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English /v/ Under Pressure: Phonological Interference among Kaili Rai EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates phonological interference in the production of the English voiced labiodental fricative /v/ among Kaili Rai EFL students. The research problem arises from the frequent substitution of /v/ with /f/ among Indonesian learners, while variation across phonological positions and specific regional language backgrounds remains underexplored. The objective of this study is to identify the types and frequency of interference in /v/ pronunciation and to examine positional vulnerability in its realization. A descriptive quantitative design was employed. Thirty-four students were selected through purposive sampling from a population of 211. Data were gathered using word lists, minimal pairs, and sentence reading tasks containing /v/ in initial, medial, and final positions. The recordings were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and analyzed through frequency and percentage calculations. The findings reveal three types of interference: substitution, omission, and epenthesis, with substitution emerging as the most dominant pattern. Interference occurred more frequently in word-initial and word-final positions than in medial positions, indicating that phonological position plays a significant role in second language segment production. The results demonstrate that pronunciation difficulty is not solely caused by the absence of a phoneme in the first language but is also shaped by positional distribution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Phonological interference remains a persistent issue in second language (L2) pronunciation, especially when learners' first language (L1) phonological systems differ structurally and distributionally from the target language. Interference has been defined as the systematic influence of one language on another in bilingual speech production [1], and it operates in rule-governed, predictable ways rather than as random deviation [2]. In L2 phonology, interference must be distinguished from performance errors caused by fatigue

or inattention and from fossilization, which refers to the long-term stabilization of non-target-like forms despite continued exposure to the L2 [3]. Although interference in Indonesian EFL contexts has been widely acknowledged, limited research has examined how it operates across phonological positions or within specific regional language backgrounds. This limitation creates a theoretical and empirical problem: pronunciation difficulty is often treated as a general substitution issue without explaining whether it reflects systematic phonological distribution or merely inventory gaps.

From a theoretical perspective, contemporary L2 phonology no longer explains cross-linguistic influence solely through phoneme inventory differences. Recent frameworks emphasize the interaction between segmental markedness, phonological distribution, and processing constraints within bilingual systems [5], [6]. Marked segments, especially those requiring complex articulatory coordination, tend to pose greater difficulty. Empirical findings demonstrate that consonant realization varies across word-initial, medial, and final positions, indicating that cross-linguistic influence is context-sensitive rather than uniform. However, many Indonesian EFL studies describe substitution patterns without systematically analyzing positional distribution. As a result, the mechanism underlying interference remains insufficiently explained.

One English segment that illustrates this issue is the voiced labiodental fricative /v/. Phonologically, /v/ is considered marked because it combines fricative constriction with the [+voice] feature, requiring sustained vocal fold vibration under oral airflow restriction. This articulatory configuration is aerodynamically unstable and cross-linguistically less frequent than its voiceless counterpart /f/ [6]. Within Indonesian EFL contexts, several studies report that learners frequently substitute /v/ with /f/ [7]. These findings suggest inventory-based influence, yet they do not determine whether substitution patterns vary across phonological environments. Moreover, research focusing on learners from specific regional language backgrounds, such as Kaili Rai, remains scarce. Since regional languages may differ in their segment inventories and phonological distributions, interference patterns could exhibit unique characteristics. The absence of distribution-based analysis and regional focus constitutes a clear research gap.

Previous studies have primarily identified/v/substitution as a general error pattern [8], but they rarely examine how positional factors influence realization accuracy. Additionally, earlier research has concentrated on Indonesian learners broadly, without isolating particular L1 backgrounds. Consequently, the interaction between L1 phonological structure, word position, and interference patterns has not been systematically investigated. This gap highlights the need for a study that integrates phonological theory, positional analysis, and specific learner populations.

In response to this problem, the present study proposes a systematic investigation of /v/ pronunciation among Kaili Rai EFL students. The study plans to analyze pronunciation data across lexical items in initial, medial, and final positions, classify interference types based on their phonological realizations, and calculate frequency patterns. Through this approach, the study seeks to determine whether interference in /v/ production reflects inventory limitation alone or a distribution-sensitive phonological process. The objectives of this study are:

a. to identify the types of phonological interference produced by Kaili Rai students in pronouncing the English voiced labiodental fricative /v/; and
b. to measure the frequency of each interference type across different phonological positions.

