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UNCOVERING THE MYTH ABOUT THE LINK BETWEEN PRONUNCIATION AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Pronunciation and listening comprehension are two areas of English proficiency that are often assumed to have a reciprocal relationship. There was an established common belief among language educators that the higher one's command of pronunciation, the better their listening comprehension, or vice versa. Although such a belief seems to be well-aligned with common sense, it is likely that it was based on presumptions rather than research-based evidence. This exploratory quantitative research investigates the link between pronunciation and listening comprehension skills by performing statistical correlation tests between the participants' level of pronunciation accuracy and listening comprehension test performance within a two-set data analysis. Data were collected from 39 vocational tertiary English language learners through a TOEIC-prediction test to measure listening skill, and a reading-aloud procedure to assess pronunciation accuracy. Data were analysed through *Pearson's* Correlation test using *SPSS* software. The study found that, in the first dataset, there was a statistically significant correlation between the number of correct answers in the TOEIC listening test and the percentage of correctly pronounced words in the reading-aloud procedure. However, the result of the analysis of the second dataset shows that the correlation between the two variables was not statistically significant. Despite the inconsistency in the correlation test results, this study contributes to the literature by presenting early evidence of the link between pronunciation and listening skills, an area that is currently underresearched. The study's pedagogical implications include the need for sustainable integration of both listening and pronunciation skills in English language classrooms across Indonesia.

Keywords**:** Correlation test; EFL; Indonesian ELT; Listening; Pronunciation; Testing; TOEIC

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the link between listening and pronunciation. Pronunciation and listening comprehension are two of the skill sets that are required to build an oral communicative repertoire in learning English. While the relationship between listening and speaking skills is extensively researched, there is currently a paucity of research investigating the link between listening and pronunciation proficiency. Thus, the frequently made remarks about how better pronunciation leads to better listening comprehension, or vice versa, were mostly based on assumptions rather than research. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by looking at the correlation between listening test performance and pronunciation accuracy, in an effort to find scientific evidence for the aforementioned common belief.

The term 'pronunciation' was relatively unfamiliar to most EFL learners in Indonesia until recently. Explicit pronunciation instruction was mostly non-existent in most General English classes at Indonesian public schools. Indonesian school curriculum does not demand the teaching of pronunciation. Besides, Levis and Grant (2003) point out that many English teachers, especially in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, such as in Indonesia, do not have a specific and efficient method to integrate pronunciation into their teaching. Within EFL settings like Indonesia, the teaching of pronunciation and speaking deserves more attention due to the lack of exposure to the language outside classrooms (Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). When we refer to the history of English Language Teaching, pronunciation was one of the aspects that was regarded as crucial during the era of *audiolingualism* (the 1950s – 1960s), in which drilling was the iconic

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method in English classes (Gilakjani, 2011). As English language teaching methods grow with the rise of multiple skill or integrated approach through Communicative Language Teaching, the teaching of pronunciation is merged into speaking (Gilakjani, 2012). Speaking, listening, and pronunciation were positioned together within the broader spectrum of oral communication (Murphy, 1991).

In general, listening undergoes the same depreciation when compared to pronunciation. It is less popular than the other learning areas, such as grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary. Listening comprehension is also not regarded as a crucial part of many English learning textbooks. Teachers are less concerned about and rarely accommodate it in their lesson plans (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Listening comprehension is often regarded as a passive skill. It is a possible misinterpretation of a skill area that plays a vital role in increasing learners' proficiency in acquiring a certain language and holds a significant influence on increasing other skills, such as speaking, reading, writing, and translating (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). English language educators have not addressed this issue comprehensively, especially in Indonesia, where listening comprehension becomes crucial only when it comes to English language proficiency tests

Both aspects, pronunciation and listening comprehension, have been the object of research for years. However, both aspects are rarely discussed as a package. Listening comprehension is mostly linked to the vocabulary aspect in terms of learners often finding challenges in listening comprehension, which is regarded as a lack of vocabulary mastery. (Underwood, 1998, *as cited in* Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Yet, vocabulary is not the only crucial factor in determining a learner's listening comprehension performance. A limited number of studies are trying to explore the link between pronunciation and listening comprehension (See, e.g., Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2013; Gilbert, 1995; Han, 1996; Khaghaninejad & Maleki, 2015; Kissling, 2018).

