-assisted dictionary, YouGlish engages students in discovering natural usage patterns across various English dialects including American, British, and Australian, and fosters greater student motivation (Prastyo et al., 2022) Therefore, YouGlish represents a valuable instructional tool that bridges theory and practice in pronunciation learning, helping students engage in authentic and autonomous language development.

By highlighting the pedagogical advantages and motivational potential of YouGlish in promoting autonomous pronunciation learning, this study seeks to investigate students'

perceptions of YouGlish and the challenges they experience when using it to support their pronunciation learning. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of using YouGlish for learning English pronunciation?
2. What challenges do students encounter when using YouGlish for pronunciation learning?

B. METHOD

A qualitative approach was employed as it is effective in capturing rich and nuanced insights into individual experiences and perceptions, particularly within context-dependent learning environments (Lester et al., 2020). The participants consisted of six English major students from a private university in West Java, selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen to represent diverse levels of English proficiency, varied academic backgrounds, and different personal goals related to pronunciation improvement (Bakla, 2018). This purposeful variation was intended to capture a broad range of learner experiences and contextual factors that influence pronunciation learning. During a twelve-week period from October 13, 2024, to January 3, 2025, the participants actively engaged with YouGlish, a digital platform that provides authentic native-speaker pronunciation through short video clips, accent options, and synchronized transcripts. The platform's multimodal features—combining auditory, visual, and textual input—allowed participants to observe real-life pronunciation and imitate native models, supporting self-directed and flexible learning (Daher-Nashif et al., 2024).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of the intervention. The interviews explored students' perceptions of using YouGlish for pronunciation practice as well as the challenges they encountered (Dei et al., 2023). Member checking was conducted to enhance the credibility of the data by allowing participants to review and validate their responses (Bakla, 2018). This procedure ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and perspectives, consistent with qualitative research practices (Keese et al., 2024). To analyze the data, thematic analysis was employed to identify and categorize key themes related to pronunciation improvement, motivation, and the effectiveness of YouGlish in a non-traditional learning environment (Rotar-Pavlic et al., 2022). This method facilitated the emergence of rich, context-specific insights by systematically coding and categorizing participants' experiences. Particular attention was given to challenges like mastering vowel reduction and prosodic features, which are critical for intelligibility in English communication (Gowhary et al., 2016). The combination of individual interviews, focus group discussions, and participant feedback enabled a robust exploration of the contextual factors influencing pronunciation outcomes, such as motivation, engagement, and the practical application of learned skills.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interview data, the findings and discussion are presented under two main themes that correspond to the research questions. The first theme explores students' perceptions and experiences of using YouGlish. The second theme examines the challenges they encounter.

1. Students' Perceptions and Experiences of YouGlish

The interviews showed that students had positive perceptions and experiences of using YouGlish for pronunciation learning. From the data, four main themes appeared: YouGlish helped improve students' pronunciation, made learning more interesting, built their confidence, and supported their different accent preferences.

YouGlish can Improve Students' Pronunciation

The interview data revealed that participants' engagement with YouGlish contributed significantly to their pronunciation development, shaped by both personal motivation and the flexibility offered by the platform. Participant 1 structured her learning around a busy schedule as a part-time catering worker. She found YouGlish useful for practicing during breaks and evenings, with the goal of improving workplace communication in American English. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I usually practice during my breaks or in the evening after work. I want to speak American English well because it helps me communicate better at my part-time job."*

Similarly, participant 3 maintained consistent practice despite irregular working hours and a demanding commute as a part-time teacher. Her motivation stemmed from self-improvement and the aspiration for native-like pronunciation. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"Even though my schedule is hectic, I try to spend a few minutes with YouGlish every day. It really helps me get closer to native pronunciation."*

Overall, the findings indicate that YouGlish supports pronunciation improvement by providing a flexible and engaging platform that aligns with students' individual schedules and personal interests. It is in line with the statement of Fu and Yang (2019) that YouGlish promotes active learning and supports the development of pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary skills.

YouGlish Can Make Learning More Interesting

The interviews also indicated that YouGlish made pronunciation learning more engaging. Participant 5 particularly valued the real-life examples of British pronunciation, which aligned with her interest in phonological variation and cultural exposure:

> *"I enjoy listening to different British accents on YouGlish. It helps me understand subtle differences and makes learning more interesting."*

This demonstrates that exposure to authentic language use through multimodal resources can increase learners' motivation and engagement, making autonomous pronunciation practice more enjoyable and stimulating. In addition, Participant 4, for instance, integrated pronunciation practice into leisure periods such as commuting or rest time. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I love listening to British music and I try to mimic the accents. I use YouGlish when I'm commuting or relaxing—it's fun and fits my schedule."*

This finding suggests that the enjoyable aspects of YouGlish, such as the exposure to authentic accents and the flexibility to practice at convenient times, contributed to sustained engagement. Learners' positive experiences indicate that the platform supports autonomous and motivating pronunciation practice, making language learning both effective and enjoyable. It is in line with the statement of Prastyo et al., (2022) that YouGlish engages students in discovering natural usage patterns across various English dialects including American, British, and Australian, and fosters greater student motivation.

