

Dialect variation in Indonesian students' English speech: The role of regional background and language exposure

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Abstract: Dialect variation in English speech among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is often shaped by learners' linguistic backgrounds and experiences with English exposure. In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia, regional language influence may contribute to variation in pronunciation, intonation, and spoken language performance. This study investigates dialect variation in Indonesian students' English speech by examining the influence of regional background and language exposure on spoken English performance. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study involved seven university students from South Sulawesi and West Sulawesi, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse linguistic backgrounds and levels of English exposure. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and spontaneous speaking tasks and analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. The findings reveal that students' English speech varied in pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and confidence in speaking, influenced by multiple interconnected factors. Regional background contributed to pronunciation differences through phonological transfer, while greater exposure to English through academic activities, digital media, peer interaction, and self-directed learning supported stronger fluency and more consistent pronunciation. Educational experiences encouraging active English use also positively influenced spoken performance. In addition, speaking anxiety emerged as a factor affecting learners' oral communication. The study highlights that variation in students' English speech should be understood as a reflection of multilingual experiences and linguistic diversity rather than solely as a pronunciation deficiency. These findings contribute to more inclusive English language teaching practices that recognize diverse linguistic backgrounds in EFL learning contexts.

Keywords: dialect variation; English speech; Indonesian students; language exposure; regional background

1. Introduction

English is widely used as a global language across multilingual settings, resulting in considerable variation in how it is spoken by learners from different linguistic backgrounds. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, spoken English is shaped not only by formal instruction but also by learners' regional language backgrounds and their exposure to English in daily life. Consequently, differences in pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and speaking patterns often emerge among learners, reflecting multilingual experiences rather than linguistic inadequacy ([Al-Khresheh, 2024](#); [Blake et al., 2021](#); [Park, 2020](#)).

In Indonesia, linguistic diversity may influence how students learn and use English. Since many learners grow up using regional languages alongside Bahasa Indonesia, local linguistic systems may affect English pronunciation and speech production. Previous studies have shown that learners' first language

backgrounds can influence pronunciation features such as consonant production, rhythm, stress, and intonation through language transfer processes ([Hou & Yang, 2025](#); [Sefain, 2025](#)). From the perspective of World Englishes, such variation should not necessarily be viewed as incorrect pronunciation but rather as a natural outcome of multilingual experiences and local linguistic identity ([Gabryś-Barker, 2019](#); [Henry, 2017](#); [Kepinska et al., 2023](#)).

Besides regional background, language exposure through classroom learning, digital media, peer interaction, and independent learning may improve pronunciation, fluency, and communicative confidence ([Mahdi, 2022](#); [Richards, 2015](#); [J. Sun et al., 2024](#)). In contrast, limited opportunities to use English may lead learners to rely more heavily on phonological patterns from their first language. Research in Indonesian EFL contexts has primarily focused on pronunciation errors and language interference. However, limited attention has been paid to dialect variation in students' English speech as a sociolinguistic phenomenon shaped by both regional background and language exposure. Therefore, this study investigates dialect variation in Indonesian students' English speech by examining how regional background and language exposure contribute to differences in pronunciation, intonation, and spoken language performance. Through qualitative analysis of students' spoken interactions, this study aims to contribute to more inclusive English language teaching practices that recognize linguistic diversity in EFL learning contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 Dialect variation and English speech in EFL contexts

Dialect variation refers to differences in language use among speakers that may appear in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and speech patterns. In multilingual contexts, these variations are influenced by speakers' linguistic backgrounds, sociocultural environments, and language experiences. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, spoken English often develops differently among learners because English is acquired alongside other linguistic systems already established in learners' first languages. As a result, variation in spoken English should not always be interpreted as evidence of limited proficiency but rather as an expected outcome of multilingual language learning ([Bice & Kroll, 2019](#); [Mahdi, 2022](#); [Richards, 2015](#); [Ushioda, 2017](#)).

