

## **INVESTIGATING EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN PRODUCING ENGLISH INTERDENTAL FRICATIVES (/θ/ AND /ð/): A DESCRIPTIVE QUANTITATIVE STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the pronunciation difficulties experienced by third-semester EFL students at Tadulako University in producing the English interdental fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/. The objectives of this study are to identify the most difficult fricative sounds and to determine the factors influencing these difficulties. This study employed a descriptive quantitative design involving 16 students of the English Education Study Program. The data were collected through a pronunciation test and a questionnaire. The pronunciation test required students to read 20 words containing /θ/ and /ð/, and the results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The questionnaire data were analyzed using mean scores and percentage distribution. The findings reveal that /θ/ was the most problematic sound, frequently substituted with /t/, while /ð/ was less problematic and occasionally replaced with /d/. The results also show that 9 students achieved excellent scores, while others showed varying levels of difficulty. In terms of influencing factors, mother tongue influence and psychological factors were identified as the most dominant, each contributing 21.3% to pronunciation difficulties. These findings indicate that first language interference and learners' anxiety play significant roles in students' pronunciation performance.

Keywords: EFL Students, Interdental Fricatives, Mother Tongue Influence, Pronunciation Difficulties, Psychological Factors

### **INTRODUCTION**

Pronunciation plays a fundamental role in second and foreign language learning, as it directly influences how effectively meaning is conveyed in oral communication. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, pronunciation extends beyond the accurate production of individual sounds to encompass intelligibility, comprehensibility, and communicative effectiveness (Derwing & Munro, 2017; Jenkins, 2000). Learners who demonstrate adequate control of grammar and vocabulary may still experience communication breakdowns if their pronunciation lacks clarity. For this reason, pronunciation is widely recognized as a central component of speaking proficiency and a key determinant of successful interaction in both academic and real-life contexts (Hong & Ha, 2022). Furthermore, pronunciation is closely linked to learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, making it both a linguistic and affective dimension of language learning. Recent studies have also emphasized that

effective pronunciation instruction, including the integration of technology and innovative pedagogical approaches, can significantly enhance learners' communicative competence (Ping & Tao, 2024; Thomson & Derwing, 2015).

Despite its importance, pronunciation remains one of the most persistent challenges faced by EFL learners. A major source of difficulty lies in the differences between the phonological systems of learners' first language (L1) and the target language (L2). When learners encounter unfamiliar phonemes, they tend to rely on their existing phonological knowledge, often substituting L2 sounds with the closest equivalents in their L1. This process, commonly referred to as interlingual interference, results in systematic pronunciation errors that may hinder intelligibility. In the Indonesian context, such difficulties are particularly evident due to substantial differences between Indonesian phonology and English sound systems. Indonesian learners frequently struggle with segmental features, including consonants and vowels that do not exist in their native language, leading to recurring mispronunciations (Firdaus, 2021). Similar findings have been reported by Kafryawan and Zulihi (2023), who highlight that L1 interference and limited phonological awareness are key contributors to pronunciation errors among Indonesian EFL learners. These findings highlight the need to examine pronunciation challenges not only as isolated errors but as systematic patterns shaped by learners' linguistic backgrounds.

Among the various pronunciation challenges, English fricative consonants—particularly interdental sounds /θ/ and /ð/—have consistently been identified as problematic for EFL learners. These sounds require precise articulatory movements involving the placement of the tongue between the teeth, a feature that is absent in many languages, including Indonesian. As a result, learners often substitute /θ/ with /t/ and /ð/ with /d/, reflecting the influence of their L1 phonological system (Firdaus, 2021). Empirical studies on Indonesian EFL learners further confirm that fricative consonants are among the most difficult sounds to acquire due to limited exposure to authentic pronunciation models, insufficient phonetic training, and a lack of articulatory awareness (Sabbu et al., 2025; Saito, 2012). In addition, recent studies have also demonstrated that learners' difficulties in producing fricatives are influenced by both phonological complexity and instructional limitations (Yulianti et al., 2025). Research in other EFL contexts has similarly shown that pronunciation errors in these sounds are not merely individual mistakes but reflect broader patterns of phonological adaptation and transfer.