Theoretically, this research is grounded in interference theory [1], [2], fossilization theory [3], and contemporary models of cross-linguistic phonological interaction and markedness [5], [6]. By integrating these perspectives, the study positions interference as systematic phonological behavior shaped by structural and distributional constraints rather than as an isolated pronunciation error.

The expected results of this research are twofold. First, it is anticipated that interference patterns will show positional variation, supporting the view that cross-linguistic influence operates in context-sensitive ways. Second, the findings are expected to clarify whether /v/ substitution among Kaili Rai learners reflects predictable phonological behavior. Academically, this study contributes empirical evidence to L2 phonology, particularly in multilingual Indonesian contexts. Pedagogically, it offers practical insight for pronunciation instruction by identifying specific phonological environments that require targeted intervention.

2. METHOD

In this study, a quantitative descriptive approach was employed to analyze students' pronunciation errors of the voiced labiodental fricative/v/at SMAN 1 Sindue. According to [9], quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data to describe a phenomenon. This research aimed to identify, count, and classify students' pronunciation errors by frequency. By doing so, the study provides a clear picture of the types and occurrences of phonological interference among the students. The primary focus was students' mistakes in pronouncing the /v/ sound, and this method is suitable because it allows for a detailed description of the issue without resorting to inferential statistical analysis.

The research population consisted of twelfth-grade students at SMAN 1 Sindue, totaling 211 students across seven parallel classes. A purposive sampling technique was used, and Class XI F was specifically chosen for the study because all students in this class belong to the Kaili Rai ethnic group. This sample of 36 students was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the phonological interference patterns in this specific group [10].

Data collection was conducted using an oral test divided into three parts: word-list reading, minimal-pair reading, and sentence reading. The pronunciation test consisted of several task types: a word list, minimal pairs, and sentence reading. In total, there were 10 words in the word list, 20 words presented in minimal pairs, and 28 words embedded in sentence-reading tasks that contained the /v/ phoneme. Each occurrence of the target phoneme produced by the students was treated as an individual pronunciation token. In total, 1,548 pronunciation tokens were analyzed in this study.

In the word list reading, students were asked to pronounce words containing the /v/ sound in different positions (initial, medial, and final). The minimal-pairs reading required students to contrast the /v/ sound with similar consonants, such as/f/ and /b/. Finally, in the

sentence reading, students read sentences with words containing the /v/ sound in various contexts. All performances were recorded to ensure accurate data collection, and the recordings were later transcribed and analyzed. All recordings were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to ensure precise phonetic analysis. To enhance transcription reliability, the transcriptions were reviewed and verified through repeated listening to minimize potential errors. The unit of analysis was each phoneme token, and each instance of /v/ production was classified into one of four categories: correct production, substitution, omission, or epenthesis.

For the analysis, the students' pronunciations were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and categorized based on the types of phonological interference. The common types of errors included substitution (e.g., /v/ → /f/), omission (e.g., /v/ → Ø), and addition (e.g., epenthesis, where an extra sound is added).

The data analysis involved calculating the frequency and percentage of each type of error using simple tabulation and Microsoft Excel. This quantitative procedure allowed the researcher to systematically identify dominant interference patterns and compare the distribution of errors across phonological positions. Using frequency and percentage analysis, the study provides an objective, measurable description of phonological interference patterns among Kaili Rai learners.

The formula used for calculating the percentage of each error type was:

$$P = \left(\frac{F}{N}\right) \times 100$$

Where:
P is the percentage of each type of error,
F is the frequency of each error,
N is the total number of responses.

After calculating the percentages, the researcher compared the frequency of each error type to identify the dominant interference pattern among the students. The results were presented in charts and tables to visually illustrate the findings and provide a clear overview of the students' pronunciation difficulties.

The research followed a systematic process to ensure consistency and validity in the findings. Each student was given the same instructions and test materials to maintain fairness, and the data collection procedure was carefully standardized to support the reliability of the results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data from the study, along with an analysis of the findings. The collected data are organized, displayed, and interpreted based on the students' test results to provide a clear understanding of the research outcomes.