The increasing global use of English has also shifted perspectives regarding what constitutes acceptable English pronunciation. Recent discussions in sociolinguistics and language teaching emphasize that English no longer belongs exclusively to native speakers but has evolved into multiple forms shaped by local contexts and communicative needs. The concept of World Englishes recognizes the legitimacy of localized forms of English influenced by regional linguistic identities and multilingual experiences ([Kepinska et al., 2023](#); [Park, 2020](#)). In this perspective, differences in pronunciation or accent are not necessarily viewed as linguistic deficiencies, provided communication remains intelligible and effective. Consequently, the spoken English of Indonesian learners may reflect local linguistic influences while still functioning effectively as a means of communication. In educational contexts, understanding dialect variation is important because students may display diverse speaking styles shaped by their regional language backgrounds and language-learning experiences. Recognizing such variation can help educators develop more inclusive approaches to English language teaching, particularly in multilingual societies where linguistic diversity forms an important part of students' identities.

2.2 Regional background and pronunciation transfer

Regional linguistic background is one of the most influential factors affecting English pronunciation among multilingual learners. Learners often bring phonological characteristics from their first language

into second or foreign language production, a phenomenon widely recognized as language transfer or phonological interference. This process occurs when speakers apply familiar sound systems from their native language while speaking English, which may influence consonant articulation, vowel production, rhythm, word stress, and intonation patterns ([Cisero & Royer, 1995](#); [Grosjean, 2012](#)).

In multilingual countries such as Indonesia, learners commonly speak local languages in addition to Bahasa Indonesia, creating diverse linguistic environments that may influence English speech production. Since each regional language possesses distinctive phonological features, students from different linguistic backgrounds may demonstrate different pronunciation tendencies when speaking English. For example, certain learners may simplify consonant sounds, alter stress patterns, or transfer local intonation features into English speech due to familiarity with regional phonological systems ([Tsunemoto & Trofimovich, 2024](#)). Recent studies have emphasized that regional linguistic influence should not automatically be categorized as pronunciation error. Instead, pronunciation variation among multilingual learners can reflect adaptation processes in which learners negotiate between their first language systems and English phonology. Therefore, understanding how regional background influences spoken English is important not only for identifying pronunciation characteristics but also for recognizing the role of linguistic diversity in language learning.

2.3 Language exposure and spoken English development

Besides regional background, exposure to English plays an important role in the development of spoken language performance. Language exposure refers to the extent to which learners interact with English in both formal and informal contexts, including classroom learning, social interaction, digital media, online platforms, self-study, and daily communication. Greater exposure to English generally increases opportunities for learners to become familiar with pronunciation patterns, vocabulary use, speaking rhythm, and communicative strategies ([Ihsani et al., 2025](#)). Recent studies indicate that sustained and meaningful exposure to English positively contributes to oral fluency, pronunciation development, and speaking confidence ([Kostromitina & Kang, 2021](#); [Moosa et al., 2025](#)). Learners who frequently engage with English through movies, social media, peer interaction, or academic activities often demonstrate greater adaptability in spoken communication because they encounter more authentic language input. Repeated exposure may also help learners become more aware of pronunciation differences and develop strategies to improve speech intelligibility.

Conversely, learners with limited exposure to English may rely more heavily on phonological features from their first language when producing spoken English. Limited opportunities to practice English outside classroom settings can restrict learners' familiarity with pronunciation norms and reduce confidence in oral communication. Consequently, differences in language exposure may contribute to noticeable variation in students' spoken English performance, including pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and confidence in communication.

2.4 Psychological factors in speaking performance

In addition to linguistic background and language exposure, psychological factors may also influence spoken English performance. Speaking anxiety is one of the most frequently discussed affective variables affecting oral communication among EFL learners. Anxiety may occur when learners experience nervousness, fear of making mistakes, or concern about negative evaluation while speaking English in academic or social contexts ([Effiong, 2016](#); [Hanifa, 2018](#); [Rajpar, 2026](#)). Psychological barriers may affect speech production in several ways. Learners experiencing anxiety may hesitate more frequently, overthink pronunciation, avoid speaking opportunities, or overemphasize certain sounds due to fear of mispronunciation ([Effiong, 2016](#)). Even learners with sufficient vocabulary or

grammatical knowledge may struggle to communicate effectively when anxiety interferes with confidence and fluency. This suggests that oral performance is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by emotional readiness and speaking confidence (Afifah et al., 2024; Ma, 2022). In EFL settings, anxiety may interact with learners' regional backgrounds and language exposure in shaping spoken English experiences. Students who have limited opportunities to practice English or who feel insecure about their accents may experience greater hesitation when speaking. Therefore, psychological factors should be considered alongside linguistic and environmental influences in understanding variation in students' spoken English.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate dialect variation in Indonesian students' English speech and to explore how regional background and language exposure contributed to differences in spoken English performance. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand linguistic variation in naturally occurring speech rather than quantitatively measuring language proficiency (Taguchi, 2018). The research focused on identifying pronunciation patterns, intonation differences, and speaking characteristics influenced by participants' linguistic backgrounds and experiences with English.