As previously asserted, there is a paucity of research directly investigating the relationship between pronunciation and listening comprehension skill level. However, the link between the two areas was hinted at in previous research. In earlier research, Pennington and Richards (1986) state that pronunciation has a natural relationship with other language usage aspects, including listening. They suggest that further research should focus on exposing this relationship to be implemented through teaching needs in the classroom. Murphy (1991) adds that pronunciation is an important internal part of composing the main skill area of speaking and listening.

The contribution of pronunciation in developing listening skills is also highlighted in more recent studies. Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) assert that one of the ultimate skills in listening comprehension is learners' ability to discriminate English language pronunciation. They argue that pronunciation constitutes knowledge about the phonemic unit, which can be correlated with the listening process, and helps develop phonemic knowledge, a schema or linguistic information that helps the listener code the sound they hear to make a meaningful message. Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2013) further suggests that pronunciation and listening comprehension are closely interrelated by a unified system, within which individual sounds are regularly related.

Research has highlighted the effect of pronunciation instruction on listening. Han (1996), who investigated the impacts of pronunciation-based listening exercises on Korean EFL learners, found that pronunciation-based listening instruction has a significant impact on pronunciation clarity and listening comprehension. In their quantitative study investigating the effect of teaching pronunciation on listening comprehension among Iranian EFL learners, Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015) found that there was a significant difference in performance in the listening comprehension test performance between the groups that had pronunciation instructions and those

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who did not. Kissling (2018), who investigates the efficacy of pronunciation instruction for improving learners' bottom-up processing in listening within a U.S. Spanish as a Foreign Language setting, found that pronunciation instruction focusing on suprasegmental features, along with perception-focused practice, helps learners with their bottom-up processing in listening to make the target language more intelligible. In this regard, research is in consensus that pronunciation instruction and pronunciation-based listening instruction could assist learners in improving their listening comprehension. The internalized comprehension (schema) possessed by learners about the two pronunciation features; segmental features (e.g., consonant, vocal, diphthong); and supra-segmental features (e.g., intonation, stress, rhyme) (See, e.g., Gilakjani, 2012, 2016; Han, 1996; Murphy, 1991) plays an important role in the development of other skill areas in acquiring the English language, especially listening.

Research also illuminates the role of listening instruction in the development of pronunciation skills. A study by Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2013), which looks specifically into the effectiveness of listening to audio stories on fostering Iranian intermediate school EFL learners' pronunciation, found that the use of audio stories as listening exercises had an overall impact on the improvement in the pronunciation proficiency of the learners.

Related research has mostly focused on the efficacy of pronunciation instruction and listening skills development, or vice versa. However, none of them attempted to quantitatively analyse the correlation between learners' pronunciation and listening skill performance as an attempt to find direct evidence of the link between pronunciation and listening comprehension skills. Based on this gap, we designed and conducted this research. Unlike the previous studies, this research is neither based on an experiment nor a classroom intervention program. It aims to measure learners' pronunciation and listening comprehension skills and to analyse the correlation between the sets of measured data in both areas. In this study, data on pronunciation ability were defined as participants' accuracy in reading/pronouncing the words in a text, while listening comprehension was represented by the listening test score in a TOEIC prediction test. To achieve this purpose, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What is the participants' accuracy level in pronunciation (reading/pronouncing words in a text)?
2) What is the rate of participants' ability to answer listening comprehension question items in a *Test of English for International Communication* (TOEIC) prediction test?
3) Is there a statistically significant correlation between pronunciation accuracy (reading/articulating words) and listening test performance?

METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative approach to investigate the possibility of two interrelated variables. They are speech accuracy in the text, as pronunciation skill parameters and performance in a listening test represent the listening comprehension performance. A statistical test in the form of *Pearson*'s *correlation test* was carried out because of the urge to provide an exclusive connection between pronunciation and listening comprehension (accuracy of speech and listening score). This research is a non-experimental study to investigate the connection between variables with correlation or regression as a major feature (Punch, 2009).

Participants

The participants of this study are 39 students of a state polytechnic from four different study programs. They were selected by using purposive/convenience sampling. The rationale behind the choice to recruit students from these programs was better access to potential participants, since the researchers had previously worked with the cohorts of students from these study programs. According to Punch (2009), purposive or convenient sampling is regarded as a proper sampling method to use in a study focusing on the correlation between variables. However, we realised that

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the choice to use purposive sampling might limit the possibility of generalising the results of the current study to a wider context outside the sample and population.