YouGlish Can Improve Students' Confidence in Speaking

Data from interviews revealed that YouGlish contributed to students' confidence in pronunciation practice. Participant 1 highlighted the usefulness of subtitles and transcripts, which enabled her to analyze pronunciation in context and imitate native speakers more accurately. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"Using subtitles and transcripts really helps me notice how native speakers articulate words. I feel more confident speaking now."*

This finding indicates that access to textual support alongside auditory input helps learners identify accurate pronunciation patterns, which in turn enhances their self-assurance in speaking. This aligns with Akyol (2013), who stated that pronunciation significantly influences how speakers are perceived in terms of credibility and confidence. Furthermore, the motivational potential of self-directed learning tools is also supported by Hämäläinen et al. (2009), who found that such tools can improve learners' confidence and clarity in pronunciation

Students Have Different Accent Preferences in Learning Pronunciation through YouGlish

The interview data revealed that students' accent preferences significantly influenced their approach to pronunciation learning using YouGlish. Each participant demonstrated a distinct orientation toward accent selection, which shaped the content they chose and how they engaged with the platform.

Participant 6 prioritized American English, guided by practical communicative needs in her work environment. She focused on YouGlish videos that aligned with her daily professional interactions. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I mainly watch American English videos because I need to communicate at work. It helps me speak more appropriately in my job."*

This example illustrates that learners' practical goals directly shape their accent choice and engagement, reflecting a functional and goal-oriented dimension of pronunciation learning.

In addition, participant 3 deliberately selected British English content, motivated by personal taste and cultural interests. Her approach was exploratory and stylistic, emphasizing the aesthetic aspects of pronunciation. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I like listening to British accents because of the music and culture. I try to imitate them to make my pronunciation sound more refined."*

This case highlights that intrinsic motivation and cultural affinity influence learners' content selection, demonstrating the role of affective and stylistic factors in shaping pronunciation practice.

Furthermore, participant 4 focused on intelligibility across accents, aiming for comprehensibility rather than native-like mastery. She alternated between American and British English content, selecting videos that suited her academic and instructional goals. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I watch both American and British videos because I want people to understand me clearly, no matter which accent they speak."*

This demonstrates that learners may adopt a pragmatic approach, balancing multiple accent models to achieve effective communication rather than focusing solely on native-like pronunciation.

Overall, these findings indicate that accent preference is a key perceptual factor influencing students' learning strategies and content choices in using YouGlish. The diversity of preferences reflects the personalized nature of pronunciation learning and underscores the importance of accommodating learners' goals, interests, and communicative prioritie. The findings also highlight the significance of linguistic diversity, echoing the perspectives of Ta et al. (2024) and Myers-Burg and Behrend (2021), who underscore the necessity of educational resources that accommodate varying accent profiles and dialect-specific vocabulary.

2. Challenges Faced During Pronunciation Learning

Data from the interviews revealed that participants encountered several challenges that affected the consistency and effectiveness of their pronunciation practice. These difficulties were shaped by both personal and contextual factors, highlighting the complexity of autonomous, technology-mediated pronunciation learning.

Participant 1 grappled with physical fatigue due to long working hours, which often impeded her ability to maintain a regular study rhythm. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"Sometimes I feel too tired after work, so I cannot practice as long as I want. I try to use short breaks to repeat words or phrases on YouGlish whenever I can."*

This example demonstrates that physical fatigue can significantly limit the duration and regularity of pronunciation practice, reflecting how external workload impacts learning consistency. In addition, participant 2 struggled with the abstraction of certain phonetic distinctions, particularly when attempting to replicate native-like intonation and stress patterns. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I sometimes get confused with words that sound almost the same. I need to listen carefully many times, and it makes me a bit nervous, but I keep trying."*

This case illustrates that the cognitive demands of phonetic differentiation can challenge learners' confidence and increase the complexity of autonomous pronunciation learning.

Moreover, participant 3 faced time management difficulties, exacerbated by her long commute and fluctuating workload. It can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *"With my long commute, I can only spend a few minutes practicing at a time, but I make sure to do it every day. Even short sessions help me improve."*

Participant 3's experience highlights that logistical and temporal constraints can affect learners' engagement and consistency, demonstrating how external circumstances influence the learning process. Overall, these findings suggest that while YouGlish provides opportunities for autonomous pronunciation practice, learners face challenges such as fatigue, phonetic complexity, and limited time, which impact the consistency and effectiveness of their learning. As argued by Hämäläinen et al. (2009), such external constraints are common in self-directed learning contexts, where learners must balance motivation with limited time and energy resources.

D. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore university students' perceptions and challenges in using YouGlish as a tool for learning English pronunciation. The findings revealed that students perceived YouGlish as a flexible and engaging platform that supports pronunciation improvement, increases motivation, and boosts confidence through authentic input and multimodal features. However, their learning process was constrained by several challenges, including physical fatigue, phonetic complexity, and time limitations, which disrupted the consistency and effectiveness of their practice. These results highlight the potential of YouGlish as a self-directed learning tool, while also underscoring the need for pedagogical guidance and supportive strategies to help learners manage external and cognitive constraints. Instructors may consider integrating YouGlish into formal instruction with structured guidance and time management strategies to enhance its effectiveness.

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