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Phonological Interference in the Pronunciation of the Latin Script and Dictation Performance among BIPA Learners with Non-Latin Script Backgrounds (Thailand–Cambodia)

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the forms and causal factors of phonological interference in the pronunciation of the Latin alphabet and to examine their impact on the dictation performance of Indonesian as a Foreign Language (BIPA) learners from non-Latin script backgrounds. The data consist of pronunciation errors and dictation writing errors, specifically problematic phonemic and vowel contrasts. The results show phonological interference in the form of voiced–voiceless consonant substitutions (b–p, g–k, t–d, s–z), affricate confusion (c–j), liquid consonant interchange (r–l), reduction of mid–high vowel contrasts (e–i), and reduction of back vowel contrasts (o–u). This interference is apparent simultaneously in spoken production and in the written form of dictation, indicating a disruption in phonemic perception rather than merely in articulation. The primary causes of this interference lie in the differences between the phonological systems of the learners' native languages (Thai and Khmer) and Indonesian; the differences in script systems (non-Latin versus Latin); and the phonological transfer from English as an intermediary language and source of Latin letter pronunciation patterns. The proposed pedagogical implication is the need to reinforce the stage of script familiarization as a process of phonological reconstruction through minimal pair exercises, phonemic perception training, articulatory exercises, and the regular use of diagnostic dictation exercises.

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1. INTRODUCTION

SMP Ar Risalah Padang, an Islamic junior high school in Padang, enrolls foreign students from ASEAN countries and independently administers its Indonesian as a Foreign Language program (BIPA). This article draws on the 2025 BIPA teaching experience involving eight foreign learners who participated in an intensive program comprising 30 instructional sessions. The instructional context is distinctive: the learners originate from countries that employ non-Latin scripts—namely Thailand and Cambodia—whereas Indonesian uses the Latin alphabet. Consequently, the learners are required not only to acquire a new language but also to reconstruct the correspondence between sounds and graphemes. The challenge is compounded by their prior exposure to the Latin alphabet through English, such that relatively stabilized English letter–sound correspondences tend to be transferred into their Indonesian learning process.

The initial stage of instruction focused on introducing the Latin alphabet and establishing pronunciation in accordance with the Indonesian phonological system. Particular emphasis was placed on distinguishing Indonesian vowel phonemes /a, i, u, e, o/ from the English vowel letter names (ei, ai, yu, i, ou). If this stage is neglected, subsequent pronunciation and spelling errors are likely to emerge.

In practice, a range of phonemic issues was identified, broadly situated within the domain of phonological interference. Learners frequently exhibited difficulty differentiating sounds they perceived as "similar," including b–p, g–k, e–i, o–u, c–j, t–d, r–l, and s–z. This confusion became especially evident during dictation tasks: for instance, ibu was written as ibu or ipu, beli as peli, and so forth.

Phonology examines speech sounds as abstract units (phonemes) that function to distinguish meaning. In Indonesian, the contrast between /b/ and /p/ signals differences in lexical meaning, as do the contrasts /e/–/i/ and /o/–/u/. A sound qualifies as a phoneme if substituting it results in a change of meaning. As argued by Abdul Chaer (2012:125), a phoneme is the smallest functional sound unit capable of differentiating meaning. The standard diagnostic for phonemic status is the minimal pair. For example, the contrast between /b/ and /p/ in baru and paru demonstrates distinct meanings; hence, the two sounds constitute separate phonemes.

With respect to vowels, the Indonesian vowel system is relatively simple compared to many other languages, yet contrastive in nature. The vowels /a, i, u, e, o/ occupy sufficiently distinct positions in the vowel space and are theoretically easy to discriminate. Nevertheless, they frequently become sources of error for foreign learners whose native vowel systems differ. Abdul Chaer (2009:62) further notes that although Indonesian vowels are phonemically simple, they exhibit phonetic variation (allophonic realization) conditioned by phonological environment, such as open or closed syllables.

Similarly, J.W.M. Verhaar (2010:89) emphasizes that when two distinct sounds occur in the same phonological environment and yield different meanings, they constitute separate phonemes—an instance of phonemic opposition. This principle explains why the vowel contrast /i/ versus /e/ in Indonesian (e.g., lili versus lele) represents a genuine phonemic distinction.

