

Investigating Pronunciation Errors of the *-ed-* Ending Among Malian Graduate EFL Students

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the pronunciation challenges faced by Malian graduate EFL learners regarding the final -ed sound in regular verbs. Utilizing qualitative methods, data were collected through structured interviews and read-aloud tasks, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of each learner's articulation of the targeted sound. The analysis identified a range of pronunciation errors, revealing a significant pattern of difficulty among participants in producing the -ed ending correctly. These difficulties may be attributed to various linguistic and phonetic factors specific to the learners' native languages. Based on the findings, this study offers pedagogical suggestions aimed at enhancing pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts. This research is expected to be beneficial for educators seeking to understand and mitigate pronunciation challenges in their classrooms.*

KEYWORDS: EFL, Final -ed Sound, Malian Learners, Linguistic Factors, Pedagogical Factors, Pronunciation Errors

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1. Introduction

Effective pronunciation in a second language involves the mastery of both segmental and suprasegmental features. According to Munro and Derwing (1994), suprasegmental features are critical for intelligibility, often outweighing segmental accuracy in communicative success. However, as Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) note, these features are among the most difficult for EFL learners to acquire. In the Malian context, Maiga (2021) identifies word stress as a key pronunciation difficulty, one that significantly impacts students' overall oral performance.

In addition to suprasegmental challenges, many learners struggle with the segmental aspects of English, particularly the morphological and phonological processes involved in word formation. A recurring issue is the pronunciation of the regular past tense -ed ending, which has three different allomorphs -/t/, /d/, and /ɪd/-depending on the final sound of the verb stem. For instance, *asked* is pronounced /æskt/, *begged* as /bɛgd/, and *wanted* as /'wɒntɪd/.

Numerous studies have addressed the difficulty EFL learners face in correctly producing these allomorphs. Flege (1995) attributes such errors to phonological transfer from the learners' first language, while Derwing and Munro (2005) emphasize the role of explicit pronunciation instruction in improving learner outcomes. Wang (2015) argues that many learners are not even aware of the rule-governed variation of the -ed ending, treating it as a uniform suffix rather than a morphophonemic feature.

Research by Garcia-Sanchez (2014) and Bui (2020) further confirms that the mispronunciation of the -ed ending is a common source of misunderstanding in spoken English. These studies highlight that learners frequently either overgeneralize one form or avoid the -ed suffix altogether in speech, especially in spontaneous conversation. Despite the significance of this issue, little research has been conducted in African EFL contexts, particularly in Mali, where English is taught as a foreign language in a multilingual environment.

To address this gap, the present study examines the pronunciation patterns of Malian graduate students concerning the past tense -ed ending. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- Can Malian graduate students accurately pronounce the final -ed ending of regular verbs?
- What are the primary tendencies observed in their pronunciation of this morphological feature?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on pronunciation challenges in EFL settings, with a particular focus on underrepresented linguistic contexts. As Levis and Barriuso (2012) argue, identifying and analyzing specific learner errors is essential for developing effective pedagogical strategies. Given the limited attention paid to pronunciation in the Malian curriculum and research, the findings of this study will offer insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking to enhance learners' pronunciation skills and overall communicative competence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Population

The participants in this study were selected from the Malian graduate student body at the University of Kabala. This demographic was chosen based on the assumption that at the graduate level students possess a sufficient level of English proficiency to pronounce the targeted sounds with minimal difficulty. A total of 20 students drawn from five different groups participated. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23 years old. All participants are multilingual, with proficiency in French and Bamanankan, and many also speak additional

local languages such as Songhai, Soninke, Dogon, Bomu, or Fulbe. This linguistic diversity is important as it may influence their pronunciation patterns and phonetic transfer when learning English.

2.2. Materials and Procedure

The participants underwent two rounds of testing for this study, each designed to assess their pronunciation accuracy in different contexts. The first test involved reading a passage and isolated words, while the second test consisted of a free speech interview. These techniques have been employed in prior research to effectively diagnose pronunciation accuracy (Grant, 2001; Smith, Meyers, & Burkhalter, 1992; Prator & Robinet, 1985; Levis & Barriuso, 2012).