3.2 Participants

The participants consisted of seven university students from different regional backgrounds in South Sulawesi and West Sulawesi, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in regional linguistic backgrounds and levels of English-language exposure. The selection aimed to include students with varied experiences in learning and using English, ranging from limited exposure outside classroom settings to more frequent interaction with English through academic activities, peer communication, self-learning, and digital media. Differences in English exposure were identified using contextual indicators such as participants' frequency of English use, access to English-learning resources, involvement in English-related activities, interaction with English-language media, and opportunities to use English in educational or social settings. Prior to participation, all participants were informed of the study's purpose and voluntarily agreed to participate. Consent was obtained for audio recording, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential throughout the research process. To maintain confidentiality, participants are referred to by participant labels or pseudonyms in the findings.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and spontaneous speaking tasks to capture participants' natural spoken English. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English using open-ended questions designed to encourage spontaneous responses regarding familiar topics, including daily activities, educational experiences, language-learning habits, hobbies, and perceptions of English use. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. To obtain more authentic spoken language data, participants also completed spontaneous speaking activities in which they described personal experiences, discussed familiar topics, and responded to simple prompts without scripted preparation. These speaking tasks enabled the researcher to observe naturally occurring pronunciation patterns, intonation, speech rhythm, and lexical choices in participants' spoken English. All speaking sessions were audio-recorded using digital recording devices and smartphones with participants' consent. The recordings were securely stored and manually transcribed to preserve linguistic details relevant to the analysis, including pronunciation features, pauses, rhythm, and intonation patterns. To

enhance the credibility of the data, recordings were listened to repeatedly and transcripts were examined repeatedly to ensure consistency and accuracy in identifying relevant linguistic features.

3.4 Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. First, all interview and speaking-task recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce detailed textual representations of participants' spoken language. Following transcription, the data were repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring linguistic characteristics associated with English speech variation. The analysis focused on linguistic aspects relevant to the study objectives, including pronunciation patterns, phonological transfer, intonation, fluency, and spoken language performance. Initial coding was conducted manually by identifying notable speech characteristics across participants. Similar linguistic features were subsequently grouped into broader categories and interpreted according to recurring patterns observed in the data. Through this process, several themes emerged concerning the influence of regional background, language exposure, educational experience, and psychological factors on students' English speech. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, spontaneous speaking tasks, and observational notes recorded during data collection. Repeated review of the data was also conducted to improve consistency in interpretation and theme development.

4. Results

Theme 1: Phonological interference from regional background

The findings show that several participants experienced phonological interference from their regional languages, particularly in pronunciation features such as consonant addition, deletion, and intonation patterns.

Student 1 from Tanete, Bulukumba demonstrated strong phonological transfer from her regional dialect. One of the most notable features is the addition of the /g/ sound in words ending in -ing, such as *goingg*, *writingg*, and *talkingg*. This reflects direct phonological transfer from the first language into English pronunciation.

Similarly, *Student 2* from Kajang exhibited the opposite pattern, namely consonant deletion, producing forms such as *goin*, *writin*, and *listenin*. This indicates phonetic simplification influenced by her local dialect structure.

Student 4 from Polman showed strong prosodic influence from the Mandar dialect, particularly in intonation and speech rhythm rather than segmental phoneme changes. Her speech tends to have a slower tempo and distinct intonation patterns typical of her regional language.

Theme 2: Language exposure and learning environment

The level of exposure to English significantly influenced pronunciation outcomes among participants.

Student 3 and *Student 7* demonstrated relatively neutral or standard-like pronunciation due to higher exposure to English. Hikmah, in particular, regularly used English through peer interaction, self-learning applications, and reading activities, which contributed to consistent pronunciation and stress patterns.

Student 5 also showed high proficiency due to intensive exposure through academic environment, English debate competitions, and daily use of English in both formal and informal contexts.