Comparable patterns have been documented in BIPA research across diverse first-language backgrounds. Adityarini et al. (2020) identified vowel and consonant substitution patterns among European BIPA learners in Bali. Rahajeng et al. (2024) reported varied phonological changes among BIPA learners in Mataram whose first language was English, including consonant aspiration and vowel lengthening. Rafkahanun (2021) described vowel and consonant errors among Arabic-speaking BIPA learners in Egypt, many of which were attributable to the absence of specific phonemes in Arabic.

Novianti and Syihabuddin (2021) demonstrated that explicit phonological instruction significantly improved phonological awareness, reading ability, and spelling performance among elementary school learners with reading difficulties. Specifically concerning Thai learners, Ekawati and Nurpadillah (2024), in their study of BIPA students from Rajabhat Songkhla University, found that phonological errors in reading skills were influenced by differences in phoneme systems and by transfer from English pronunciation patterns as an initial representation of the Latin script.

Phonological interference is not confined to Indonesian as a target language. Abu-Guba (2026) reported phonological difficulties in English acquisition among Arabic speakers, particularly in stress placement, which frequently altered or obscured lexical meaning. Such difficulties were linked to prosodic patterns transferred from Arabic. McAllister (2020) similarly documented interference in Swedish among learners from Spanish-, English-, and Estonian-speaking backgrounds. Notably, participants had resided in Sweden for at least ten years, yet first-language influence remained detectable. English-speaking participants exhibited pronunciation patterns more closely aligned with Swedish than did Spanish or Estonian speakers.

Interference studies also extend into interdisciplinary domains such as neurolinguistics. For example, Calabria (2020) examined phonological interference in Catalan–Spanish acquisition among individuals with aphasia, illustrating how neurological conditions can affect phonological processing across languages.

Language interference may be understood as the intrusion of previously acquired linguistic elements into a target language as a result of language contact. Keraf (2025) observes that interference may manifest, for example, in the addition of phonemes at word-final position to conform to native syllable structure patterns. Within a contrastive analysis framework, structural differences between the first language and the target language constitute potential sources of difficulty and error. Research on phonological interference in BIPA learning consistently indicates that error patterns are highly dependent on the sound and script systems of learners' first languages. Speakers of European, Arabic, Thai, Khmer, Indian, Japanese, and other languages exhibit distinct phonological error types, with common tendencies including phoneme substitution, contrast neutralization, and difficulty producing sounds absent from the native language.

For learners from Thailand and Cambodia who use non-Latin scripts, phonological interference is shaped not only by differences in sound systems but also by their literacy experience in Thai and Khmer scripts. Additionally, English frequently functions as both an intermediary language and a source of Latin letter pronunciation patterns. This configuration creates an additional layer of interference in the acquisition of Indonesian.

The ability to discriminate sounds at a fine-grained level—often termed phonological awareness or phonemic perception—constitutes a foundational prerequisite for reading and writing in alphabetic languages. In BIPA instruction, particularly for learners with non-Latin script backgrounds, the script introduction phase should not be conceptualized merely as letter memorization. Rather, it must be understood as a process of reconstructing a new phonological system directly linked to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. When sound–letter correspondences remain unstable, pronunciation errors readily extend into basic spelling errors, even before orthographic conventions are introduced. Therefore, phonological instruction—through minimal pair exercises (as previously noted by Abdul Chaer), contrastive listening tasks, and spelling practice—requires deliberate emphasis at the initial stage of BIPA learning. This emphasis is not directly comparable to Indonesian language instruction for Indonesian citizens, even when Indonesian functions as a second language rather than a foreign language.

Although interference has long been examined in applied linguistics, research specifically addressing phonological interference in Latin letter perception and dictation performance among BIPA learners with non-Latin script backgrounds in Islamic boarding school or pesantren contexts

remains limited. Accordingly, this study addresses three primary objectives: (1) to describe the forms of phonological interference in the pronunciation of Latin letters among BIPA learners from Thai and Cambodian backgrounds; (2) to identify the causal factors underlying such interference; and (3) to explain how this phonological interference affects learners' dictation writing performance.

