IJLECR (International Journal of Language Education and Cultural Review)
E-Jurnal: http://journal.unj.ac.id/unj/index.php/ijlecr
Volume 11, Number 2, December 2025, Page: 260-270

IJLECR
International Journal of Language Education and Culture Review

E-ISSN: 2461-131x
P-ISSN: 2406-8586

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.21009/ijlecr.v11i2.64902*

Received: 23 September 2025
Revised: 25 November2025
Accepted: 4 December 2025
Published: 7 December 2025

Emotional Dynamics of High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) among EFL Learners in a Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation remains a challenge for EFL learners, particularly in pesantren contexts where access to systematic phonetic instruction is limited. High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) has been recognized as an effective approach to improving pronunciation through exposure to multiple speakers and accents. This study examines both pronunciation development and the emotional dynamics experienced by learners during HVPT implementation. Using a qualitative case study design, the study involved 20 santri participating in an English Club at a pesantren in Madura. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The findings indicate three key emotional dynamics. First, learners initially experienced negative emotions, including anxiety, tension, and fatigue, especially when encountering unfamiliar phonetic input. Second, these emotions gradually shifted toward positive states such as curiosity, confidence, enjoyment, and pride as learners became more familiar with the training. Third, positive emotions enhanced learner engagement and supported more natural and fluent pronunciation, while persistent anxiety constrained speech production and accuracy. The study also highlights the crucial role of the tutor and a supportive classroom atmosphere in maintaining emotional balance and optimizing HVPT outcomes. Overall, the study concludes that HVPT supports not only pronunciation improvement but also learners' emotional engagement, which plays a significant role in motivation and learning outcomes. Effective HVPT implementation in pesantren settings therefore requires integrating phonetic instruction with emotional support.

Keywords: *High Variability Phonetic Training, Emotional Dynamic, Pesantren Setting*

INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia has its set of issues which include into pronunciation (Istiqomah et al, 2021; Winarti et al, 2019). Pronunciation is a key element in language study which improves oral communication skills or speaking (Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2021; Smakman, 2020). Also, which plays a role is how well students can tell apart and put out English sounds which they don't have in their native language (Tambunsaribu & Simatupang, 2021; Luthfianda et al, 2024). But for EFL students in settings which have little native speaker input and exposure to a wide range of English sounds like in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) the delivery of sounds which are foreign to their language for instance /θ/

in “think” or /æ/ in “cat” cause misperception and poor production which leads to suboptimal performance in speaking skills (Ristati et al, 2025). It affects language proficiency which includes fluency, also students’ self esteem and motivation to study (Wibowo & Nasrullah, 2024).

In the case of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) which their curriculum structure is put forward through a religious based framework (Arif & Abdullah, 2024), formal English language instruction takes a back seat to that of religious studies. To that end some Islamic boarding schools have created what may be called informal education like English language clubs. These clubs are put in place for students to practice language skills out of the formal structure of the school. Also, within these informal settings which may pass as English language clubs’ students do indeed put to use what little foreign language skill they may have. But at the same time, it is also true that learning English in these out of the way groups is also a challenge. One issue is that of pronunciation and intonation which is very much a student’s’ issue in terms of limited exposure, a lack of systematic phonetic instruction, and also a limited English language communication setting (Sholihah & Desrani, 2024). It requires a better, more structured and adaptive approach which addresses the individual needs of the students especially in the area of pronunciation which is be able to improve in their pronunciation accuracy and their confidence in using English.

One of the methods that is growing in its use in the field of pronunciation teaching is High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT). It is a training method which puts out to improve foreign language listening and pronunciation skills by presenting different sets of sounds and accents (Mahdi & Mohsen, 2024). This approach trains students’ ability to identify and tell apart sounds through which they are exposed to many speakers and contexts (Zhang, Liao, & Truong, 2024). That is to say it includes exposure to a wide range of sound variations of a sound for example the different ways in which /t/ is pronounced in the word “water” thus at the same time which improves perception and production of sound. This method has very also proven to do well in that it improves phonetic skills as well as the recognition and production of foreign language sounds. Thus, the application of HVPT has great value in the improvement of EFL students in Islamic boarding schools’ pronunciation (Mahdi & Mohsen, 2024; Thomson, 2018; Melnik & Peperkamp, 2020).