In contrast, Students 1 and 2 reported limited exposure to English outside the classroom, relying mainly on formal instruction. This limited exposure contributed to stronger regional pronunciation influence.

Theme 3: Educational influence

Educational background also played a significant role in pronunciation development. Students who attended schools with stronger English programs (e.g., Student 5 and Student 3) showed better pronunciation accuracy and fluency. Student 3 benefited from a boarding school system with “language day” policy, requiring active English use. Conversely, Students 1 and 2 experienced English instruction that focused mainly on grammar and reading skills, with minimal pronunciation training. This lack of explicit phonetic instruction contributed to persistent pronunciation variation.

Theme 4: Psychological factor (speaking anxiety)

Psychological factors also influenced speech production. Student 1 reported anxiety when speaking English in public settings. This anxiety affected her pronunciation, leading to overemphasis on certain sounds.

Table 1. Finding summary

Student	Regional background	Pronunciation features	Main influencing factors
S1	Bulukumba (Tanete)	Adds /g/ in -ing words (<i>writingg</i>)	Limited exposure, phonological transfer, anxiety
S2	Kajang	Deletes final /g/ (<i>writin</i>)	Limited exposure, phonetic simplification
S3	Pinrang	Neutral pronunciation	High exposure, pesantren language system
S4	Polman (Mandar)	Strong intonation influence	Regional dialect, limited early exposure
S5	Gowa	Near-native fluency	High exposure, debate practice, strong education
S6	Makassar (urban)	Near-native, British-like accent	Media exposure, self-learning, motivation
S7	Soppeng	Standard pronunciation	Peer interaction, self-learning apps

5. Discussion

5.1 Regional background and pronunciation transfer

The findings reveal that regional background contributes to differences in English pronunciation among participants. Several students demonstrated phonological transfer from their regional languages, particularly through consonant addition, consonant deletion, and distinctive intonation patterns. For example, Participant 1 exhibited consonant addition in words ending in *-ing*, while Participant 2 tended to simplify pronunciation through consonant deletion. Participant 4 demonstrated strong regional influence through speech rhythm and intonation patterns.

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the role of first language phonological transfer in second language pronunciation development. Learners commonly transfer familiar phonological features from their first language into English speech, affecting consonant production, rhythm, stress, and intonation (Al-Khresheh, 2024; Sefain, 2025; Tsunemoto & Trofimovich, 2024). Additionally, they frequently experience pronunciation variation influenced by regional language backgrounds (Hou & Yang, 2025; Ushioda, 2017). However, the findings of this study suggest that pronunciation differences should not necessarily be viewed as linguistic deficiencies. From the perspective of World Englishes, pronunciation variation among multilingual learners reflects adaptation to local linguistic contexts rather than failure to achieve native-speaker pronunciation norms (Kepinska et al., 2023; Park, 2020). In this regard, participants' speech patterns may represent legitimate forms of multilingual language use shaped by regional identity and linguistic experience.

5.2 Language exposure and spoken English development

The findings further indicate that language exposure played an important role in shaping participants' spoken English. Participants with greater exposure to English through peer interaction, digital media, self-directed learning, and academic engagement tended to demonstrate more stable pronunciation, greater fluency, and stronger confidence in spoken communication. For instance, Participants 3, 5, and 7 demonstrated relatively more neutral pronunciation patterns and stronger oral performance, which appeared to be associated with more frequent opportunities to engage with English.

This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of meaningful English exposure in oral language development. Sustained interaction with English contributes positively to pronunciation improvement and speaking performance. Furthermore, exposure through media, educational activities, and social communication can increase learners' communicative confidence and adaptability (Ihsani et al., 2025; Mahdi, 2022). Conversely, participants with more limited exposure to English tended to be more strongly influenced by regional linguistic systems. Participants 1 and 2, for example, showed more noticeable phonological transfer, possibly because their interaction with English occurred primarily within formal classroom contexts. This supports previous findings suggesting that restricted opportunities for English use may increase learners' reliance on first language phonological systems (Hou & Yang, 2025).

