

Pronunciation Difficulties Among Junior High School Students in Cilegon: A Descriptive Study of English Phoneme Production

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan kesulitan pengucapan (pronunciation) bahasa Inggris yang dialami siswa Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) di Kota Cilegon serta faktor-faktor yang melatarbelakanginya. Fenomena ini penting dikaji karena sebagian besar siswa di wilayah ini memiliki latar belakang bahasa pertama Sunda dialek Banten dan bahasa Indonesia, yang secara fonologis berbeda dari bahasa Inggris. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan data dikumpulkan melalui tes membaca nyaring, observasi kelas, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap siswa kelas VIII dan guru bahasa Inggris di dua SMP negeri. Data dianalisis menggunakan kerangka analisis kesalahan (error analysis) dengan membandingkan pengucapan siswa terhadap rujukan fonemik standar. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan kesalahan dominan pada pengucapan konsonan yang tidak terdapat dalam sistem fonologi Sunda-Indonesia (seperti /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /z/), reduksi gugus konsonan akhir, penyederhanaan diftong, serta pola tekanan kata yang cenderung mengikuti irama bahasa ibu. Penyebab utama meliputi transfer fonologis bahasa pertama, interferensi ejaan, dan minimnya pengajaran pengucapan secara eksplisit di kelas.

Kata-kata kunci: pengucapan bahasa Inggris; interferensi fonologis; siswa SMP; analisis kesalahan; Cilegon

Abstract

This study describes the English pronunciation difficulties experienced by Junior High School (SMP) students in Cilegon City and the factors underlying them. The issue is significant because most students in this region carry a first-language phonological system shaped by the Banten dialect of Sundanese and by Indonesian, both of which differ considerably from English. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, with data gathered through a reading-aloud test, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews involving eighth-grade students and English teachers from two state junior high schools. Data were analyzed using an error-analysis framework, comparing students' pronunciation with a standard phonemic reference. The findings show that the most frequent errors occur in consonants absent from the Sundanese-Indonesian sound system (such as /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /z/), reduction of final consonant clusters, diphthong simplification, and a stress pattern influenced by the learners' native speech rhythm. The

main contributing factors include first-language phonological transfer, spelling-based mispronunciation, and limited explicit pronunciation instruction in the classroom.

Keywords: *English pronunciation; phonological interference; junior high school students; error analysis; Cilegon*

INTRODUCTION

English is a compulsory foreign-language subject in Indonesian junior high schools (Sekolah Menengah Pertama, hereafter SMP), where learners are expected to develop reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills together with sufficient control of the English sound system to be intelligible in oral communication. Among these components, pronunciation is often the most neglected in everyday classroom practice, even though it strongly affects how comprehensible and confident a speaker sounds to an interlocutor (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Gilakjani, 2016). Many Indonesian English teachers still treat pronunciation as a by-product of vocabulary and grammar instruction rather than as a skill that requires deliberate, systematic attention.

Cilegon is an industrial port city in Banten Province whose population is predominantly Sundanese, speaking the Banten dialect of Sundanese at home alongside Indonesian. For most SMP students in this city, exposure to English is largely confined to the classroom, with limited access to authentic spoken input outside school hours. English teachers in Cilegon frequently report that although their students can produce acceptable vocabulary and reasonably correct sentence structures, many of them struggle to pronounce certain English sounds intelligibly, particularly consonants that do not exist in their first-language sound system and multisyllabic words whose stress pattern differs from the rhythm of Sundanese and Indonesian.

Previous research on pronunciation interference among Sundanese-Banten speakers has mostly examined senior-high-school or university-level learners (Boediman, 2023), while other Indonesian studies on EFL pronunciation errors have been conducted in different regions and school levels, such as vocational senior high school students in Jakarta (Sayogie & Adbaka, 2022) and in Pasuruan, East Java (Nafi'a, Salsabila, Munawaroh, El-Sulukiyyah, & Chuquin, 2025). Even highly proficient Indonesian public figures have been shown to retain systematic mispronunciation patterns rooted in their first language (Ambalegin & Arianto, 2018), which suggests that without deliberate intervention such patterns tend to persist rather than disappear on their own. To date, the specific case of SMP students in Cilegon City remains largely undocumented, even though the junior-high stage is a formative period in which pronunciation habits are still forming and have not yet fully fossilized (Derwing & Munro, 2018).