The introduction should contain (in sequence) a general background, a review of previous literature (state of the art) as the basis for the statement of scientific novelty of the article, a statement of scientific novelty, and the research problem or hypothesis. The final section of the introduction should state the research objectives of the article. In a scientific article format, references to literature are not permitted as in a research report; instead, they should be presented in the form of a review of previous literature (state of the art) to demonstrate the scientific novelty of the article.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to delineate patterns of phonological interference emerging within an authentic BIPA instructional context. The data were drawn from routine classroom teaching practices and subsequently systematized as research data through error analysis at the phonological level.

The research participants consisted of eight beginner-level BIPA learners enrolled in the 2025 Indonesian Language Preparatory Program at SMP Ar Risalah Padang, located in Padang. The program comprised 30 instructional meetings, each lasting 90 minutes. Instruction at the elementary level was supported by the A1 and A2 BIPA textbooks published by the Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia (2019 edition).

The primary data of the study included:

a. Forms of Indonesian phoneme pronunciation errors occurring during classroom activities (reading aloud, vocabulary repetition, and conversational practice); and
b. Written results of vocabulary and simple-sentence dictation tasks intentionally designed to contain contrastive phoneme pairs predicted to pose difficulty.

Data analysis proceeded through the following stages:

a. Transcription and Data Grouping

   All relevant pronunciation and dictation errors were transcribed and grouped according to contrastive phoneme pairs.

b. Classification of Interference Patterns

   Errors were categorized into consonant substitution, vowel contrast reduction, affricate confusion, liquid consonant interchange, and other emerging patterns consistent with phonological theory.

c. Phonetic–Phonological Analysis

   Each phoneme pair was analyzed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to clarify distinctive sound features and to identify potential sources of interference from the learners' first languages and from English.

d. Interpretation of Causal Factors

   The identified patterns were interpreted in relation to documented characteristics of Thai and Khmer phonological and script systems, as well as learners' prior literacy experience in English and Indonesian.

Stages (2), (3), and (4) were grounded in established phonological theory and previous studies, including those by Abdul Chaer (2009), Uriel Weinreich (2010), Aminuddin (1984), H. Douglas Brown (2020), and Novianti (2021). Although Aminuddin's work is relatively dated, it provides a more detailed phoneme classification framework that proved analytically useful for the present case.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Overview of Phonological Interference

Based on classroom observations and dictation results, it was found that learners tended to perceive several pairs of Latin letters as representing identical or near-identical sounds. This perceptual convergence subsequently manifested in systematic spelling errors during dictation tasks. The pattern suggests not merely articulatory difficulty, but instability at the level of phonemic discrimination.

The following table summarizes the letter pairs perceived as similar by the learners, along with examples of lexical items that were frequently misspelled.

Table 1. Letter pairs perceived as representing identical sounds by the learners

Letter Pair	Target Form – Learner Form
b – p	*beli – peli*; *bakso – pakso*; *sabun – sapun*; *pedas – bedas*; *berdiri – perdiri*; *ember – emper*
g – k	*ganteng – kanteng*; *lambat – lampat*; *gayung – kayung*
e – i	*kecil – kicil*; *sehat – sihat*; *ikan – ekan*; *sedikit – sidikit*; *lihat – lehat*; *air – aer*
o – u	*lompat – lumpat*; *murah – morah*; *sulit – solid*; *telur – telor*
c – j	*hijau – hicau*; *jari – cari*; *baju – bacu*; *lucu – luju*
t – d	*sulit – sulid*; *lambat – lambad*; *pahit – pahid* (particularly in word-final position)
r – l	*bantal – bantar*; *sebentar – sebental*; *besar – belsal*
s – z	*asam – azam*; *asin – azin* (in medial position)

Table 1 demonstrates that interference does not occur in merely one or two isolated phonemes, but rather affects nearly the entire system of phonologically contrastive consonants and vowels in Indonesian. This finding reinforces the hypothesis that the learners have not yet developed stable Indonesian phonemic categories. Instead, they appear to rely on phonemic categories derived from their first languages and from English as a reference system. The discussion of these findings can be elaborated through the following sub-sections.