Beyond linguistic factors, pronunciation difficulties are also shaped by psychological and contextual influences. Affective variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation play a crucial role in learners' pronunciation performance. Learners who experience high levels of anxiety may avoid speaking or produce speech with hesitation, which in turn affects their pronunciation accuracy. Pronunciation-related anxiety, including concerns about making mistakes or being judged by peers, has been identified as a significant factor influencing learners' engagement and performance in oral communication (Lacabex & Roothoof, 2023; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In addition, environmental factors such as limited opportunities for practice, lack of exposure to authentic English input, and insufficient instructional support further contribute to persistent pronunciation difficulties

(Karmida et al., 2024). Supporting this view, Ristati et al. (2024) argue that classroom environment and teaching practices play a critical role in shaping learners' pronunciation development, particularly in EFL contexts with limited exposure to English.

Although a growing body of research has examined pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners, much of the existing literature tends to focus on general pronunciation problems or broad phonological features. Relatively few studies have provided a detailed analysis of learners' difficulties in producing specific problematic sounds, particularly interdental fricatives, within localized educational contexts (Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021). Moreover, previous research has often treated linguistic and psychological factors separately, with limited attention to how these factors interact to shape learners' pronunciation performance. While some studies emphasize phonological constraints and L1 interference (Angkarini, 2023), others highlight affective dimensions such as pronunciation anxiety (Erdel, 2023), yet an integrated perspective remains underexplored. This indicates a gap in the literature that calls for a more comprehensive, context-sensitive, and multidimensional investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the pronunciation difficulties experienced by third-semester EFL students in producing the English interdental fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/, as well as to identify the linguistic and psychological factors influencing these difficulties. By focusing on a specific group of learners within a particular institutional context, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of pronunciation challenges in EFL settings. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective, context-sensitive pronunciation teaching strategies and to enrich the existing body of research on EFL pronunciation by offering insights into the interplay between phonological and affective dimensions of language learning.

## METHODS

### *Research Design*

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate students' pronunciation difficulties and the factors influencing those difficulties. A descriptive quantitative approach is appropriate for identifying patterns, measuring frequencies, and describing phenomena as they naturally occur without manipulation of variables. This design enables researchers to systematically analyze learners' performance and perceptions using numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of pronunciation research, descriptive quantitative methods are commonly used to examine error patterns and learner responses in a structured and measurable way, particularly when supported by test scores and questionnaire data (Wulandari et al., 2022).

### *Participants*

The participants of this study consisted of 16 third-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which allows researchers to intentionally select individuals based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. In this study, the criteria included students who had taken pronunciation-related courses and were expected to have

basic knowledge of English phonetics. Purposive sampling is widely used in educational research to ensure that participants are information-rich and relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020).

### ***Instruments***

#### ***Pronunciation Test***

The primary instrument used in this study was a pronunciation test, which required students to read a list of 20 English words containing the interdental fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/. The test was designed to identify students' ability to accurately produce these target sounds. Pronunciation tests are widely used in EFL research to assess learners' segmental accuracy and identify common error patterns in speech production (Rahman & Hasan, 2020). The students' pronunciations were recorded and evaluated based on accuracy, with particular attention to substitution errors such as /θ/ → /t/ and /ð/ → /d/.

#### ***Questionnaire***

A Likert-scale questionnaire was used to examine the factors influencing students' pronunciation difficulties, including linguistic and psychological aspects. The questionnaire consisted of several statements related to mother tongue influence, exposure to English, practice opportunities, and anxiety. Likert-scale instruments are widely used in educational research to measure attitudes, perceptions, and learner experiences in a structured and quantifiable manner (Joshi et al., 2015; Koo & Yang, 2025).