3.1. Results

The study investigated pronunciation errors in the voiced labiodental fricative /v/among Kaili Rai students at SMAN 1 Sindue. Data were gathered through an oral pronunciation test administered to 36 students, and their responses were transcribed using

the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The data were analyzed quantitatively to determine the types and frequencies of phonological interference, shedding light on the specific challenges these students face when pronouncing the /v/ sound in English.

Table 1. Distribution of Phonological Interference in Kaili Rai Students' Pronunciation of /v/

Error Type	How Many Times	Percentage %	What is Happening?
Substitution (/v/ → /f/)	1.325	85.5	Replacement of /v/ with voiceless /f/
Devoicing (/v/ → /f/)	132	8.5	Loss of voicing during production
Epenthesis (extra sound)	50	3.2	Insertion of additional sounds
Omission (vanishing /v/)	41	2.6	Deletion of the /v/ sound
Total	1.548	100	Total number of pronunciation errors

Substitution emerged as the most common type of phonological interference in the study. A total of **1.325 instances** of substitution were recorded, making up **approximately 85.5%** of the total pronunciation tokens. In these cases, students replaced the target /v/ sound with the voiceless fricative /f/, which is more familiar to them because it is present in their native language, Kaili Rai. This error suggests that students tend to rely on phonemes they are more comfortable producing, in this case, the voiceless /f/, rather than the voiced /v/. This consistent pattern of substitution indicates that students' difficulties in producing the /v/ sound are primarily driven by the transfer of phonological patterns from their first language to English [11].

The second most frequent error type was **devoicing,** which occurred **132 times**, accounting for **8.5%** of the total pronunciation tokens. Devoicing errors happened when the voiced sound /v/ was pronounced as the voiceless /f/. This error suggests that while students are aware of the /v/ sound, they struggle to produce it with the appropriate voicing. The occurrence of devoicing, though less frequent than substitution, highlights a specific challenge for these students in distinguishing between voiced and voiceless fricatives, a key feature of English phonology that may not be present in the same way in their native language [12].

In addition to substitution and devoicing, **epenthesis** and **omission** errors were also observed, but at much lower frequencies. Epenthesis, which involves the insertion of an additional sound to facilitate pronunciation, occurred 50 times, or 3.2% of the total tokens. This suggests that some students, in an attempt to make the/v/ sound easier to pronounce, inserted an extra vowel or sound, possibly as a strategy to simplify articulation. Omission of the /v/ sound was recorded 41 times, making up 2.6% of the total pronunciation tokens [13]. This error likely reflects cases in which students could not produce the /v/ sound at all and therefore omitted it from their speech, further emphasizing the difficulty of producing this sound.

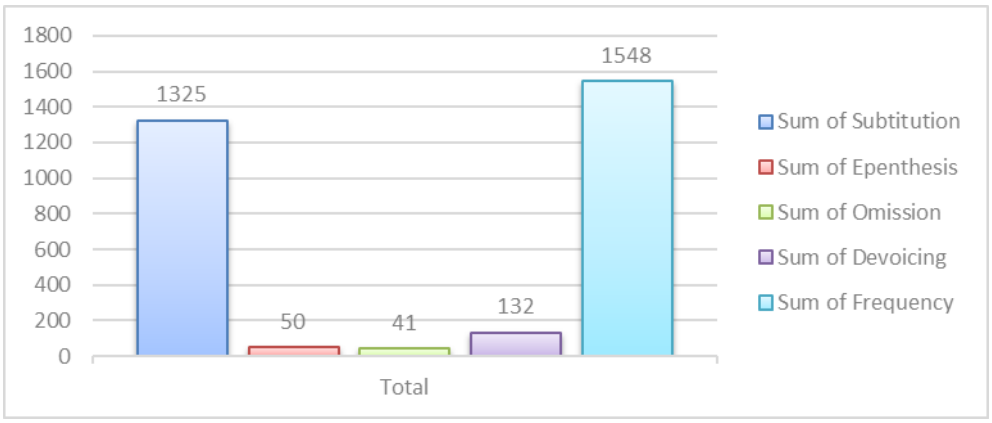

Figure 1: Distribution of Pronunciation Error Types in the production of the English /v/

The overall frequency distribution of these errors indicates a clear dominance of substitution errors, with students primarily replacing the target /v/ sound with the more familiar /f/ [14]. This consistent pattern of substitution suggests that students' native-language phonology plays a significant role in their pronunciation difficulties. Devoicing, while still notable, was less frequent, whereas epenthesis and omission were observed much less often, suggesting a different set of challenges students experience. These findings suggest that Kaili Rai students primarily struggle with accurately producing the /v/ sound, often defaulting to more familiar phonemes from their first language [15]. The results highlight the need for targeted phonological training in the pronunciation of English fricatives, particularly the voiced labiodental /v/ sound, to help students overcome these interference patterns [16].