High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) is grounded in the principle that exposure to a wide range of phonetic variations enables learners to develop more stable and flexible phonological representations. By encountering multiple speakers, accents, and contextual realizations of the same sounds, learners are better able to generalize phonetic categories and improve both perception and production accuracy (Bradlow et al., 1999; Iverson et al., 2005; Sakai & Moorman, 2018). Previous studies have shown that HVPT is particularly effective for EFL learners when dealing with sounds that are absent in their first language, such as /θ/ and /ð/, which often cause persistent pronunciation difficulties (Iverson et al., 2009; Mahdi & Mohsen, 2024). Moreover, HVPT has been reported to support not only segmental features but also suprasegmental aspects of speech, including intonation and rhythm, which are essential for fluency and intelligibility in communication (Thomson, 2025).

But most research report on the quantifiable results of phonetic skill improvement (Uchihara, Karas, & Thomson, 2024; Mahdi & Mohsen, 2024; Zhang, Cheng & Zhang, 2021, Sakai & Moorman, 2018; Logan, Lively, & Pisoni, 1991), which at the same time pays little attention to non linguistic elements like students’ feelings during the learning process. In other words, research into HVPT reports mainly on its cognitive results which in turn pay little attention to the affective element of the learners whereas in fact emotions play a key role in successful language learning.

Pronunciation learning, however, is not solely a cognitive process but also an emotionally charged experience. Unlike receptive language skills, pronunciation practice involves oral

production that is often performed publicly, making learners more vulnerable to emotional reactions. Studies have reported that pronunciation activities may elicit a wide range of emotions, from positive states such as enthusiasm, enjoyment, and confidence to negative emotions including anxiety, frustration, and embarrassment (Alimorad & Adib, 2022). These emotional responses influence learners' willingness to practice, their openness to corrective feedback, and their persistence in overcoming errors. Importantly, maintaining a balance between positive and negative emotions is crucial, as excessive anxiety has been shown to inhibit pronunciation development and reduce learners' willingness to engage in spoken interaction (Eragamreddy, 2024).

In the field of positive psychology and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), research has shown that positive emotions such as enthusiasm, self-confidence, and satisfaction contribute to increased motivation and learning retention, while negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration may hinder learning and become barriers to instructional effectiveness (Zhang & Chen, 2022; Lindquist et al., 2015). Despite this growing body of research, studies examining the emotional dimensions of High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT), particularly within pesantren contexts, remain limited. Pesantren represent a distinctive learning environment characterized by monolingual settings, intensive religious study schedules, strong social norms, heavy academic workloads, and limited access to technology. These conditions may shape learners' emotional responses to intensive pronunciation training differently and require contextual adaptation of HVPT to address persistent issues such as phonetic fossilization (Akla & Muyassaroh, 2024).

Research in second language acquisition further suggests that emotional experiences are closely interconnected with learners' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Positive emotions have been found to enhance intrinsic motivation, which in turn supports affective engagement (interest and comfort), cognitive engagement (attention and strategy use), and behavioral engagement (active participation and practice frequency) in pronunciation learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Learners who experience enjoyment and confidence during pronunciation instruction tend to demonstrate higher levels of participation and greater improvement in pronunciation accuracy and fluency. Conversely, negative emotional states such as anxiety and low self-confidence may hinder engagement and limit learning gains. These findings underscore the importance of examining learners' emotional dynamics when implementing pronunciation-focused approaches such as HVPT, particularly in demanding learning environments like pesantren.

Based on these considerations, the present study is guided by the following research problem: how do EFL learners' emotional experiences during HVPT influence their engagement, motivation, and pronunciation learning outcomes in a pesantren context? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: (1) to explore the emotional dynamics experienced by EFL learners during HVPT implementation in a pesantren setting, and (2) to examine how these emotional experiences relate to learners' engagement, motivation, and pronunciation development. The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the study enriches SLA research by extending the discussion of emotion in pronunciation learning within under-researched religious educational contexts. Practically, the findings provide insights for English teachers and program designers in pesantren to develop pronunciation instruction that integrates effective phonetic training with learners' emotional and psychological support.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to obtain an in-depth and holistic understanding of EFL learners' emotional experiences during High-Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT). A case study approach is suitable for examining

complex educational phenomena within their real-life contexts (Duff, 2014). The case investigated in this study was an English club operating under the auspices of an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in Madura, a context characterized by limited exposure to authentic English input and strong sociocultural influences on learning.