In addition, items related to anxiety were conceptually informed by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which has been extensively used to measure learners' anxiety in language learning contexts.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

Data collection was conducted in two stages. First, the pronunciation test was administered to the participants. Each student was asked to read aloud the prepared list of words, and their pronunciations were recorded for further analysis. Second, the questionnaire was distributed to the same participants to gather data on the factors influencing their pronunciation difficulties. The combination of test and questionnaire data allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of both performance and underlying factors.

### ***Data Analysis***

#### ***Pronunciation Test Analysis***

The pronunciation data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages. Each student's pronunciation was categorized as correct or incorrect based on standard English pronunciation. Common error patterns, particularly substitutions of /θ/ and /ð/, were identified and quantified. Descriptive statistical analysis is suitable for summarizing learners' performance and identifying dominant error trends in pronunciation studies (Wulandari et al., 2022).

### Questionnaire Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using mean scores and percentage distribution. Each response on the Likert scale was assigned a numerical value, and the mean scores were calculated to determine the degree of agreement for each factor. This method allows researchers to interpret learners' perceptions and identify the most influential factors contributing to pronunciation difficulties. Likert-scale data analysis through mean and percentage is commonly applied in educational research to provide clear and interpretable results (Joshi et al., 2015).

### Validity and Reliability

To ensure the quality of the instruments, both content validity and reliability were considered. The pronunciation test items were selected based on commonly reported problematic sounds (/θ/ and /ð/) in EFL contexts, ensuring their relevance to the research objectives. The questionnaire items were adapted from established constructs in pronunciation and language anxiety research, particularly those related to FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986), to ensure conceptual validity.

Reliability was addressed by maintaining consistency in test administration and scoring procedures. All participants were assessed using the same word list and evaluation criteria, ensuring uniformity in data collection.

## RESULTS

### Pronunciation of Interdental Fricatives

To examine students' ability in producing the interdental fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/, a pronunciation test consisting of 20 words was administered. The students' performances were evaluated based on pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility using a five-point rating scale.

Table 1. The results of the pronunciation test

| No. | Student Name | Correct Pronunciation  | Incorrect Pronunciation   |
|-----|--------------|--|---|
| 1   | S1           | Correct /ð/: this, that, these, those, they, mother, brother, father, together, weather                                  | Substituted /θ/ → /t/ in think, thank, three, thin, thumb, bath, mouth, teeth, north, faith |
| 2   | S2           | Correct /θ/: bath, mouth, teeth, north, faith; Correct /ð/: this, that, they, mother, brother, father, together, weather | Substituted /θ/ → /t/ in think, thank, three, thin, thumb; /ð/ → /d/ in these, those        |
| 3   | S3           | Correct: they, mother, brother, father, weather  | Substituted /θ/ → /t/; /ð/ → /d/; incorrect pronunciation of together                       |
| 4   | S4           | Correct /θ/ and /ð/ in most target words   | Substituted /θ/ → /t/ in think, thank, thin, thumb  |
| 5   | S5           | Same pattern as S3   | Same pattern as S3  |

|    |     |   |                                      |
|----|-----|---|--------------------------------------|
| 6  | S6  | Same pattern as S4                          | Same pattern as S4                   |
| 7  | S7  | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 8  | S8  | All /θ/ correct; /ð/ mostly correct         | Substituted /ð/ → /d/ in some words  |
| 9  | S9  | Similar to S4 with additional correct items | Similar to S4 with additional errors |
| 10 | S10 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 11 | S11 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 12 | S12 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 13 | S13 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 14 | S14 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 15 | S15 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |
| 16 | S16 | All target words pronounced correctly       | None                                 |

The pronunciation test results were further quantified by calculating the number of correctly pronounced words produced by each student. Each correct pronunciation was assigned one point, with a maximum score of 20. The scores were then converted into categories based on a five-point rating scale, as presented in Table 2.