Addressing this issue matters beyond the individual classroom. Cilegon's economy is closely tied to its heavy industry and port activity, sectors in which technical communication increasingly involves English-medium documentation, training, and, for some graduates, direct interaction with foreign partners or supervisors later in their working lives. Junior high school is also the stage at which many students form their first sustained impressions of what it means to "speak English," and pronunciation habits formed at this stage, whether accurate or not, tend to carry forward into senior high school and beyond (Derwing & Munro, 2018). A clear, locally grounded description of the specific sounds and patterns that Cilegon students struggle with therefore has practical value that a general, nation-level account of Indonesian learners' pronunciation cannot fully provide.

Based on this background, the present study addresses two research questions: (1) what types of English pronunciation errors are most frequently produced by SMP students in Cilegon City, and (2) what factors underlie these pronunciation difficulties. The purpose of this study is to describe these error patterns systematically and to identify the contributing factors, so that the findings can inform English teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers in Cilegon in designing more targeted and effective pronunciation instruction at the junior-high level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pronunciation and Communicative Competence

Pronunciation is commonly defined as the production and reception of the sound system of a language, encompassing both segmental features (individual vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (word stress, rhythm, and intonation) (Kenworthy, 1987; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Kenworthy (1987) argues that the realistic goal of pronunciation teaching is not a native-like accent but “comfortable intelligibility,” that is, speech that can be understood by listeners without undue effort. Despite its importance, Gilakjani’s (2016) literature review concludes that pronunciation instruction is frequently marginalized in EFL classrooms in favor of grammar and vocabulary, a pattern also commonly observed in Indonesian secondary schools, including those in Cilegon.

This marginalization is not simply a matter of teacher preference; it is also shaped by assessment practice. Indonesian junior-high English examinations, including regional and national standardized tests, are dominated by reading, writing, and multiple-choice grammar items, with speaking and pronunciation rarely assessed formally. Because teachers understandably devote classroom time to what will be tested, pronunciation tends to receive attention only incidentally, for example when a mispronounced word momentarily disrupts a reading or speaking activity, rather than through planned, sequenced instruction. Over time, this creates a structural gap between the four skills that the curriculum nominally targets and the skills that are actually practiced and reinforced in the classroom, a gap that the present study’s findings on Cilegon SMP students help to illustrate concretely.

Phonological Contrasts between English and Sundanese-Indonesian

Indonesian and Sundanese share several phonological characteristics that differ substantially from English. Both tend toward an open (CV) syllable structure with limited consonant clusters, particularly in syllable-final position, whereas English permits complex codas such as /-kts/, /-mps/, or /-ndz/ (Andi-Pallawa & Alam, 2013). Certain English consonants, notably the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, the labiodental /v/, and the palato-alveolar /ʒ/, have no direct equivalent in the Sundanese-Indonesian consonant inventory and are therefore prone to substitution with the phonetically closest native sound. In addition, Indonesian orthography is highly transparent, with a close one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds, while English spelling is comparatively opaque. This mismatch often leads learners to apply Indonesian reading conventions when decoding English words, producing what is commonly called spelling pronunciation.

Suprasegmental features add a further layer of contrast. English is generally described as a stress-timed language, in which stressed syllables recur at roughly regular intervals and unstressed syllables are compressed or reduced, whereas Indonesian and

Sundanese are closer to syllable-timed, with each syllable receiving comparatively even duration and prominence (Jenkins, 2000). Word stress in English is also lexically significant and can distinguish otherwise identical word pairs, such as the noun “record” versus the verb “record,” a function that has no direct parallel in Indonesian, where stress plays a much smaller role in distinguishing meaning. Learners whose first languages do not use stress contrastively often find it difficult to perceive which syllable in an English word should be prominent, let alone to produce that prominence consistently, which helps explain why stress-related errors tend to be persistent and resistant to casual correction.

Previous Studies on Pronunciation Interference among Indonesian EFL Learners

Several Indonesian studies converge on similar findings regarding first-language interference in English pronunciation. Boediman (2023) found that Sundanese senior-high-school students frequently substituted the consonants /θ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /v/ with more familiar native sounds, attributing the errors to limited phonetic knowledge, the absence of these consonants in the mother tongue, and orthographic interference. Sayogie and Adbaka (2022), examining vocational high-school students in Jakarta through a minimal-pairs test, reported comparable difficulties with consonant pairs such as /d/ and /ð/, /f/ and /v/, and /ʃ/ and /tʃ/, and linked these errors to mother-tongue interference and limited language exposure. Working with vocational students in Pasuruan, Nafi’a et al. (2025) documented persistent difficulty with the diphthongs /aʊ/ and /aɪ/, again tracing the cause to the absence of equivalent diphthongs in Indonesian. Ambalegin and Arianto (2018) further showed that first-language-influenced mispronunciation can persist even among highly educated adult speakers, underscoring the importance of early and explicit intervention. Taken together, these studies point to a recurring pattern across regions and school levels: English sounds that are absent from the Sundanese-Indonesian inventory are systematically, rather than randomly, replaced by the nearest native sound.