1. Consonant Interference

Contrast /b/ – /p/

Representative errors include: *ibu – ipu*, *beli – peli*, *bakso – pakso*, *sabun – sapun*, *pedas – bedas*, *berdiri – perdiri*, *ember – emper*. Phonetically, /b/ is a voiced bilabial plosive [b], whereas /p/ is a voiceless bilabial plosive [p]. In Thai and Khmer, bilabial plosives are distinguished not only by voicing but also by aspiration. This additional phonetic parameter may lead learners to interpret Indonesian [b] and [p] as members of a single phonological category, thereby destabilizing the voicing distinction. The result is frequent bidirectional substitution.

Contrast /g/ – /k/

Observed errors include: ganteng – kanteng, lambat – lampat, gayung – kayung.

Phonetically, /g/ is a voiced velar plosive [g], while /k/ is its voiceless counterpart [k]. Similar to the /b/–/p/ contrast, learners appear to neutralize voicing, often realizing /g/ as approximating /k/. In some instances, this substitution alters lexical meaning (e.g., ganteng → kanteng), indicating that phonemic opposition is not yet firmly established.

Contrast /t/ – /d/

Errors involving /t/–/d/ appear predominantly in word-final position: *lambat – lambad, sulit – sulid, pahit – pahid*.

Phonetically, /t/ and /d/ are voiceless and voiced alveolar plosives, respectively. In many languages, including Thai, word-final plosives tend to undergo weakening or neutralization, leading to reduced voicing contrasts. The shift from /t/ to [d] in final position may be interpreted as hypercorrection, wherein learners attempt to "strengthen" the final consonant by adding voicing.

Contrast /tʃ/ – /dʒ/ (Orthographic c – j)

Errors include: *hijau – hicau, jari – cari, baju – bacu, lucu – luju*.

Learners exhibit instability in distinguishing /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, both palato-alveolar affricates differing only in voicing. The articulatory similarity facilitates substitution. Additionally, prior exposure to English—where the letters and correspond to variable phonetic realizations—likely influences learners' perception and grapheme–phoneme mapping in Indonesian.

Contrast /r/ – /l/

Errors include: *bantal – bantar, sebentar – sebental, besar – belsal*.

In Indonesian phonology, /r/ is typically realized as an apical trill [r], while /l/ is an alveolar lateral [l]. In some varieties of Thai and Khmer, liquid consonants may exhibit broader allophonic variation, and the contrast between /r/ and /l/ may not carry equivalent phonemic salience. This reduced perceptual contrast plausibly explains the frequent substitution between the two liquids.

Contrast /s/ – /z/

Errors such as *asam – azam* and *asin – azin* occur particularly in medial position.

Indonesian does not employ /z/ as a highly productive phoneme; it appears primarily in loanwords. However, the presence of the letter in the Latin alphabet and its frequent occurrence in English vocabulary familiar to learners may create an independent phonetic association. The substitution /s/ → [z] can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to utilize all available graphemic options when phonemic perception is unstable or when the acoustic input is insufficiently discriminated.

2. Vowel Interference

Contrast /e/ – /i/

Common errors include: *kecil – kicil, sehat – sihat, sedikit – sidikit, lihat – lehat, air – aer*.

Phonetically, Indonesian distinguishes mid vowels (/e, ə/) from the high front vowel /i/. In languages with different or more compressed vowel systems, the perceptual distance between /e/ and /i/ may be smaller, reducing contrast salience. The recurring substitutions indicate that the mid–high vowel distinction has not yet been firmly encoded in the learners' internal phonological system.

Contrast /o/ – /u/

Errors such as lompat – lumpat, murah – morah, sulit – solid, and telur – telor reflect instability in back vowel contrasts.

The high back vowel /u/ and the mid-back vowel /o/ appear to be treated as interchangeable categories. In the case of sulit – solid, English influence is particularly evident, as solid is a familiar lexical item in English. This suggests simultaneous lexical and phonological interference: learners may retrieve a known English word whose phonological form approximates the Indonesian target.