*Table 2. Students' pronunciation scores and categories*

| No. | Student Name | Student Name | Category  |
|-----|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 1   | S1           | 3            | Fair      |
| 2   | S2           | 3            | Fair      |
| 3   | S3           | 2            | Poor      |
| 4   | S4           | 4            | Good      |
| 5   | S5           | 2            | Poor      |
| 6   | S6           | 4            | Good      |
| 7   | S7           | 5            | Very Good |
| 8   | S8           | 4            | Good      |
| 9   | S9           | 3            | Fair      |
| 10  | S10          | 5            | Very Good |
| 11  | S11          | 5            | Very Good |
| 12  | S12          | 5            | Very Good |
| 13  | S13          | 5            | Very Good |
| 14  | S14          | 5            | Very Good |
| 15  | S15          | 5            | Very Good |
| 16  | S16          | 5            | Very Good |

The results indicate that students demonstrated varying levels of pronunciation ability, ranging from poor to very good performance. While a considerable number of students were able to pronounce most of the target words correctly, several students still showed significant difficulties, particularly in producing unfamiliar English sounds. A key finding of this study is that the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ was the most problematic sound. This is evidenced by the high frequency of substitution errors, where /θ/ was consistently replaced with /t/ across different word positions, such as think → tink and bath → bat. This pattern suggests that students tend to rely on the closest equivalent sound in their first language when encountering unfamiliar phonemes, which reflects first language interference in pronunciation (Jahara et al., 2021).

In contrast, the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ was less problematic, as most students were able to produce this sound correctly in common words such as this, that, and they. Errors involving /ð/ were relatively limited and mainly occurred in less familiar words such as these and those, where /ð/ was occasionally substituted with /d/. The lower frequency of errors indicates that /ð/ is comparatively easier for students than /θ/. One possible explanation is that /θ/ requires more precise articulatory control and is less familiar in the students' phonological system. Overall, these findings demonstrate that although some students have achieved a high level of pronunciation accuracy, a noticeable gap still exists among learners, indicating that pronunciation competence is not evenly developed at the same academic level.

### ***Factors Influencing Pronunciation Difficulties***

To identify the factors influencing students' pronunciation difficulties, a questionnaire consisting of 20 items was administered and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentage distribution. The result of the normality test showed that the data were normally distributed (Sig. = 0.689 > 0.05), indicating that the data were suitable for further analysis.

*Table 3. Descriptive statistics of factors influencing pronunciation difficulties*

| No                             | Statement item  | N  | Min | Max | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------------------|---|----|-----|-----|------|----------------|
| <b>Mother Tongue Influence</b> |   |    |     |     |      |                |
| 1                              | I often replace English sounds such as /θ/ or /ð/ with sounds from my mother tongue.            | 24 | 1   | 4   | 2.58 | 0.65           |
| 2                              | Sounds that do not exist in my native language are very difficult for me to pronounce.          | 24 | 1   | 4   | 2.83 | 0.71           |
| 3                              | The sound system in my first language strongly influences the way I pronounce words in English. | 24 | 1   | 4   | 2.79 | 0.78           |
| 4                              | I find it difficult to distinguish English sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/.                          | 24 | 1   | 4   | 2.87 | 0.80           |