Variables and Data Collection Tools

In this study, we investigated the relationship between the two variables, pronunciation and listening. The data collection procedure can be broadly categorised as a survey. According to Punch (2009), a survey has a broad definition. It is not only about having closed-ended questions with the *Likert* scale as an answer. Data were collected in two phases. For each phase, there were two sets of data. The first set is related to the pronunciation variable. We asked the respondents to read or pronounce words in a prepared text selected from a TOEIC preparation book. The reading process will be recorded by using a voice recorder, and the recording will be analysed based on the number of correctly pronounced words (Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2013) divided by the total number of words in the text, multiplied by one hundred. In this process, frequency or same-word repetition is not excluded. The formula for data collection for the pronunciation variable for each respondent is as follows:

$$number\ of\ correctly-pronounced\ words / number\ of\ words\ in\ a\ text$$

The recording of each participant was assessed by two researchers. The results were compared and discussed to reach a consensus. In this way, inter-rater reliability was established.

In this research, the concept used to identify correct or wrong pronunciation will be based on intelligibility. This concept emphasises the understanding of the recipient toward the message of the speaker (Harmer, 2007) by clarifying words (Levis, 2005) based on segmental pronunciation features (vocal, consonant; voiced, voiceless; diphthong; triphthong) as the parameter.

The data for the listening variable is in the form of participants' TOEIC-prediction listening test results. Participants were asked to do the listening part consisting of 100 multiple-choice questions. This was similar to the approach used by Han (1996), which utilised the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in a study investigating the effects of pronunciation-based listening instruction on pronunciation clarity and listening comprehension. In the current study, the TOEIC-prediction test was chosen because of its business English content, which was considered relevant for students of a vocational college. The range of data for this variable is the same as the variable for pronunciation, which is 0 to 100percent.

In this research, the questions in the TOEIC-prediction listening test were not tested for their validity and reliability since they were part of an official TOEIC preparation book. Official test items had been tested for their validity and reliability by *Education Testing Service,* the developer of the TOEIC test. However, the read- aloud protocol, which also used reading materials from the TOEIC test, was piloted with two students who did not participate in the study. The pilot run was conducted to ensure the clarity of the procedure and to check that the quality of the recordings was intelligible and good enough to be assessed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed quantitatively using *SPSS* Software. Descriptive statistics are presented to describe the participants' performance on both tests across the different times of testing. This study aims to assess the common presumption that pronunciation skills are linear with listening skills- that the better one's pronunciation is, the better their listening comprehension is. To achieve

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this, *Pearson's correlation test* was performed to see the correlation between pronunciation and listening comprehension variables. *Pearson's correlation test* was chosen due to the nature of the data, which was numeric/scale with a wide range of variance. Variance is the principle of a simple correlation test. If two variables correlate, they will have identical variance or co-vary (Punch, 2009). In addition to statistical analyses, data were also analysed descriptively using graphics and diagrams. Descriptive data analysis plays an important role in quantitative research, especially when there are no statistically significant results.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Number of correct answers in the listening section of the TOEIC-prediction test

There are 100 questions in the listening part of the TOEIC-prediction test. Table 1 shows the descriptive data of the respondents' correct answers in the first test. The participants' performance on the listening section of the TOEIC-prediction test across two testing phases is summarised in Tables 1 and 2. In the first test (N=27), participants scored between 24 and 72 out of 100 items (M=37.22, SD=10.80). In the second test (N=23), scores ranged from 28 to 61 (M=43.00, SD=7.69). Although the mean score increased by approximately 5.78 points in the second test, this improvement was not statistically significant, suggesting that the participants' listening comprehension remained relatively stable across both testing occasions.

Table 1.
Descriptive data of the number of correct answers in the first listening test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
NC_listening_first	27	24	72	37.22	10.804
Valid N (listwise)	27				

Table 2.
Descriptive data of the number of correct answers in the second listening test

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
NC_listening_SECOND	23	33	28	61	43.00	7.687	59.091
Valid N (listwise)	23						

The level of accuracy in word pronunciation through the reading-aloud procedure.

The audio recordings of the reading aloud procedures were analysed to determine the level of accuracy in pronouncing words within the reading process. The following are the numbers of correctly and incorrectly pronounced words in the two stages of data collection. Table 3 describes findings from the first stage, and Table 4 describes the second stage.

