

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Research Background

Language proficiency is a foundational pillar of academic success, shaping cognitive development and educational achievement. At the core of this proficiency, especially in oral communication, lies pronunciation—the act of producing the sounds of a language with clarity and accuracy. Effective pronunciation facilitates intelligibility and is essential for meaningful academic discourse and knowledge exchange.

Delving deeper, the building block of pronunciation is the phoneme. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a language that can distinguish one word from another (e.g., /p/ versus /b/ in "pat" and "bat"). Mastery of a language's phonemic is crucial for learners, as it directly impacts both their spoken production and their auditory comprehension.

This study focuses specifically on phonemic awareness—the ability to recognize, isolate, and manipulate these individual phonemes within spoken words. It is the conscious understanding that words are composed of sequences of discrete sounds. As Yopp and Yopp (2009) note, it involves focusing on the sound structure of language, momentarily apart from its meaning.

This awareness is not an innate skill but a learned sensitivity that is pivotal for language acquisition, serving as a critical bridge between oral language and literacy. For college students, particularly in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, robust phonemic awareness is a key determinant of oral fluency and listening comprehension.

Within this framework, this research investigates the specific phonemic awareness competencies of 5<sup>th</sup> Semester UIN Antasari English Department students who were undertaking teaching practicum. The inquiry aligns with the Quranic principle from Surat Al-Mujadila (58:11), which emphasizes the elevation of those who possess knowledge. In this context, the pursuit of linguistic precision—the deep, analytical understanding of language sound structure—constitutes a form of knowledge that enhances communicative competence. Therefore, this research not only addresses a specific gap in applied linguistics but also resonates with the broader value placed on articulate communication and the progressive ascent of the learned, as supported by this Islamic teaching.

Surat Al-Mujadila (58:11) in Islam mentions the importance of effective communication:

يَأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا فِي الْمَجَالِسِ فَاقْسِحُوا يَنْسَحِ  
الَّهُ لَكُمْ وَإِذَا قِيلَ أَنْشُرُوا فَانْشُرُوا يَرْفَعَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ  
أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ١١

Based on Surah Al-Mujadila (58:11), this passage explains that Muslims are instructed to make space for others when asked and to respectfully comply with directives, such as from a leader like the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This fosters an atmosphere of brotherhood, mutual aid, and order within gatherings. The core lesson is that Allah elevates in degrees those who believe and possess beneficial knowledge, particularly when that knowledge is applied in obedience to God and in service of creating a peaceful, supportive community. Ultimately, every action is known to Allah, who justly rewards good deeds and disciplines wrongdoing. This principle of using knowledge for communal good and ethical communication aligns with the foundational values supporting your study on phonemic awareness and oral proficiency.

The elevation of believers and those with knowledge is emphasized in Surah Al-Mujadila (58:11), which emphasizes their progressive ascent in stages. The core of my research, "Exploring English Phonemic Awareness Among Indonesian College Students: A Case Study of Oral Language Proficiency," is in line with this Quranic advice. In the same

way as the verse emphasizes the rise of the knowledgeable, my research explores the phonemic awareness levels of Indonesian college students. A significant link is made between the topic of my research and the Quranic guideline because the Quranic principle supports the larger issue of knowledge and proficiency, highlighting the value of language competency and successful student communication.

The capacity is the endeavor to focus on spoken language sounds while momentarily losing track of its meaning (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Thus, the capacity to focus on the phonemic structure of language rather than its content is known as phonemic awareness.

Phonologists focus on studying the acoustic patterns of a language, along with the knowledge and skills required by speakers, listeners, and young learners to attain proficiency in that language, as outlined by McMahon (2002). Trehearne (2003) defines phonemic awareness as "an understanding of the sound structure of language, recognizing that language comprises words, syllables, rhymes, and sounds (phonemes) within those words." In accordance with these perspectives, phonemic awareness involves the capacity to engage thoughtfully with language, encompassing both the speaker's articulation of a sound and the listener's comprehension of its meaning.

The ability to compare and manipulate speech units within words and syllables serves as an indicator of phonemic awareness, which involves comprehending the fundamental sound units, as explained by Shah (2002). Phonemic awareness is not merely recognizing the sounds

but also utilizing these units for mental computations. In the view of Denton, Hasbrouck, Weaver, and Riccio (2000), phonemic awareness entails recognizing words independently of their associated meanings, distinguishing it from reading or phonics. Scholars note that children's increasing awareness of the sublexical, segmental structure within the phonemic aspect of language, encompassing both larger and smaller units, is encompassed by the term phonemic awareness, as stated by Justice, Bowles, and Skibbe (2006). Geudens (2006) adopts the term "sensitivity" as a broader expression for the term "phonemic awareness," using it as an overarching concept.

## **B. Definition of Key Terms**

- 1. English Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. In this research, it refers to the central focus of investigating the ability of 5<sup>th</sup> semester UIN Antasari English Department students to recognize and understand English phonemes as a foundation for effective pronunciation and listening instruction.
- 2. College Students:** Students enrolled in tertiary education in Indonesia, representing diverse academic disciplines and linguistic backgrounds, with a specific focus on their awareness of English phonemes. In this research, it specifically refers to the 5<sup>th</sup> semester UIN Antasari Banjarmasin college students enrolled in English Education Department, who is currently attending teaching

practicum, whose linguistic background and academic disciplines influence their English language learning experiences.

3. **Pronunciation Skills:** In this study, pronunciation skills refers specifically to students' ability to use their phonemic awareness when explaining sounds, guiding learners through pronunciation difficulties, and supporting listening accuracy in the classroom.
4. **Exploring:** Qualitative investigation emphasizing a comprehensive examination of English phonemic awareness among Indonesian college students. In this research, it signifies the methodological approach of conducting an in-depth exploration to understand the complexities of English phonemic awareness among Indonesian college students.
5. **Narrative Inquiry:** In-depth examination of the experiences of Indonesian college students regarding English phonemic awareness, allowing for detailed exploration of individual perspectives and contextual factors. In this research, it outlines the methodology employed to examine individual experiences and contextual factors shaping English phonemic awareness and oral language proficiency among Indonesian college students.

### C. Research Questions

1. How do English Education Department students show awareness of English phoneme structures in pronunciation and listening context?
2. What types of English phoneme-related difficulties do students recognize in their pronunciation and listening experiences?

## **D. Research Objectives**

1. To examine how English Education Department students show awareness of English phoneme structures in their explanations of pronunciation and listening.
2. To analyze English Education Department students' perceptions of how their phonemic awareness supports their readiness to teach English pronunciation and listening.

## **E. Research Significance**

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of language development and teacher education by examining the levels of phonemic awareness among English Education Department students. The study refines existing theories on phonemic processing and its relationship to language skills by highlighting how the ability to understand and produce individual English sounds underpins both pronunciation and listening comprehension. In doing so, it extends current perspectives on phonemic awareness beyond learner language proficiency to include the preparation of future teachers, demonstrating how phonemic competence forms a foundation for pedagogical readiness in pronunciation and listening instruction.

On a practical level, the findings of this research hold significant implications for educational practices in Indonesia. Understanding the levels of phonemic awareness among college students can inform curriculum development and instructional strategies, facilitating the

enhancement of language proficiency. Educators and policymakers can use these insights to tailor interventions that address specific challenges in phonemic awareness, ultimately improving students' overall communication skills. Additionally, the study may offer practical recommendations for language instructors, contributing to more effective teaching methods and interventions in the context of Indonesian higher education.