

Phonological Variations in English among Gen Z Learners: A Sociophonetician Perspective

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Abstract. This study investigated the phonological variations of English among Generation Z learners from a sociophonetic perspective. Data were collected from classroom recordings, reading tasks, and sociolinguistic interviews with 30 university students. The analysis focused on vowel quality, consonant articulation, and prosodic features. The results revealed that vowel shifts, particularly the realization of /æ/ as /ɛ/, reflected strong exposure to American English through digital media. Consonant variations were also observed, including the substitution of interdental fricatives with alveolar stops and the reduction of consonant clusters, which were influenced by both first language transfer and the demands of rapid online communication. Moreover, participants frequently used rising intonation in declarative sentences, a feature associated with global youth identity. Attitudinal data indicated that learners perceived their pronunciation not as a deficiency but as a reflection of identity and global belonging, with intelligibility prioritized over native-like accuracy. These findings suggested that Gen Z learners' phonological practices were shaped by both linguistic and sociocultural factors. The study contributed to sociophonetic research by illustrating how digital exposure and generational identity influenced speech variation. Pedagogically, it underscored the need for pronunciation teaching that emphasizes intelligibility and respects the diversity of global English.

Keywords: *Phonological variation, Sociophonetics, Generation Z, English Pronunciation*

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INTRODUCTION

The study of phonology, which examines the sound systems of language, provides a basis for understanding how English is produced, acquired, and adapted in diverse sociolinguistic contexts. In the digital era, English is no longer restricted to classroom learning but is shaped by global media, online communication, and popular culture. This is particularly evident among Generation Z (Gen Z), individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who are the first generation to grow up entirely in a digitally connected environment. Their constant exposure to multiple English varieties through social media, films, music, and global online communities contributes to the emergence of distinctive phonological patterns that differentiate them from earlier generations of learners (Androutsopoulos, 2020; Tagg & Seargeant, 2021).

Phonological variation is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a social one, influenced by identity, peer interaction, and exposure to diverse English models. A sociophonetician perspective highlights how pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm function as reflections of both linguistic adaptation and social positioning (Docherty & Foulkes, 2022). For Gen Z learners, phonological features often represent hybrid patterns, shaped by the interplay of local languages and global English varieties, particularly American and British English, as well as hybridized forms circulating online (Leppänen, 2020; Jenkins, 2022). These variations underscore the role of phonology in signalling identity, cultural affiliation, and membership in global communities.

Studying phonological variation among Gen Z learners in 2025 is highly relevant as this group now constitutes a major segment of educational and professional settings. Their speech practices illustrate ongoing shifts in English phonology influenced by globalization, mobility, and digitization (Mufwene, 2021). Understanding these variations offers both theoretical and practical contributions: theoretically, it provides insights into the dynamic relationship between language and society, while practically, it helps inform pronunciation pedagogy. Language educators must acknowledge the sociophonetician realities of Gen Z learners in order to design pronunciation instruction that fosters intelligibility while embracing linguistic diversity (Munro & Derwing, 2020; Saito, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate phonological variations in English among Gen Z learners through a sociophonetician lens, focusing on how social identity, media exposure, and linguistic environment shape their pronunciation patterns.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-method sociophonetic design, combining quantitative analysis of phonological patterns with qualitative exploration of the social factors that shaped these variations. The participants consisted of Generation Z English learners, aged between 18 and 24, who were enrolled in university-level English programs in Makassar, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select approximately 30–40 students, ensuring representation of diverse linguistic backgrounds while maintaining shared exposure to digital English input. This sample size was considered sufficient for both phonetic and thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected through three main instruments. First, speech recordings were conducted, consisting of both structured reading tasks (such as word lists, minimal pairs, and short passages) and spontaneous speech tasks (such as interviews and discussions). This dual method allowed the researcher to compare controlled and natural speech (Munro & Derwing, 2020). Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore learners' attitudes toward pronunciation, their perceptions of identity, and the influence of media exposure and peer

interaction on their speech (Tagg & Seargeant, 2021). Finally, a short questionnaire was administered to document participants' language background, frequency of English use, and digital media engagement, as these factors were often linked to phonological variation (Androutsopoulos, 2020).

The analysis combined acoustic, auditory, and qualitative approaches. Acoustic analysis was performed using *Praat* software to measure both segmental features (such as vowel formants and consonant realizations) and suprasegmental features (such as intonation, rhythm, and stress) (Boersma & Weenink, 2023). Auditory and perceptual analysis by trained raters complemented these measurements, allowing for the identification of phonological features that might not have been fully captured through acoustic means (Munro & Derwing, 2020). In addition, qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework to identify social and cultural factors that influenced phonological variation, including identity construction, peer influence, and digital media exposure.