3.2. Discussion

This study highlights that substitution is the most prevalent type of phonological interference observed in Kaili Rai students' pronunciation of the English voiced labiodental fricative /v/, particularly in the form/v/ → /f/ [17]. This finding strongly suggests that these students experience considerable difficulty in accurately producing the target sound, especially in maintaining the voicing feature, a crucial aspect of this phoneme [18]. The consistent substitution of /v/ with /f/ reflects a deeper issue in phonetic realization, specifically the difficulty in distinguishing between voiced and voiceless sounds in English.

The dominance of substitution errors has significant implications for the intelligibility of students' spoken English [19]. Substitution directly impacts segmental accuracy, the accuracy of individual sounds, and can lead to misunderstandings, especially when /v/ functions as a meaning-distinguishing sound. For example, words like very versus ferry or save versus safe are differentiated solely by the presence of /v/. When students replace /v/ with /f/, listeners are more likely to misinterpret the intended words, potentially leading to communication breakdowns [5]. This miscommunication can lead to confusion or frustration, especially in situations that require precise understanding.

From a phonological perspective, the occurrence of substitution errors is not random but follows a systematic pattern [20]. These students are likely influenced by the phonological rules of their first language, which affect their production of English sounds. According to Campbell [2], second language learners tend to assimilate new sounds to the closest equivalents in their native-language phonological system. In this case, students perceive the English /v/ as similar to the /f/ sound in their first language, leading to consistent substitution rather than accurate production of the target phoneme [21]. This systematic error pattern reinforces the idea that the production of English phonemes is shaped by the students' native phonological system, leading to predictable errors when producing sounds that do not exist in their first language [22]. Unlike many previous studies, which primarily attributed substitution errors to the absence of /v/ in learners' first-language phoneme inventories, this study demonstrates that phonological position also plays a crucial role in shaping interference patterns. The findings show that interference occurs more frequently in word-initial and word-final positions, suggesting that positional vulnerability influences phoneme production accuracy. This indicates that pronunciation difficulty cannot be explained solely by differences in phoneme inventories but must also take phonological distribution into account. Therefore, this study extends existing research by providing a more distribution-sensitive explanation of phonological interference, particularly among learners from regional language backgrounds such as Kaili Rai.

The higher frequency of substitution compared to other errors, such as devoicing, epenthesis, and omission, further suggests that while students are aware of the presence and position of the /v/ sound in English words, they face challenges in accurately producing it, particularly with respect to voicing [23]. Unlike omission, which reflects the complete absence of a sound, substitution indicates that students are attempting to pronounce the target phoneme but substitute it with a more familiar sound, /f/. This points to an issue not with the recognition of the sound but with its accurate articulation, particularly in producing the voiced counterpart [24].

This finding supports Ellis [1] assertion that substitution is the most common form of phonological interference, especially when learners encounter second language sounds that are perceptually similar to sounds in their first language but differ in their articulation. The issue of voicing, in particular, is complex for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Roach [4] notes that voicing requires precise coordination of vocal fold vibration, which can be difficult for learners to control consistently, particularly when they are not accustomed to this feature in their first language. Consequently, students often simplify the production of these sounds by substituting them with voiceless counterparts, such as/f/, which are easier to articulate [25].