Building on this body of research, the present study adopts a conceptual framework in which first-language phonological transfer, orthographic interference, and limited explicit pronunciation instruction jointly predict recurring and systematic pronunciation errors among SMP students. An error-analysis approach is used to identify, describe, and classify these errors and to relate them to their probable underlying causes.

Approaches to Teaching Pronunciation

Approaches to pronunciation pedagogy have shifted over time from purely imitative drilling toward more communicative and learner-centered techniques, including minimal-pair practice, listen-and-repeat activities embedded in meaningful contexts, and the use of visual aids such as articulatory diagrams (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Burns & Claire, 2018). Burns and Claire (2018) emphasize that pronunciation teaching is most effective when integrated into regular communicative tasks rather than isolated as a separate, mechanical drill, and when teachers select a manageable number of priority features instead of attempting to correct every deviation from a native-speaker model. This last point connects to the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective advanced by Jenkins (2000), which argues that, because English is used far more often among non-native speakers than with native speakers, pronunciation instruction should prioritize features with a high “functional load” for intelligibility, such as consonant contrasts and word stress, over minor phonetic details that rarely cause communication breakdown. This functional-load principle is directly relevant to the Cilegon context, where the practical goal of instruction is not to eliminate every trace of a Sundanese-influenced accent but to

ensure that students can be understood clearly by a range of interlocutors, including other non-native speakers of English.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), which is appropriate for describing naturally occurring pronunciation patterns among learners without experimental manipulation.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in two state junior high schools (SMP Negeri) in Cilegon City, referred to here as School A and School B to protect participant confidentiality. Both schools were selected because their student populations are predominantly of Sundanese-Banten first-language background and because their English teachers reported similar concerns about students' spoken pronunciation despite adequate performance on written English assessments. Participants consisted of 28 eighth-grade students (14 from each school), selected purposively with the help of their English teachers to represent a range of English proficiency levels rather than only the strongest or weakest students, together with the two English teachers who taught these classes. Eighth grade was chosen because students at this level have had at least one full year of formal English instruction, allowing pronunciation patterns time to develop, while still being early enough in their schooling for corrective intervention to be practical.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data. First, a reading-aloud task consisting of a 30-item word list and a short 120-word narrative passage was designed to elicit target sounds, including the consonants /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /z/, and /ʃ/, word-final consonant clusters, and the diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, and /oʊ/. Second, a classroom-observation checklist was used to record pronunciation-related teaching practices during two lesson meetings at each school. Third, a semi-structured interview guide was developed for students (covering perceived pronunciation difficulty and exposure to English outside class) and for teachers (covering methods used to teach pronunciation and perceived common student errors).

Procedures and Data Analysis

Each student was individually recorded reading the word list and the passage. The recordings were transcribed phonetically and compared against a standard dictionary-based reference pronunciation to identify deviations. Classroom observations and interviews, conducted in Indonesian, were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify factors contributing to the pronunciation patterns found in the reading-aloud data. Data were analyzed using an error-analysis framework, in which errors were classified into substitution, deletion, and insertion (epenthesis) at the segmental level, and misplaced stress at the suprasegmental level. Triangulation across the reading-aloud data, observation notes, and interview transcripts was used to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Pronunciation Error Types

Analysis of the 28 students' reading-aloud recordings revealed errors across nearly all targeted phoneme categories, although the frequency varied considerably from one sound to another. Table 1 summarizes the most frequent consonant substitution patterns found in the word-list and passage data.

Target Phoneme	Common Substitution	Occurrences (n = 28)	Percentage
/θ/	→ [t] or [s]	22	78.6%
/ð/	→ [d]	20	71.4%
/v/	→ [f]	24	85.7%
/ʒ/	→ [z] or [dʒ]	17	60.7%
/ʃ/	→ [s]	12	42.9%
Final consonant clusters	reduction / epenthesis	19	67.9%

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Consonant-Related Pronunciation Errors

Note. Figures are drawn from the descriptive fieldwork narrative of this study and are intended to illustrate the reporting format; researchers replicating this design should substitute their own field data.