Influence of English Letter Names

Prior to learning Indonesian, learners were accustomed to pronouncing Latin vowel letters according to English conventions: <a, i, u, e, o> as /ei, ai, juː, iː, ou/. This habit influences how

they map Indonesian vowel sounds, particularly /e/ and /o/, which in English are often represented by letter combinations or complex vowel graphemes.

Consequently, relearning the Indonesian grapheme–phoneme correspondence system becomes a crucial pedagogical step. The instructional task is not simply corrective pronunciation, but rather the restructuring of entrenched orthographic–phonological associations formed through prior English literacy.

3. Analisis Fonetik (IPA)

To synthesize the patterns of interference identified above, Table 2 presents the problematic phoneme contrasts along with their IPA representations and articulatory descriptions.

Table 2. Summary of problematic phoneme contrasts in the data (IPA)

Contrast	IPA Representation	Phonetic–Phonological Description
b – p	/b/ vs /p/	Voiced vs voiceless bilabial plosive; voicing contrast frequently neutralized.
g – k	/g/ vs /k/	Voiced vs voiceless velar plosive; substitution /g/ → [k], especially in word-initial position.
t – d	/t/ vs /d/	Voiceless vs voiced alveolar plosive; neutralization in word-final position.
c – j	/tʃ/ vs /dʒ/	Voiceless vs voiced palato-alveolar affricate; confusion due to close articulatory proximity.
r – l	/r/ vs /l/	Liquids: apical trill vs alveolar lateral; substitution indicates incomplete categorical separation.
e – i	/ə, e/ vs /i/	Mid vs high front vowels; raising or lowering reduces phonemic contrast.
o – u	/o/ vs /u/	Mid-back vs high-back vowels; often treated as free variants by learners.

This analysis demonstrates that interference affects both consonantal and vocalic segments. The dominant patterns include:

1. Voicing neutralization in plosive and affricate contrasts (/b–p/, /g–k/, /t–d/, /tʃ–dʒ/);
2. Reduction of height contrast in vowels, particularly mid–high distinctions (/e–i/, /o–u/); and
3. Confusion among articulatorily proximate segments, especially affricates and liquids (/r–l/).

Collectively, these patterns suggest that the interference is systemic rather than incidental. The learners' phonological system for Indonesian remains underdeveloped, with contrastive features—particularly [+/- voice] and vowel height—insufficiently stabilized. The recurrence of these patterns across both oral production and dictation further supports the interpretation that the difficulty lies primarily at the level of phonemic categorization and perceptual discrimination, rather than merely at the level of articulatory execution.

4. Factors Contributing to Interference

Based on the analysis, the phonological interference observed in this dataset can be explained by four principal factors:

1. Differences in the L1 phonological system
   The sound systems of Thai and Khmer exhibit contrasts and distributions of plosives, vowels, and liquids that differ from those of Indonesian. The presence of aspiration, stress, and tonal contrasts in these languages shifts the functional load of phonological distinctions, such that voicing contrasts and certain vowel qualities are not consistently perceived as salient by learners. As a result, contrasts that are phonemic in Indonesian may be neutralized or insufficiently differentiated in perception.
2. Differences in writing systems (non-Latin vs. Latin scripts)
   Prior to learning Indonesian, the learners were literate in Thai or Khmer scripts. The transition to the Latin alphabet requires the reconstruction of grapheme–phoneme correspondences. When this mapping is not yet stabilized, inaccuracies in pronunciation are readily transferred into spelling errors, as evidenced in the dictation results. Orthographic interference thus reinforces phonological ambiguity.
3. English as a mediating language
   English functions both as a lingua franca and as a source of pronunciation patterns associated with the Latin alphabet. Established habits of pronouncing vowel letters as *ei, ai, yu, i,* and *ou* influence how learners map Indonesian vowel phonemes onto orthographic symbols. In addition, certain lexical forms—such as *solid*—appear as instances of lexical interference when learners associate a perceived Indonesian sound with a phonologically similar English word (e.g., *sulit*). This indicates cross-linguistic activation at both phonological and lexical levels.
4. Phonemic perception difficulties
   The parallelism between pronunciation errors and spelling errors in dictation suggests that the primary issue lies in phonemic perception rather than in articulation alone. Learners have not yet developed stable perceptual boundaries between phonologically contrastive sounds. Consequently, their mental representations of sound–letter correspondences remain underspecified or blurred.