2.2.1. Reading Passage and Isolated Words

The diagnostic reading passage was a concise text derived from a video presentation of Suggestopedia by Lisa Sparrow.¹ This text was transcribed by the researcher and focused on teaching the past tense, including the pronunciation of past tense forms. The isolated words comprised 17 commonly used regular verbs conjugated in the past simple tense, selected by the researcher to ensure relevance and frequency in everyday use. These verbs are presented in the table below.

Table1: List of isolated words

borrow	Dress	answer
close	enjoy	bake
compare	help	behave
continue	add	admire
		agree

2.2.2. Free Speech

The second assessment involved a structured interview in which participants were prompted to respond to questions designed to elicit personal narratives, particularly concerning their past activities. This approach was aimed at encouraging the use of the past tense and providing a natural context for pronunciation practice.

Prior to the study, participants were informed about the interview topics and provided with a worksheet one week in advance, allowing them ample time to prepare. All sessions were recorded using a mobile phone recorder to ensure accurate data collection. After the interviews, only the regular verbs in their past tense forms were transcribed, focusing specifically on the pronunciation of the -ed- ending to align with the study's objectives.

2.3. Calculating Error Rate

To analyze the collected data, two judges, including the researcher, evaluated the pronunciation accuracy of the participants. The reading passage included 17 regular verbs conjugated in the simple past tense, and another 17 regular verbs were provided in a separate reading list. The error rate for each reader was calculated by identifying incorrect pronunciations of the -ed- endings, multiplying the total number of errors by 100, and dividing by 17. For instance, if a reader made five errors, the error rate would be

¹ Language teaching methods, Suggestopedia by Lisa Sparrow. (2023, October, 02) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rkrvRlty5M&t=759s>

calculated as approximately 29%. For the free speech segment, the error rate was determined by summing the errors and dividing by the total number of verbs used by each speaker. In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative examination was conducted to provide descriptive insights into the types of errors observed.

The study employed an impressionistic assessment of pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2008), whereby the researchers relied on their perceptual judgments to evaluate the participants' pronunciation of regular verbs in the past tense. This method is widely accepted in pronunciation research and has been supported by scholars in the field (Ladefoged, 2003, p. 30, cited in Levis & Barriuso, 2012). Through this

methodology, the study aims to yield valuable insights into the pronunciation challenges faced by Malian EFL learners.

3. Results

Our research questions focused on two primary aspects: first, whether students make errors in pronouncing the final -ed sound of regular verbs in the past tense, and second, the main patterns of these errors. The results revealed a wide range of pronunciation abilities among the participants, with error rates fluctuating between 43% and 88%. This variability indicates a significant challenge in mastering this particular phonetic feature.

Overall, serious errors were observed in both the reading passage and the isolated words, with an average error rate of 51%. Similarly, the free speech component yielded an error rate of 52%. Notably, participants exhibited consistent performance across different testing formats, suggesting that their difficulties with the -ed ending were pervasive and not confined to specific contexts.

A detailed analysis of the errors revealed that the most significant issues stemmed from the overgeneralization of the /id/ and /d/ sounds, which accounted for 81% and 12% of the total errors, respectively. Additionally, the omission of the sound altogether was noted in 7% of the cases, indicating instances where the final -ed sound was not pronounced at all. Notably, there were no occurrences of the /d/ sound being incorrectly pronounced as /t/.

The findings from the reading exercises were mirrored in the free speech assessments. A striking 75% of the errors in free speech were related to the addition of an epenthetic vowel, which is a common strategy that speakers employ when encountering challenging sounds. The remaining errors involved the omission of the ending sound (21%) and the substitution of the /t/ sound with /d/ (4%).

To illustrate the error distribution, the following diagrams present the percentage of errors for each learner, complemented by subsequent diagrams that depict the frequency of specific error types. These include mispronunciations of /d/ or /t/ as /id/, /t/ as /d/, /d/ as /t/, and instances of sound omission. By visualizing these error patterns, we can gain a clearer understanding of the pronunciation challenges faced by the participants in this study.