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining confidentiality through anonymization, and adhering to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. By combining quantitative precision with qualitative depth, this research method provided a comprehensive framework for investigating the phonological variations of English among Generation Z learners from a sociophonetic perspective.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the speech data revealed several notable phonological variations among Gen Z learners. First, vowel variation was highly prominent. Many participants showed a tendency to merge or shift certain vowel sounds toward American English norms, particularly in words containing the /æ/ vowel, which was frequently realized closer to /ɛ/ (e.g., "cat" pronounced as "ket"). This pattern indicated the influence of American media exposure, such as YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok, which participants reported as their primary sources of English input.

Second, consonant reduction and simplification were observed. Cluster reduction occurred in casual speech, with participants often omitting final consonants in words like "tests" (/tɛsts/) pronounced as /tɛs/. Similarly, the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ were frequently replaced with /t/ or /d/, as in "think" pronounced /tɪŋk/. These substitutions reflected both transfer from the learners' first language (Bahasa Indonesia or local languages) and the tendency of Gen Z speakers to prioritize fluency and speed in digital communication.

Third, intonation and rhythm patterns displayed significant variation. Several participants employed rising intonation in declarative sentences, a feature commonly associated with "uptalk" or global youth speech styles. This was

particularly evident in spontaneous interviews, suggesting the role of peer influence and social identity in shaping speech practices. Furthermore, many participants adopted syllable-timed rhythm, which aligns with their L1 prosodic patterns, rather than the stress-timed rhythm characteristic of native English varieties.

Finally, the sociolinguistic interviews indicated that learners were aware of their non-standard pronunciation but often expressed positive attitudes toward it. They associated their phonological style with global youth culture and identity rather than viewing it as a deficiency. Participants emphasized that their main concern was intelligibility, not conformity to native-like pronunciation.

The findings suggest that Gen Z learners' phonological variations are shaped by a combination of media exposure, peer interaction, and first language transfer, reflecting broader sociophonetic trends in youth speech. The observed vowel shifts toward American English norms support previous research highlighting the influence of global digital media on learners' pronunciation patterns (Androutsopoulos, 2020; Tagg & Seargeant, 2021). In this study, participants' frequent engagement with online platforms appeared to play a stronger role in shaping phonological outcomes than classroom instruction.

Consonant substitutions, particularly the replacement of interdental fricatives, align with well-documented challenges among EFL learners and confirm earlier studies that identified these sounds as marked and prone to simplification (Munro & Derwing, 2020). However, the prevalence of cluster reduction and omission in casual speech among Gen Z learners also indicates the role of rapid, informal digital communication, where efficiency is often prioritized over phonological accuracy.

The intonation patterns, especially the use of rising intonation in declaratives, point to the spread of globalized youth speech styles. This finding resonates with sociophonetic studies that link intonational shifts to identity construction and generational identity (Docherty & Foulkes, 2022). For Gen Z, such phonological choices reflect not only linguistic adaptation but also symbolic alignment with a global digital community.

Importantly, learners' attitudes toward their pronunciation highlight the changing values in English language use. Rather than striving for native-like accuracy, many Gen Z learners emphasized intelligibility and identity expression. This perspective supports Jenkins' (2022) view of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where variation is not necessarily an obstacle but part of the evolving nature of global English. Pedagogically, the results underscore the need for a shift in pronunciation instruction. Instead of enforcing rigid native-speaker norms, educators should recognize the sociophonetic realities of learners and focus on promoting intelligibility while allowing space for linguistic diversity. As Saito (2021) argues, effective pronunciation teaching must balance clarity with learners' social identity, acknowledging that variation is an inherent feature of global English use. In

sum, the study demonstrates that Gen Z learners' phonological variations are socially and culturally embedded rather than random errors. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in sociophonetics and applied linguistics, emphasizing the interplay between phonology, identity, and digital media in shaping contemporary English use.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the phonological variations of English among Gen Z learners from a sociophonetic perspective. The findings showed that learners demonstrated systematic variation in vowel production, consonant substitution, and prosodic features. Vowel shifts, such as the tendency to pronounce /æ/ closer to /ɛ/, reflected the influence of American English input primarily acquired through digital media. Consonant simplifications, including the replacement of interdental fricatives and the reduction of clusters, were attributed to both first language transfer and the demands of rapid communication in digital spaces. Furthermore, the prevalence of rising intonation in declarative sentences suggested the adoption of global youth speech styles that index identity and group belonging.

The learners' attitudes revealed that they did not perceive their phonological patterns as deficiencies but rather as markers of identity and global youth culture. Their primary concern was intelligibility, which aligns with current perspectives in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). These results indicated that Gen Z learners' phonological practices were shaped not only by linguistic constraints but also by social and cultural factors.

Overall, the study contributed to sociophonetic research by demonstrating how generational identity and digital exposure influenced phonological variation in English. It also offered pedagogical implications, emphasizing that pronunciation teaching should prioritize intelligibility and acknowledge the legitimacy of variation in global English contexts. In doing so, educators could better support learners in developing communicative competence while respecting their linguistic identity.

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