The research was conducted in an English club program that implemented HVPT activities as part of its pronunciation practice. The participants consisted of 20 santri, selected through purposive sampling based on their active participation in the HVPT sessions. These students regularly attended the training and were considered capable of reflecting on their emotional and learning experiences. The English club setting allowed for sustained interaction and observation of learners' emotional dynamics during pronunciation practice.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to capture learners' emotional experiences comprehensively. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' emotions, interpretations, motivation, and perceived learning outcomes related to HVPT. An interview guide was developed based on theories of emotion in second language acquisition and learner engagement. Participant observation was conducted during HVPT sessions to document students' emotional expressions, interaction patterns, engagement levels, and responses to pronunciation tasks. Field notes and observation sheets were guided by predefined emotional and engagement indicators. In addition, students' learning journals and personal notes were analyzed as supporting documents to triangulate emotional and experiential data.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded inductively to identify recurring emotional patterns, motivational shifts, and engagement behaviors. Codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting learners' emotional dynamics during HVPT. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and documents. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

For the interview instrument, use an interview grid with several aspects that will be asked according to the following table.

Table 1. Interview Aspects

No	Interview Aspect	Focus of Question
1	Emotional responses to HVPT	Feelings before, during, and after HVPT sessions (e.g., anxiety, enjoyment, confidence)
2	Motivation	Changes in motivation to practice pronunciation and participate in English activities
3	Learning engagement	Willingness to practice, participation, attention, and effort during HVPT
4	Perceived pronunciation improvement	Students' perceptions of changes in pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and confidence
5	Learning challenges	Emotional and cognitive difficulties experienced during HVPT
6	Tutor and classroom atmosphere	Perceptions of tutor support, peer interaction, and learning environment

Then, the observation instrument is prepared based on several aspects of observation based on the theoretical framework in the following table.

Table 2. Observation Aspects Based on Theoretical Framework

No	Aspect Observed	Indicator	Theoretical Basis
1	Emotional expressions	Facial expressions, tone of voice, body language	Alimorad & Adib (2022); Lindquist et al. (2015)
2	Behavioral engagement	Frequency of participation, willingness to speak	Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011); MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012)
3	Cognitive engagement	Focus, repetition, self-correction attempts	Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011)
4	Affective engagement	Enjoyment, confidence, anxiety during tasks	Eragamreddy (2024)
5	Interaction patterns	Peer collaboration and response to feedback	Zhang & Chen (2022)
6	Learning persistence	Effort after errors, task completion	MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Students' Emotional Dynamic during HVPT Implementation

The findings show that students experienced dynamic emotional changes during the implementation of High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) in the English Club, as reflected in both interview and observation data. These emotional dynamics ranged from negative emotions such as anxiety and fatigue to positive emotions including curiosity, enthusiasm, pride, and increased motivation. Interview data indicate that anxiety and physical fatigue were common during the initial stages of HVPT. One student explained:

> *"At first, I was very anxious because I was afraid of pronouncing them incorrectly. Moreover, at that time, I wasn't very focused on listening because I was very tired after school and Islamic boarding school activities. Time was very limited. But after several attempts with the tutor's guidance, I finally managed to pronounce the word. I felt relieved and more enthusiastic."* **(Student 1)**

This statement illustrates the emotional shift from anxiety to enthusiasm as students began to experience small successes during HVPT practice. Similar emotional transitions were reported by other participants. Another student stated:

> *"When I successfully imitate correctly after listening to the recording several times, the fatigue and sleepiness disappear, and I become even more motivated to continue."* **(Student 2)**

These interview findings were corroborated by classroom observations. During early sessions, several students were observed hesitating before speaking, producing very soft utterances, and showing signs of tiredness such as lowered posture and reduced focus. As students became more familiar with HVPT activities, observable behaviors changed, including increased vocal volume, more frequent repetition of target sounds, and more active participation. Curiosity and a sense of challenge also emerged as positive emotional drivers. One student expressed:

> *"I was curious about why a real person's voice could be so different from ours. So I wanted to keep trying until I could sound like them."* **(Student 5)**

He further added:

> *"Sometimes it's really hard, but that challenges me to prove that I can do it too."* **(Student 5)**

Observational data supported this finding, as students demonstrating curiosity were frequently seen replaying audio materials, leaning closer to the speakers, and initiating

additional practice without tutor prompts. Feelings of pride were also evident when students received peer recognition. One student noted:

"When I imitate correctly, my friends say it's good. I feel really proud because I usually make mistakes." **(Student 3)**

Correspondingly, classroom observations showed that students who received positive feedback were more willing to volunteer responses and actively participate in subsequent HVPT activities. These findings suggest that students' emotional dynamics during HVPT are fluid, with emotional shifts from anxiety to curiosity, challenge, and pride supporting sustained motivation and engagement in pronunciation learning.