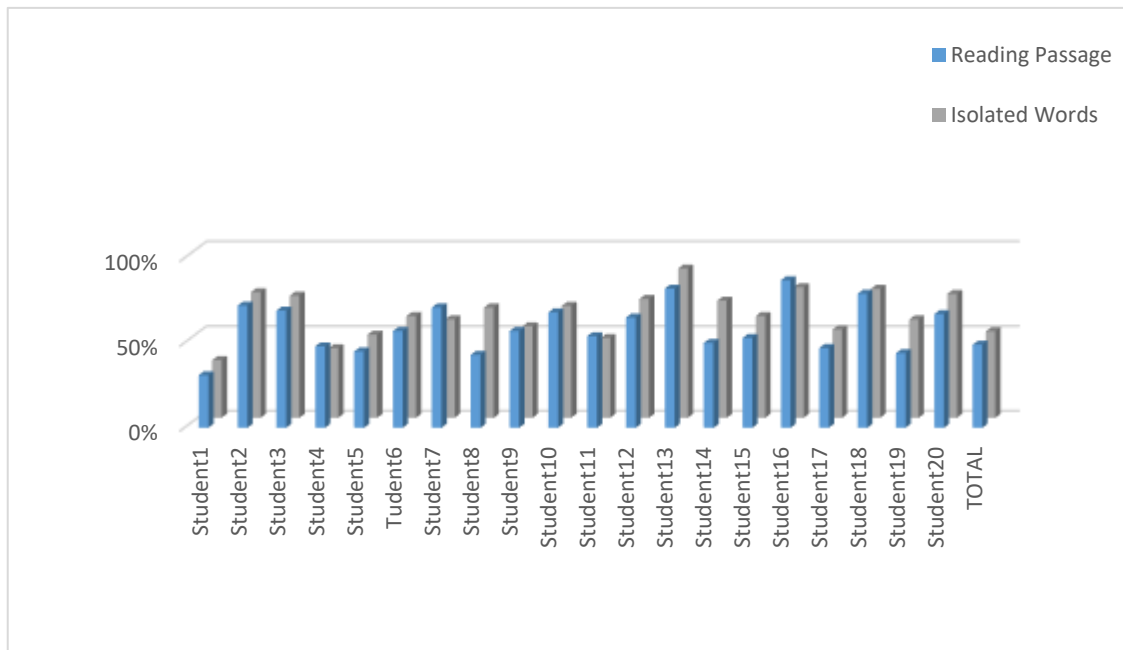


Figure1: Percentage of errors in reading

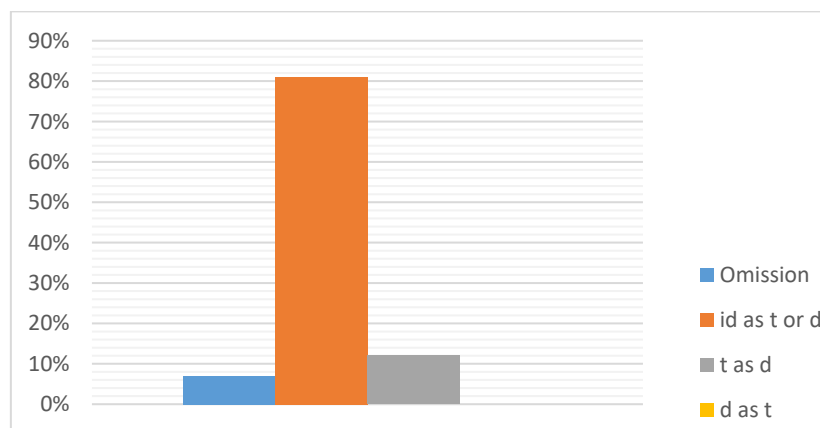


Figure2: Error tendencies in reading

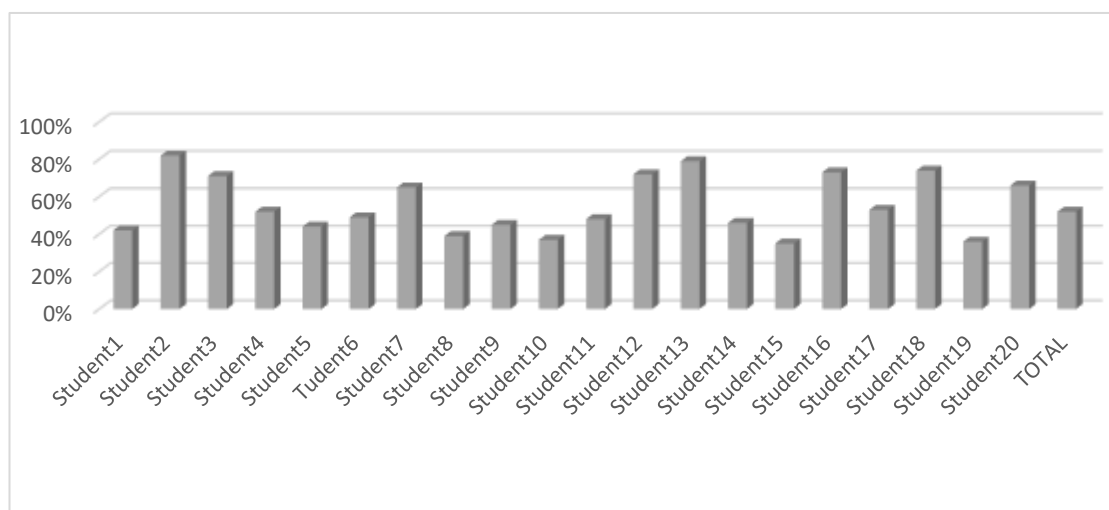


Figure3: Percentage of errors in free speech

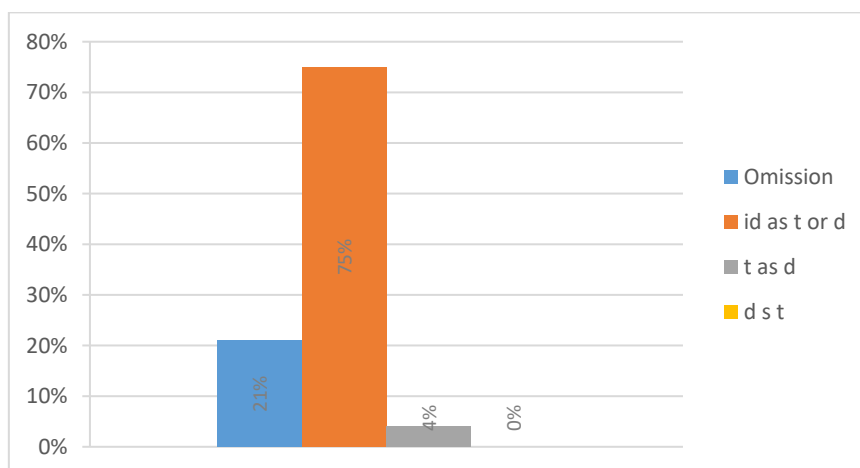


Figure4: Error tendencies in reading

4. Discussion

As presented in the findings, the error rates in the reading passage, isolated words, and free speech were quite similar. The pronunciation difficulties with the -ed ending of regular verbs centered on three main issues: overgeneralization of the /id/ and /d/ sounds, and the complete omission of the sound. The most frequent error was substituting /id/ for /t/ or /d/.

4.1. Causes of Errors

One potential cause of students' errors in pronouncing the -ed ending is related to English spelling. The relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English is complex. Words are often not pronounced the way they are written, which can lead students to pronounce all -ed endings as /id/ or /d/. This study shows, as seen in diagrams 2 and 4, that none of the errors involved pronouncing /d/ or /id/ as /t/, indicating that the participants were misled by spelling patterns. All words that ended in /t/ (e.g., washed, looked, stretched) were incorrectly pronounced, either as /d/ or /id/.