Moreover, compared to epenthesis and omission, substitution is cognitively less demanding for learners. Substitution does not require changes to syllable structure or the deletion of phonemes; instead, learners map the unfamiliar sound onto a phoneme that already exists in their first language phonological inventory. This ease of substitution likely explains why it is the dominant strategy for these students, whereas the other types of interference are much less frequent. Epenthesis and omission would require more

substantial adjustments to the word's structure, making them more complex and less common as strategies for dealing with unfamiliar sounds.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the predominance of substitution errors suggests that English pronunciation instruction for these students should specifically focus on developing their phonological awareness, particularly with respect to voicing contrasts [27]. Teachers should explicitly highlight the difference between the voiceless /f/ and the voiced /v/, drawing attention to the voicing feature rather than the place of articulation, since both sounds share the same place of articulation (labiodental). Emphasizing the phonetic distinction in voicing, whether the vocal cords vibrate or not, can help students better distinguish between these two fricatives and improve their pronunciation of /v/.

Following the guidelines of Monika [28], effective pronunciation teaching should combine explicit explanations of phonetic features, perception training, and opportunities for controlled practice [29]. A practical way to help students recognize the voicing difference is to engage them in exercises that focus on vocal fold vibration. For instance, teachers can encourage students to place their fingers on their throat while producing minimal pairs like *fan–van* or fine–vine, so they can feel the difference in voicing. This tactile feedback can help learners internalize the voicing feature, which is often underdeveloped or unstable in their pronunciation [30].

In addition, the systematic nature of the substitution error observed in this study suggests that pronunciation errors are not haphazard but rather predictable and teachable. Recognizing substitution as the dominant error type enables instructors to design targeted, systematic strategies for teaching English pronunciation rather than treating it as an isolated skill [3]. It is crucial for pronunciation instruction to be integrated into vocabulary learning and speaking activities, as pronunciation cannot be fully developed in isolation from these contexts.

This approach aligns with Campbell [2] concept of Focus on Form, which advocates for drawing learners' attention to linguistic features as they naturally arise in communicative contexts. By anticipating substitution errors when introducing new words containing the /v/ sound and providing timely, corrective feedback, teachers can transition from reactive error correction to proactive instructional strategies [31]. This approach will not only help prevent errors from becoming ingrained but will also enhance students' ability to produce more accurate and intelligible English pronunciation in real-life communication. Ultimately, a more focused and targeted teaching approach can lead to more effective pronunciation learning and improved communication skills. These findings also contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of foreign language phonology by demonstrating that phonological interference is not merely a result of phoneme absence but reflects systematic interaction between phoneme inventory and phonological distribution. This suggests that pronunciation instruction should move beyond simple phoneme introduction and incorporate position-sensitive training to improve learners' phonological accuracy. By highlighting the role of positional distribution, this study offers new insights into how regional language background and phonological environment interact in shaping foreign-language pronunciation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that interference in the production of the English voiced labiodental fricative /v/ among Kaili Rai EFL students follows a systematic pattern shaped by phonological position. The analysis reveals that variation in realization is closely related to positional distribution within words, indicating structured interaction between the learners' L1 phonological system and English segmental environments. These findings support the view that pronunciation challenges are influenced not only by differences in segment inventories but also by positional sensitivity within phonological systems.

The implications of this research extend to both theory and practice. In theoretical terms, the study provides empirical support for context-sensitive models of cross-linguistic influence, particularly those that emphasize the interaction between structural representation and phonological distribution [1], [5], [6]. The results strengthen the argument that interference operates as a rule-governed phenomenon rather than as incidental deviation [2]. From a pedagogical standpoint, the study suggests that pronunciation instruction may benefit from greater emphasis on positional training. Rather than introducing segments in isolation, instructional design can prioritize environments with higher articulatory vulnerability, thereby increasing precision and efficiency in classroom practice.

This research is bounded by its concentration on a single consonantal segment and a specific regional learner group. The participant sample is limited to Kaili Rai students, and the scope does not include comparative analysis with other L1 backgrounds or additional marked consonants. These boundaries limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized across broader EFL populations.

Future investigations may expand the scope by examining other marked segments, incorporating larger and more diverse participant groups, or conducting cross-regional comparisons to identify broader distributional tendencies. Experimental designs integrating acoustic analysis or perception data may also deepen understanding of how positional constraints shape bilingual phonological systems. For the wider public, particularly educators and curriculum designers, this research contributes insight into how structured pronunciation patterns emerge in multilingual contexts. Such understanding may inform more focused instructional strategies, ultimately supporting clearer communication and improved L2 speech intelligibility in educational settings.

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