Table 3. Emotional Dynamics during HVPT: Interview and Observation Findings

Emotional Aspect	Interview Evidence (Students' Voices)	Observation Evidence
Anxiety	Fear of mispronunciation and lack of confidence at early stages	Hesitation, low voice volume, avoidance of eye contact
Fatigue	Reports of tiredness due to school and pesantren activities	Slouched posture, reduced attention during listening tasks
Emotional relief	Feelings of relief after successful pronunciation	Smiling, relaxed posture, repeated attempts
Curiosity	Interest in native-speaker pronunciation differences	Replaying audio, focused listening behavior
Challenge	Desire to prove ability despite difficulty	Persistent practice, repeated trials
Pride	Pride after receiving peer recognition	Increased participation and volunteering
Motivation	Increased enthusiasm to continue HVPT	Sustained engagement and active involvement

The Impact of the Emotional dynamic on Motivation, Engagement, and Learning Outcomes

The findings indicate that students' emotional dynamics during High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) significantly influenced their motivation, level of engagement, and pronunciation learning outcomes. These influences were evident in both students' verbal accounts during interviews and their observable behaviors during HVPT sessions.

1. The Role of Emotions in Enhancing or Inhibiting Learning Motivation

Interview data revealed that positive emotions such as joy, confidence, and curiosity acted as strong motivators during HVPT practice. Students reported feeling more motivated when HVPT materials were engaging and relatable.

"I feel happy, Sis. When HVPT uses sound samples from movies and songs, it's easier for me to remember the pronunciation. It feels so good when I finally can imitate it correctly." **(Student 14)**

"What keeps me motivated even though the pronunciation is difficult is that HVPT is made fun, so the stress is somewhat diverted. Instead, it makes me curious to keep trying." **(Student 7)**

These perceptions were supported by classroom observations. Students who expressed enjoyment and curiosity were observed voluntarily repeating sounds, requesting to replay audio materials, and maintaining attention for longer periods. In contrast, negative emotions such as fatigue and frustration were found to reduce motivation.

"When I'm tired, HVPT practice feels hard and makes me reluctant to repeat the sounds." **(Student 8)**

Observationally, students who reported fatigue were less responsive, repeated sounds fewer times, and showed reduced concentration, indicating that emotional and physical states influenced motivational intensity during HVPT.

2. The Relationship between Emotional Dynamics and Students' Level of Engagement

Interview findings showed a strong relationship between emotional states and engagement levels. Students who experienced positive emotions such as enthusiasm and satisfaction tended to participate actively in HVPT activities.

"I'm really active, Sis! It's fun hearing different accents. It makes me enthusiastic about repeating until I can do it." **(Student 11)**

Classroom observations corroborated this finding, as enthusiastic students were seen speaking more frequently, repeating sounds with clearer articulation, and volunteering responses. Conversely, students who experienced confusion, embarrassment, or anxiety often disengaged from activities.

"I am silent if I can't tell the difference of the sounds." **(Student 15)**

"If asked to repeat out loud by myself I get embarrassed." **(Student 8)**

Observed behaviors included silence during drills, avoidance of eye contact, and reluctance to respond individually. However, in supportive classroom conditions—such as choral repetition and positive tutor feedback these students gradually demonstrated increased engagement

3. The Influence of Emotions on Pronunciation Learning Outcomes

Students' emotional states were also found to influence pronunciation progress. Interview data indicated that positive emotions facilitated experimentation with difficult sounds and improved pronunciation accuracy.

"When I am happy and confident, I am more open to try tough pronunciations like the 'th' sound." **(Student 1)**

"When I'm relaxed and comfortable, my pronunciation becomes more natural." **(Student 4)**

Observational data confirmed that confident and relaxed students demonstrated smoother articulation, more flexible tongue movement, and greater consistency in producing target sounds. In contrast, anxious students exhibited stiff articulation and inconsistent pronunciation despite repeated practice. This observation was further supported by tutor reflections:

"When students feel more relaxed and confident, their pronunciation clearly improves." **(Tutor)**

These findings suggest that pronunciation outcomes in HVPT are shaped not only by phonetic input but also by learners' emotional readiness and comfort during practice.