| Accent and Local Dialect Influence |   |    |   |   |      |      |
|------------------------------------|---|----|---|---|------|------|
| 5                                  | My regional dialect influences the way I place stress in English words.                                     | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.58 | 0.88 |
| 6                                  | When speaking English, I tend to use the intonation pattern of my regional dialect.                         | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.42 | 0.93 |
| 7                                  | I find it difficult to modify my accent to sound more like a native English speaker.                        | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.62 | 0.88 |
| 8                                  | Listeners often notice that I still use my native language accent when speaking English.                    | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.21 | 0.93 |
| Limited Practice and Exposure      |   |    |   |   |      |      |
| 9                                  | I rarely have the opportunity to listen to native speakers of English.                                      | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.67 | 0.87 |
| 10                                 | I rarely practice English pronunciation outside the classroom.  | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.38 | 1.01 |
| 11                                 | I am aware that shadowing can help improve pronunciation, but I rarely practice it.                         | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.58 | 0.78 |
| 12                                 | I rarely use media such as films, podcasts, or songs to improve my pronunciation.                           | 24 | 1 | 4 | 1.92 | 0.88 |
| Orthography-Pronunciation Mismatch |   |    |   |   |      |      |
| 13                                 | I often mispronounce words because I rely more on their spelling than their sounds.                         | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.54 | 0.72 |
| 14                                 | I feel confused because some English words are spelled the same but pronounced differently.                 | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.79 | 0.83 |
| 15                                 | I usually determine how to pronounce a word based on its written form.                                      | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.50 | 0.83 |
| 16                                 | The irregular spelling of words such as though, through and rough makes them difficult for me to pronounce. | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.67 | 1.01 |
| Psychological Factors              |   |    |   |   |      |      |
| 17                                 | I feel nervous or anxious when I am asked to speak English in front of the class.                           | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.92 | 0.78 |
| 18                                 | I feel less confident when comparing my pronunciation with my classmates.                                   | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.88 | 0.80 |
| 19                                 | I tend to avoid speaking English because I am afraid of making pronunciation errors.                        | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.38 | 0.92 |
| 20                                 | I feel embarrassed when other people cannot understand the way I pronounce words.                           | 24 | 1 | 4 | 2.92 | 0.88 |

The mean scores obtained from each factor were then converted into percentage values to determine the relative contribution of each factor to students' pronunciation difficulties. The percentage distribution of these factors is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Influencing Factors

| Factor                             | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------|----------------|
| Mother Tongue Influence            | 21.3           |
| Accent & Local Dialect             | 18.9           |
| Limited Practice & Exposure        | 18.3           |
| Orthography–Pronunciation Mismatch | 20.2           |
| Psychological Factors              | 21.3           |

The percentage distribution of the influencing factors is further illustrated in the pie chart below to provide a clearer visual representation of their relative contributions.

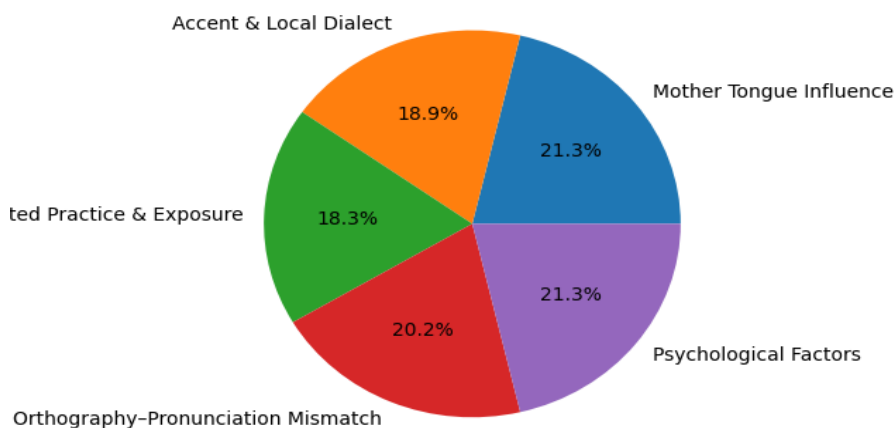


Figure X. Distribution of factors affecting pronunciation difficulties

The results of the normality test using the Shapiro–Wilk formula showed that the significance value (Sig. = 0.689) was higher than 0.05, indicating that the data were normally distributed. This confirms that the data were appropriate for further statistical analysis. The descriptive analysis revealed that all five factors contributed to students' pronunciation difficulties, but with varying levels of influence. Among these, mother tongue influence and psychological factors emerged as the most dominant, each contributing 21.3% to the overall difficulties.