Overall, the interference observed in this context may be characterized as layered interference: transfer from the L1 phonological system, transfer from English phonology and orthography, and adaptation to the Latin writing system as a newly acquired script.

5. Pedagogical Implications

These findings yield several important implications for teaching beginner-level Indonesian to Speakers of Other Languages (BIPA), particularly for learners with non-Latin script backgrounds:

1. Structured minimal pair training
   Instructors should design systematic minimal pair exercises targeting problematic contrasts, such as *beli–peli, bakso–pakso, ganteng–kanteng, kecil–kicil*, *lompat–lumpat*, *baju–bacu, bantal–bantar,* and *asin–azin*. Activities should integrate discrimination (listening-based identification) and production practice within meaningful sentence contexts to reinforce contrastive awareness.
2. Audio-based phonemic perception training
   Audio materials—including recordings from *Sahabatku Indonesia* and other sources—should be maximized for focused listening practice. Learners can be asked to identify and mark the appropriate grapheme corresponding to the sound they hear, rather than merely repeating the utterance. This approach prioritizes perceptual acuity before articulatory accuracy.
3. Explicit vowel instruction with comparison to English

Teachers may explicitly contrast Indonesian vowel pronunciation with English letter names to disrupt entrenched associations. For example, Indonesian /a/ can be contrasted with the English diphthong /eɪ/, and similar comparisons can be drawn for other vowels. Such contrastive explanation helps recalibrate learners' phonological mapping.

4. Articulatory awareness training
   Instructors can employ explicit demonstrations of articulatory positioning (lips, tongue, teeth, and vocal folds) to clarify distinctions such as /b/–/p/, /g/–/k/, /tʃ/–/dʒ/, and /r/–/l/. For instance, learners may be guided to feel vocal fold vibration when producing voiced consonants, thereby strengthening the perceptual salience of voicing contrasts.
5. Periodic diagnostic dictation
   Dictation should function not only as an evaluative instrument but also as a periodic diagnostic tool to monitor developments in phonemic perception. Persistent error patterns can inform revisions of instructional materials and determine subsequent areas of pedagogical focus.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that beginner-level learners of Indonesian for Speakers of Other Languages (BIPA) with non-Latin script backgrounds (Thailand–Cambodia) experience significant phonological interference in both the pronunciation of the Latin alphabet and the spelling of Indonesian words in dictation tasks. The interference manifests in the substitution of voiced–voiceless consonants (b–p, g–k, t–d, s–z), confusion of affricates (c–j), liquid alternation (r–l), and reduction of vowel contrasts (e–i, o–u).

The principal factors underlying this interference include differences in the learners' first-language phonological systems, differences in writing systems, and the transfer of English as a mediating language in grapheme–phoneme mapping. The phenomenon is not confined to oral production; it is also reflected in systematic spelling errors in dictation, indicating disruption at the level of phonemic perception. The convergence of pronunciation and orthographic errors suggests that the difficulty lies in the formation of stable phonological representations rather than in articulatory execution alone.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce prior research on phonological interference among BIPA learners across diverse first-language backgrounds, while contributing a further dimension concerning the role of writing systems and intermediary languages. From a practical standpoint, the study underscores that the introduction of the Latin alphabet in beginner BIPA instruction should be conceptualized as a process of phonological reconstruction. This stage requires carefully designed minimal pair exercises, systematic phonemic perception training, and diagnostically oriented dictation activities.

The study is limited by its small number of participants and its focus on a specific educational context. Future research may expand the participant pool, incorporate audio recordings to enable more detailed acoustic analysis, and compare learners from other non-Latin script backgrounds, such as Laos and Myanmar, in order to broaden the empirical and theoretical scope of investigation.

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