Table 4. The Impact of Emotional Dynamics on Motivation, Engagement, and Learning Outcomes

Learning Aspect	Interview Evidence	Observation Evidence
Motivation	Enjoyment and curiosity increased willingness to practice	Frequent voluntary repetition and sustained attention
Decreased motivation	Fatigue and frustration reduced practice desire	Limited repetition and reduced responsiveness
Engagement	Enthusiastic students actively participated	Volunteering, clearer articulation, frequent practice
Low engagement	Anxiety and embarrassment led to silence	Avoidance of eye contact, minimal participation

E-ISSN: 2461-131x
P-ISSN: 2406-8586

Pronunciation improvement	Confidence encouraged trying difficult sounds	More natural articulation and consistency
Pronunciation difficulty	Anxiety caused stiffness and hesitation	Rigid mouth movement and inconsistent production

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) by demonstrating that its effectiveness extends beyond technical phonetic improvement to include learners' emotional dynamics during the training process. Previous HVPT studies have largely emphasized measurable gains in perception and production accuracy through exposure to multiple accents and phonetic variations (Logan et al., 1991; Sakai & Moorman, 2018; Uchihara et al., 2024). This study extends those findings by showing that successful pronunciation development such as improved production of /θ/, /r/, and vowel length contrasts is closely associated with students' emotional readiness. Learners who experienced positive emotions such as confidence, enthusiasm, and enjoyment were more willing to engage in repeated practice and take phonetic risks, resulting in more natural and fluent pronunciation. This highlights a novel contribution of the present study by positioning emotional dynamics as a mediating factor in HVPT effectiveness.

From the perspective of affective studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the findings align with and further elaborate existing theories that emphasize the role of emotion in language learning. The observed influence of anxiety, tension, and self-doubt on articulation supports the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; Lin, 2008), which posits that negative emotional states can obstruct language input and output. However, this study advances affective SLA research by providing empirical evidence from pronunciation-focused training, an area that has received less affective attention compared to skills such as speaking or writing. While previous studies have discussed the general relationship between emotion, motivation, and engagement (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), the present findings demonstrate how emotional tension manifests physically in articulation, affecting tongue and facial muscle movement during pronunciation practice. This nuanced insight adds depth to the understanding of emotion performance relationships in SLA.

In terms of learning context, this study offers a significant contribution to research on EFL instruction in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), a setting that remains underrepresented in international literature. Existing national studies have reported challenges related to limited exposure, heavy religious schedules, and English-speaking anxiety among pesantren students (Wibowo & Nasrullah, 2024; Andini & Zaitun, 2023). The present study extends these findings by showing that HVPT can function as an effective pronunciation strategy in pesantren contexts when learners' emotional experiences are carefully managed. The findings suggest that the pesantren environment does not merely present constraints but also shapes unique emotional responses that can either support or hinder intensive phonetic training. This contextual insight represents a novel contribution by situating HVPT within a religious educational setting and highlighting the importance of emotional adaptation.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of integrating emotional support into pronunciation instruction to maximize HVPT outcomes. Consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of teacher support and classroom atmosphere in reducing language anxiety (Zhang & Chen, 2022; Eragamreddy, 2024), this study demonstrates that tutor encouragement and a supportive learning environment enable students to lower affective barriers and engage more fully with phonetic input. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative perspective, which combines HVPT, affective SLA, and pesantren-based EFL learning into a unified framework. By demonstrating that pronunciation success is the result of both technical phonetic training and emotional facilitation, this study offers pedagogical implications for designing

E-ISSN: 2461-131x
P-ISSN: 2406-8586

pronunciation programs that are not only linguistically effective but also emotionally responsive, particularly in contexts with limited exposure to authentic English.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the implementation of High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) significantly influences not only students' technical pronunciation development but also their emotional dynamics during learning. The findings indicate that positive emotions such as confidence, enthusiasm, and emotional ease enhance students' motivation, engagement, and willingness to practice challenging phonetic features, leading to more natural pronunciation outcomes. Conversely, negative emotions including anxiety, tension, and low self-confidence inhibit participation, restrict articulatory flexibility, and slow phonetic internalization. These results confirm that students' emotional states play a crucial role in determining the overall effectiveness of HVPT. The findings extend existing HVPT research by demonstrating that emotional dynamics function as a mediating factor in pronunciation training effectiveness. This study also reinforces affective perspectives in Second Language Acquisition, particularly the Affective Filter Hypothesis, by showing how emotional tension directly affects physical articulation and sound production. By integrating phonetic training with affective dimensions, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of pronunciation development in EFL contexts.

Pedagogically, the results suggest that HVPT should be implemented alongside deliberate emotional support strategies. Tutors are encouraged to create a supportive and low-anxiety learning environment that fosters confidence, encourages risk-taking, and normalizes pronunciation errors as part of the learning process. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, where learning conditions are intensive and time-constrained, emotionally responsive HVPT implementation can help maximize students' engagement and pronunciation gains. Future research may explore the emotional dynamics of HVPT using mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine changes over time. Further studies could also investigate the role of specific emotional regulation strategies or tutor interventions in enhancing HVPT outcomes. Expanding research to different educational contexts and proficiency levels would provide broader insights into the adaptability and effectiveness of HVPT across diverse EFL settings.

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