The dominance of mother tongue influence indicates that students' first language plays a crucial role in shaping their pronunciation patterns. This finding is consistent with the results of the pronunciation test, where many students substituted /θ/ and /ð/ with /t/ and /d/, reflecting the absence of these sounds in their native language system (Khoshmuratovna, 2023). In addition, psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes also showed a strong influence, suggesting that

emotional factors significantly affect students' pronunciation performance. This indicates that pronunciation difficulties are not only linguistic but also affective in nature.

Other factors, including orthography–pronunciation mismatch, showed a relatively high contribution, indicating that students often rely on spelling when pronouncing English words, which may lead to errors due to inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation. Meanwhile, accent and local dialect as well as limited practice and exposure demonstrated moderate levels of influence. Although these factors contribute to pronunciation difficulties, their impact is less significant compared to mother tongue interference and psychological factors. Overall, these findings suggest that pronunciation difficulties arise from a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors, with first language interference as the most dominant influence.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that third-semester EFL students experience significant difficulties in producing the English interdental fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/, with /θ/ emerging as the most problematic sound. This result strongly corroborates previous empirical findings on English fricatives among Indonesian learners. For instance, Angkarini (2023) reported that /θ/ accounted for 93.9% of pronunciation difficulties, followed by /ð/ at 60.6%, indicating that interdental fricatives consistently pose major challenges for learners. The similarity between these findings and the present study suggests that the difficulty is not incidental but represents a systematic phonological issue in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings can be explained through the concept of interlingual interference and phonological transfer, where learners rely on their first language (L1) system when encountering unfamiliar sounds. As highlighted by Aulia et al. (2025), pronunciation errors frequently arise due to L1 interference, articulatory unfamiliarity, and limited phonological awareness, leading learners to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with native equivalents. In the case of Indonesian learners, the absence of /θ/ and /ð/ in the native phonological system results in substitutions such as /t/ and /d/, as observed in this study. This aligns with phonetic theory, which emphasizes that speech production is constrained by previously established articulatory habits and motor patterns (Azizah & Musthofa, 2024).

Furthermore, the findings can also be interpreted through the lens of articulatory phonetics, which explains that the production of sounds depends on the coordination of speech organs such as the tongue, teeth, and airflow. Interdental fricatives require specific articulatory positioning—placing the tongue between the teeth—which is unfamiliar to Indonesian learners. Without explicit instruction and practice, learners are unlikely to develop accurate articulatory control. As emphasized by Azizah and Musthafa (2024), learners' pronunciation is shaped by their ability to manipulate articulatory organs, and insufficient phonetic training leads to persistent inaccuracies. This explains why students in this study exhibited consistent substitution errors rather than gradual improvement.

In addition to linguistic factors, the findings also highlight the critical role of instructional exposure and learning environment. The limited opportunities for authentic pronunciation practice reported by participants align with broader EFL research indicating that classroom-based instruction often prioritizes grammar and vocabulary over pronunciation. Bozavlı (2021) found that students in distance or limited instructional environments tend to experience low motivation and insufficient engagement, which negatively affects language learning outcomes, including pronunciation. Similarly, Suseno (2023) emphasized that pronunciation requires continuous practice and guided instruction, as incorrect pronunciation can lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. These findings support the argument that pronunciation difficulties are not solely due to linguistic factors but are also shaped by pedagogical limitations.

Another important dimension revealed in this study is the influence of psychological factors, particularly pronunciation anxiety. The questionnaire results indicate that students experience fear of making mistakes and concern about negative evaluation, which affects their willingness to practice speaking. This finding is strongly supported by Erdel (2023), who conceptualizes pronunciation anxiety as a multidimensional construct involving self-perception, fear of evaluation, and beliefs about pronunciation learning. According to this framework, learners who perceive their pronunciation as inadequate are more likely to avoid speaking situations, thereby reducing opportunities for improvement. Moreover, anxiety has been shown to impair oral performance by affecting cognitive processing and motor coordination during speech production, further reinforcing incorrect pronunciation patterns.