Table 3.
Percentage of correctly and incorrectly pronounced words in the first stage of data collection.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
percent_corr_pronun_first	27	81.70	98.10	91.1481	4.32269
no_mis_pron_first	27	3	30	14.37	7.223
Valid N (listwise)	27				

Table 4.
Percentage of correctly and incorrectly pronounced words in the second stage of data collection.

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance

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No_mispron_second	23	80	25	105	52.91	20.789	432.174
Percent_corr_pronun_second	23	26.40	65.00	91.40	81.9261	7.05029	49.707
valid N (listwise)	23						

There is a notable difference in pronunciation accuracy between the two stages. In the first stage (N=27), participants demonstrated a high level of accuracy, with correctly pronounced words ranging from 81.7 per cent to 98.1 per cent (M=91.15, SD=4.32). In the second stage (N=23), accuracy dropped significantly, ranging from 65 per cent to 91.4 per cent (M=81.93, SD=7.05). This decline of approximately 9.22 percentage points is likely attributable to differences in text characteristics between the two stages, including genre, length, and lexical complexity.

Correlation between listening test performance and pronunciation accuracy level in the reading aloud procedure.

This study investigates the common presumption that good pronunciation skills are related to good listening skills. *Pearson's correlation test* was conducted between the number of correct answers in the listening test and the percentage of correctly pronounced words in the reading-aloud procedure for each phase. Figure 1 describes the pattern of correlation between these two variables in the first phase of data collection. The *Pearson's correlation test* output for phase one can be seen in Table 5.

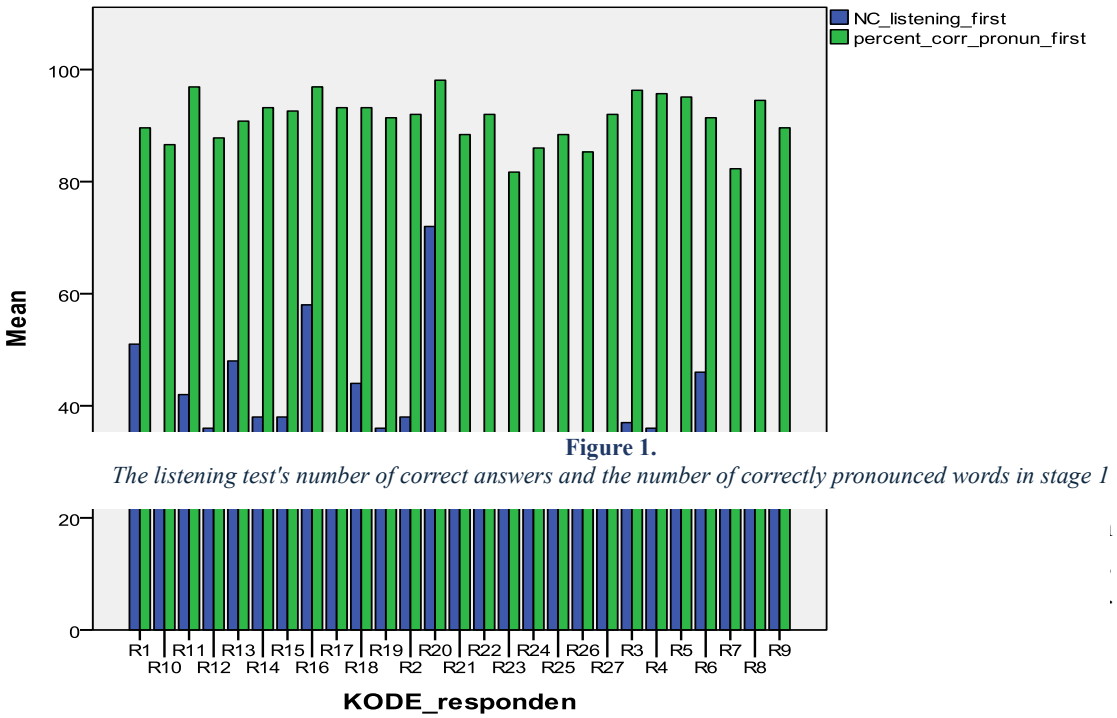


Figure 1.
The listening test's number of correct answers and the number of correctly pronounced words in stage 1

Results of the correlation test of the data from the first stage.