5.3 Educational experience and spoken English performance

Educational experiences also appeared to contribute to differences in participants' spoken English. Participants who had access to environments encouraging active English use, such as structured English programs, language-based activities, or regular communicative practice, generally demonstrated stronger pronunciation consistency and fluency. Participant 3, for example, benefited from a *boarding school* environment that encouraged regular English communication, while Participant 5 demonstrated stronger spoken performance associated with active participation in English-related activities (Z. Sun et al., 2017). These findings support earlier research indicating that learning environments significantly influence spoken language development among EFL learners. Studies have shown that consistent communicative practice and explicit opportunities for oral interaction contribute to greater pronunciation development and speaking confidence (Afifah et al., 2024; Moosa et al., 2025). Educational contexts that emphasize meaningful language use may therefore provide learners with more opportunities to improve speech intelligibility and communicative competence (Kostromitina & Kang, 2021). At the same time, the findings suggest that formal classroom instruction alone may not be sufficient for the development of spoken English. Participants with limited opportunities for pronunciation practice outside formal instruction demonstrated more noticeable pronunciation

variation. This suggests that classroom learning may be more effective when complemented by broader opportunities for authentic exposure to English ([Moosa et al., 2025](#)).

5.4 Psychological factors and speaking anxiety

The findings also suggest that psychological factors, particularly speaking anxiety, influenced participants' spoken performance. Participant 1 reported feeling anxious when speaking English publicly, which appeared to affect pronunciation and speaking confidence. Anxiety may contribute to hesitation, overemphasis on sounds, or reduced fluency during oral production ([Afifah et al., 2024](#)). This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that emotional factors play an important role in second language speaking performance ([Ma, 2022](#)). Speaking anxiety can negatively influence learners' confidence and oral performance even when linguistic knowledge is adequate. Similarly, anxiety in EFL contexts may limit learners' willingness to speak and reduce opportunities for communicative practice, ultimately affecting spoken language development.

The presence of anxiety in this study further indicates that spoken English variation cannot be explained solely through linguistic background or exposure. Instead, oral performance may emerge from the interaction between linguistic experience, learning opportunities, and emotional factors affecting learners' confidence during communication ([Rajpar, 2026](#)). Overall, the findings suggest that dialect variation in Indonesian students' English speech should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by regional linguistic background, language exposure, educational experiences, and psychological conditions. Rather than evaluating pronunciation solely through native-speaker standards, English language teaching may benefit from recognizing linguistic diversity and supporting learners in developing intelligible and confident communication across varied sociolinguistic contexts.

6. Conclusion

How students pronounce English is significantly influenced by their geographical origin, educational background, and daily routines, as can be deduced from the findings of observations and interviews done with several students from different areas of South Sulawesi and West Sulawesi. The findings demonstrate a clear distinction between people who had a regionally unique accent and those who spoke more like Standard English. In the manner of their native language, Bulukumba participants exhibited phonological interference by adding and removing sounds, like /g/ or /n/, at the ends of words. In the meantime, West Sulawesi participant exhibits a significant influence of local accents in her intonation and speech rhythm. This proves that extended exposure to regional languages can establish pronunciation patterns that transfer to English. In contrast, participants from Soppeng, Makassar (formerly from Java), Gowa, and Pinrang, among others, exhibited a more neutral pronunciation that was closer to the norm. This is brought about by some things, like attending institutions that promote English language instruction, enrolling in training or courses, regularly reading and listening to English-language content, and often utilizing English in everyday situations, such as social media or debate competitions. As a result, it may be deduced that a student's English pronunciation is influenced not only by their geographic location but also by their exposure to the language, personal behaviors, and the learning atmosphere. That the geographical origin is only one of numerous interacting variables is demonstrated by the fact that some of the participants from West Sulawesi and specific regions of South Sulawesi have excellent pronunciation. As a result, the methodology for learning English must take into account the variety of students' phonological histories to offer consistent and adequate reinforcement in developing foreign language competence.

Author's declaration

Author contribution

Suci Pole Mappaita: conceptualization, design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and writing-original draft. **Muhammad Rifqi Syamsuddin:** data analysis and interpretation, data and result validation, and writing-discussion.

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Data availability

The additional supporting data of this study may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Ethical clearance

This study was conducted under permission from English Department of Universitas Negeri Makassar, and in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants, including respect for voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent, in line with the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

AI statement

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used for language enhancement and structural editing during the preparation of this manuscript. No AI tools were used for research design, data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of results. All final content was reviewed, revised, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and originality of the work.

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