Importantly, the present study demonstrates that pronunciation difficulties should be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon, resulting from the interaction of linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological factors. While L1 interference provides the structural basis for pronunciation errors, limited exposure and insufficient instructional support hinder the development of accurate phonological representations. At the same time, anxiety and low confidence reduce learners' willingness to engage in pronunciation practice, creating a cyclical effect in which errors persist over time. This finding is consistent with Afifah and Devana (2020), who emphasize that pronunciation challenges are influenced not only by phonological differences but also by learners' affective conditions and learning environments. In addition, Lei and Trung (2024) highlight that learners' perceptions, attitudes, and learning experiences play a crucial role in shaping pronunciation development, particularly in structured educational settings. This integrated perspective extends previous research by showing that addressing pronunciation difficulties requires more than phonetic instruction alone; it necessitates a holistic approach that considers both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings carry several important implications. First, there is a clear need for explicit instruction in articulatory phonetics, particularly for sounds that do not exist in learners' L1. Teachers should provide detailed explanations and

demonstrations of tongue placement and airflow, supported by visual aids and modeling. Second, increasing learners' exposure to authentic English input through multimedia tools and pronunciation applications can help improve their phonological awareness. As noted by Suseno (2023), the use of pronunciation applications can enhance students' speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills while increasing motivation. Third, addressing psychological barriers is essential; creating a supportive classroom environment that reduces anxiety and encourages experimentation can significantly improve learners' pronunciation development.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, and the use of a controlled reading task may not fully reflect learners' spontaneous speech performance. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods or longitudinal approach to explore how pronunciation develops over time and how different instructional interventions affect learners' performance. Additionally, further studies could investigate the role of technology-enhanced learning in reducing pronunciation anxiety and improving articulatory accuracy.

In conclusion, this study confirms that the pronunciation of English interdental fricatives remains a persistent challenge for EFL learners, particularly in Indonesian contexts. The findings underscore that pronunciation difficulties are not merely phonetic issues but are shaped by a complex interplay of phonological constraints, instructional practices, and affective factors. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated pedagogical approach that combines explicit phonetic instruction, increased exposure, and psychological support to foster both accuracy and confidence in learners' spoken English.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the fricative sounds that are difficult for third-semester EFL students at Tadulako University and to examine the factors influencing these pronunciation difficulties. The results of the pronunciation test revealed that students experienced greater difficulty in producing the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ compared to the voiced interdental fricative /ð/. Many students substituted /θ/ with /t/, particularly in words such as *think*, *three*, and *thank*, as well as in final-position words like *bath* and *teeth*. Meanwhile, errors in producing /ð/ occurred less frequently and were generally substituted with /d/. These findings indicate that unfamiliar English sounds, especially those absent in the Indonesian phonological system, pose significant challenges for EFL learners.

The questionnaire results showed that several factors contributed to students' pronunciation difficulties. Among the five factors examined, mother tongue influence was identified as the most dominant factor, indicating that students tend to rely on their native language phonological patterns when pronouncing English words. Psychological factors such as nervousness and lack of confidence also significantly affected students' pronunciation performance, while accent and local dialect, limited practice and exposure to English, and orthography-pronunciation mismatch showed moderate influence.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of pronunciation difficulties by demonstrating that learners' problems are influenced not only by phonological differences but also by psychological factors. This finding highlights the importance of viewing pronunciation learning as a combination of linguistic and affective processes. In addition, this study provides practical implications for English language teaching, particularly in emphasizing the need for targeted pronunciation instruction and supportive learning environments to improve students' confidence and speaking performance.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that English lecturers provide more focused pronunciation instruction, especially on problematic sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, by using effective strategies such as pronunciation drills, listening activities, and audiovisual media. Creating a supportive learning environment is also essential to reduce students' anxiety and enhance their confidence. Furthermore, students are encouraged to practice pronunciation regularly outside the classroom through exposure to authentic English materials. Future research is suggested to involve larger samples and explore other aspects of pronunciation as well as more effective instructional strategies.

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