		NC_listening_ first	percent_corr_pronun_first
NC_listening_first	Pearson Correlation	1	.539**
	Sig. (2- tailed)		.004
	N	27	27

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percent_corr_pronun_first	Pearson Correlation	.539**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	27	27

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

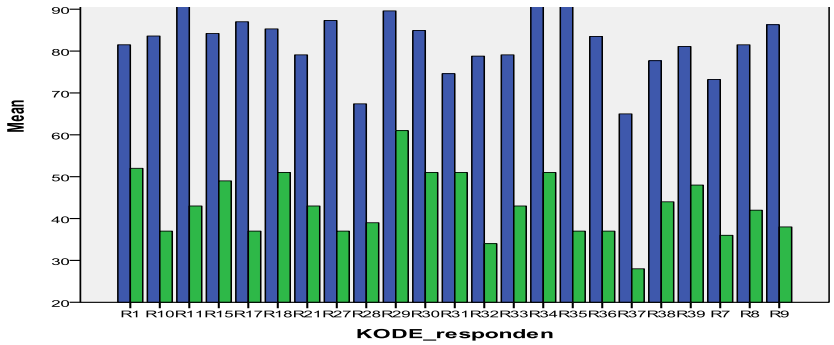
Table 6.
Results of the correlation test of the data from the second stage.

		percent_corr_pronun_second	NC listening_second
percent_corr_pronun_second	Pearson Correlation	1	.376
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.077
	N	23	23
NC_listening_second	Pearson Correlation	.376**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.077	
	N	23	23

The correlation between the two variables in the second phase (see Table 6), however, was not statistically significant (r = 0.376, p = 0.077, N = 23). Although a moderate positive correlation coefficient was observed, the significance value (p = 0.077) exceeded the conventional threshold of 0.05. This means that the observed relationship could not be generalised beyond this sample. It is also important to note that the reported p-value of 0.077 indicates a trend toward significance that fell short of the conventional alpha level.

The correlation between these two variables can also be observed in Figure 4. The figure visualises the non-linear link between pronunciation accuracy and listening test score.

Figure 2.
The listening test's number of correct answers and the number of correctly pronounced words in the second phase



Several factors may have contributed to the inconsistency between the two correlation tests. First, the sample size differences. The first test included 27 participants, while the second included only 23, a reduction of approximately 15 per cent in number. Smaller sample sizes reduce statistical power, making it more difficult to detect significant correlations even when a moderate relationship exists (Cohen, 1988). The loss of four participants between the two testing phases may have been sufficient to push the second correlation below the significance threshold. Second, text difficulty and genre effects. The two reading-aloud texts differed in genre, length, and lexical

complexity. The significant drop in pronunciation accuracy from the first to the second stage (91.15 per cent to 81.93 per cent) suggests that the second text was considerably more challenging for participants. This increased difficulty may have introduced greater variability in pronunciation scores, potentially weakening the correlation with listening test performance. Third, participant characteristics and testing conditions. The reading-aloud procedure was conducted in the presence of the researchers, which may have induced varying levels of anxiety across participants. Performance anxiety during oral production tasks is well-documented in the literature (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991) and could have affected pronunciation accuracy differently in the two testing phases.

Despite the inconsistency, the first test's significant correlation ($r = 0.539$, $p = 0.004$) provides preliminary evidence suggesting a moderate positive relationship between pronunciation accuracy and listening comprehension. This finding aligns with previous research by Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2013), who found that listening exercises positively impact pronunciation, and Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015), who demonstrated that pronunciation instruction significantly improved listening comprehension performance. Similarly, Kissling (2018) found that pronunciation instruction on suprasegmental features enhanced bottom-up processing for listening. However, the non-significant result in the second test ($r = 0.376$, $p = 0.077$) cautions against drawing definitive conclusions about a consistent, generalisable link between the two skills based on this study alone. The near-significant p-value (0.077) suggests that with a larger sample size or more uniformed text and controlled testing conditions, the relationship might reach statistical significance, but this remains speculative without further evidence.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the correlation between pronunciation accuracy and listening comprehension performance through a two-phase data collection approach using the TOEIC-prediction listening test and a read-aloud procedure to measure pronunciation performance. The findings reveal a complex picture: while the first test resulted in a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between pronunciation accuracy and listening performance ($r = 0.539$, $p = 0.004$), the second test did not produce a significant correlation ($r = 0.376$, $p = 0.077$).