Another factor influencing pronunciation is the stress pattern of the preceding syllable. Suh (2016) notes that learners may struggle with the -ed ending based on the verb's stress pattern. For instance, the pronunciation changes depending on whether the root verb ends with a voiced or voiceless consonant, which can confuse learners unfamiliar with these rules.

Consonant clusters also pose a problem. When the -ed ending is pronounced as /t/ or /d/, it creates a cluster of consonants, which is a challenge for many EFL learners (Diouf Lo, 2021; Fathy Khalifa, 2020). This difficulty is likely influenced by learners' native languages. For example, Bamanankan, the local language in Mali, does not have consonant clusters, making it harder for native speakers to pronounce them in English. Garcia-Sanchez (2014) found that Spanish-speaking learners faced similar difficulties, struggling to produce the three allophones of the -ed ending (/t/, /d/, and /ɪd/) due to L1 phonology interference. Keshavarz and Salimi (2011) also reported differences in pronunciation accuracy depending on the learners' language background.

In the free speech part of the study, many students did not use the correct past tense forms, likely due to their weak grasp of past tense grammar. This made it seem as if they were not pronouncing the -ed ending at all.

These issues can be traced back to the classroom. Despite phonetics being a core subject in the English department, it does not seem to significantly improve students' pronunciation. Moreover, there is no language lab, and pronunciation instruction is mainly delivered using traditional methods, focusing heavily on rules (Maiga, 2021). While the -ed ending is occasionally covered in written exams, it is not explicitly included in the curriculum, meaning that only some teachers address it in their lessons. This lack of focus contributes to students' difficulties in pronouncing the -ed ending correctly.

4.2. Suggestions for Learning/Teaching the -ed Ending

Based on the results, the following recommendations can help improve the learning and teaching of the -ed ending. One effective activity for students is self-recording. Students could watch Lisa Sparrow's video on pronouncing the past tense forms, record themselves repeating the passage, and then compare their recording with the original. This self-assessment method can be both engaging and educational. Additionally, tongue twisters, such as Peter Piper, can be used to make pronunciation practice more fun. Many such exercises are easily found online.

Moreover, mobile applications like ELSA can provide instant feedback on pronunciation, which is an effective tool for self-improvement. Huffman (2011) highlights the benefits of mobile technology in enhancing oral proficiency, citing its accessibility and user-friendly nature. Abbas and Fathira (2020) also used mobile apps to help their students improve their pronunciation of the -ed ending.

However, technology should not replace formal pronunciation instruction. Research shows that direct instruction can significantly improve learners' pronunciation of regular verbs ending in -ed. Alves (2007) and Delatorre & Baptista (2014) found that even short-term pronunciation instruction positively impacted learners' ability to pronounce -ed endings. The authors also observed that explicit instruction on the pronunciation rules of the -ed ending led to better pronunciation accuracy. Many students are unaware of these rules, resulting in inconsistent pronunciation. Bui (2020) further emphasizes the need to integrate focused pronunciation practice into lessons to raise awareness and improve students' production of the -ed ending.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the pronunciation of the past tense -ed endings in regular verbs by Malian graduate EFL learners. The findings revealed three primary issues: the frequent addition of an epenthetic vowel (inserting an extra vowel sound), the incorrect use of /d/ as /t/ after voiceless consonants, and the omission of the -ed ending altogether. These patterns suggest that the learners struggle to consistently apply the correct pronunciation rules for the -ed ending. Interestingly, the only error that was not common in this study was the use of /t/ as /d/, which contrasts slightly with findings from previous research (Prator & Robinet, 1985; Abbas & Fathira, 2020;). However, these similarities and differences must be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the results.

Given the strong evidence from other studies demonstrating the positive effects of pronunciation instruction, it is recommended that teachers-regardless of their specialization-explicitly address the pronunciation of the -ed ending in their lessons. Additionally, teachers should encourage students to use pronunciation learning strategies, such as mobile applications, which can help improve their awareness and accuracy. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating the pronunciation of other grammatical endings, such as the final -s, and exploring how learners' native languages, particularly French and local languages, influence their pronunciation of English.

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