The significant finding in the first test supports the theoretical framework proposed by Pennington and Richards (1986), who argue that pronunciation has a natural relationship with listening and other language skills. This is further supported by Murphy's (1991) assertion that pronunciation functions as phonemic knowledge that serves as a schema for listeners to decode spoken language. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) similarly contend that the ability to discriminate English pronunciation is a fundamental skill in listening comprehension. The moderate correlation ($r = 0.539$) observed in the first test suggests that participants who had internalised more accurate phonemic representations were better equipped to process and comprehend spoken English.

However, the non-significant result in the second test introduces important caveats. The inconsistency may reflect methodological limitations rather than a true absence of relationship. Firstly, the sample size reduction from 27 to 23 participants likely reduced statistical power. According to Cohen (1988), detecting a moderate correlation ($r = 0.50$) with 80% power at alpha $= 0.05$ requires approximately 29 participants. Both tests fell below this threshold, making them potentially underpowered. Secondly, the different text characteristics between the two testing phases introduced variability that may have confounded the pronunciation-listening relationship.

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These findings are consistent with the broader literature on pronunciation and listening relationships, though with important nuances. Han (1996) found that pronunciation-based listening instruction improved both pronunciation clarity and listening comprehension among Korean EFL learners, suggesting a bidirectional relationship. Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015) demonstrated that explicit pronunciation instruction significantly improved listening comprehension performance. Kissling (2018) reveals that suprasegmental-focused pronunciation instruction improved bottom-up processing for listening. Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2013) asserts that listening exercises have a direct impact on English learners' pronunciation. Collectively, these studies suggest that while a theoretical and pedagogical link between pronunciation and listening exists, the strength and consistency of this correlation may depend on various moderating factors. Findings of the current study indicate that the text difficulty level might have played an important role in determining pronunciation accuracy during the read-aloud procedure. This delineates the link between pronunciation, listening, and other skill areas, such as vocabulary (Pennington & Richards, 1986). Overall, the findings of the current study emphasise the need for systematic integration of pronunciation and listening instruction in English Language Teaching curricula.

In summary, while the first test's significant correlation provides preliminary evidence for a positive relationship between pronunciation accuracy and listening comprehension, the inconsistent results across the two testing phases prevent definitive conclusions. The findings suggest that the relationship between pronunciation and listening is likely moderated by factors such as text difficulty in the reading-aloud procedure, sample size, and testing conditions. Future researchers should carefully consider these when designing their research. Future studies should also aim to explore the interplay between pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the correlation between pronunciation accuracy and listening comprehension performance in an effort to seek evidence of a common presumption that better pronunciation is parallel to better listening, or vice versa. To achieve this, pronunciation accuracy and listening performance were measured through the read-aloud procedure and TOEIC-prediction listening test on two separate data collection phases.

The results showed that, while the listening test performance of the participants across the two testing phases was relatively consistent, there was a significant drop in pronunciation accuracy in the second phase when compared to the first one. This difference can be attributed to the text complexity level, along with testing conditions during the read-aloud procedure.

The results of *Pearson's correlation test* for the first phase flagged a statistically significant positive correlation between pronunciation accuracy and listening performance. This means, in the first phase, participants with higher listening scores tended to have better pronunciation accuracy, or vice versa. However, this was not the case in the second phase. The second test did not yield statistically significant results. The inconsistency between the two correlation tests here is attributed to the difference in sample size, the complexity level of the reading texts used in the read-aloud procedure, and the testing conditions across the two phases.

Overall, the inconsistent results across the two correlation tests prevent a definitive conclusion about a linear relationship between pronunciation and listening skills. However, this study contributes to the literature by providing preliminary evidence on the positive relationship between the two skill areas. Furthermore, findings of this study also suggested that pronunciation and listening performance might also be affected by other areas, such as vocabulary mastery. This calls for further research. For example, the interplay between pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary should be explored more in future studies. Researchers should pay more attention to

sample size, testing conditions, and the uniformity of the text in the read-aloud procedure in order to measure pronunciation accuracy more accurately if they want to employ a similar approach in the future.

The practical implications of this study include the need for a sustainable integration of pronunciation and listening instruction into Indonesia's English language teaching curricula. Not only because there was preliminary evidence of their positive relationship as reported in this study, but also because of their potential roles in developing other skill areas like vocabulary and speaking.

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