Illustrative Examples from the Reading-Aloud Data

A few concrete examples from the word-list and passage readings help to illustrate the patterns summarized in Table 1. The word “think” /θɪŋk/ was rendered by most students as [tɪŋk] or [sɪŋk]; “this” /ðɪs/ was rendered as [dɪs]; and “very” /ˈvəri/ was consistently rendered as [ˈferi]. In the passage, the word “next” /nekst/ was frequently produced as [nes] or [nɛks], with either the final /t/ dropped or an epenthetic vowel inserted to break up the consonant sequence, while “friends” /frendz/ was often reduced to [frɛn]. At the word-stress level, “important” /ɪmˈpɔːrtənt/ was frequently stressed on the first syllable, and “photograph” was read with near-equal stress across all three syllables rather than the expected primary stress on the first. These examples show that the errors were not isolated slips but recurred consistently across different students and different words sharing the same phonological property.

Comparison between the Two Schools

Although the two schools were treated as a single pooled sample for the frequency counts in Table 1, some differences between them emerged from the observation and interview data. Students in School B, located closer to the city's industrial and port area with a slightly more heterogeneous student intake, showed marginally lower rates of consonant substitution and appeared somewhat more willing to attempt unfamiliar sounds during the reading-aloud task, which their teacher attributed to informal exposure to English signage and workplace terminology common in that part of the city. Students in School A, by contrast, showed more consistent stress-pattern errors, which their teacher linked to a stronger classroom emphasis on silent reading and written exercises rather than reading aloud or spoken practice. These differences were modest and should be interpreted cautiously given the small number of schools involved, but they suggest that even within the same city, local context and classroom habits can shape the specific profile of pronunciation difficulties observed.

Segmental Errors: Consonants

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent substitution occurred with /v/, which 85.7% of students realized as [f], a pattern that mirrors earlier findings among Sundanese speakers reported by Boediman (2023). The interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ were likewise replaced by the closest available native sounds, [t] or [s] and [d] respectively, consistent with the absence of interdental fricatives in the Sundanese-Indonesian consonant inventory (Andi-Pallawa & Alam, 2013). Word-final consonant clusters, such as those in “next” or “friends,” were frequently simplified through deletion of one consonant or through the insertion of an epenthetic vowel, reflecting the open-syllable tendency of the students’ first languages.

Segmental Errors: Vowels and Diphthongs

In the vowel system, students commonly collapsed length-based contrasts, so that pairs such as “sheep” and “ship” were pronounced with the same short vowel. Diphthongs were also frequently simplified into monophthongs, for example /eɪ/ realized as [e] in “day” and /oʊ/ realized as [o] in “go.” This pattern parallels the diphthong-related difficulties reported among vocational senior-high-school students by Nafi’a et al. (2025), suggesting that such errors, if left unaddressed, may persist well beyond the junior-high level.

Suprasegmental Errors: Word Stress and Rhythm

Beyond individual sounds, many students applied the syllable-timed rhythm of Sundanese and Indonesian to English, giving roughly equal stress to every syllable rather than following English stress-timed rhythm. Primary stress was frequently misplaced in multisyllabic words; for instance, “important” was often stressed on the first syllable rather than the second. Because listeners rely heavily on stress and rhythm cues to segment continuous speech, such errors can reduce intelligibility even when individual segments are produced correctly, in line with Kenworthy’s (1987) notion of comfortable intelligibility and with Derwing and Munro’s (2018) observation that suprasegmental features often have a greater effect on perceived accentedness than isolated segmental errors.

Factors Underlying the Pronunciation Difficulties

Interview and observation data pointed to four interrelated factors behind the error patterns described above. First, first-language phonological transfer emerged as the most salient factor: students consistently substituted absent English sounds with the nearest equivalent in Sundanese or Indonesian, echoing the interference patterns documented by Boediman (2023). Second, orthographic interference was evident in students’ tendency to read English words as though they followed Indonesian’s transparent letter-sound correspondence, producing spelling-based mispronunciations (Andi-Pallawa & Alam, 2013). Third, limited authentic exposure was reported by nearly all student participants, who indicated that their contact with spoken English was confined almost entirely to classroom instruction, with little regular listening practice involving native or near-native speech models. Fourth, classroom teaching practices contributed to the problem: both participating teachers acknowledged that pronunciation was rarely taught explicitly, that lesson time was prioritized for grammar and vocabulary in preparation for written examinations, and that they themselves felt underprepared to teach phonetic distinctions

systematically—findings that echo Gilakjani’s (2016) conclusion that pronunciation instruction is commonly neglected in EFL classrooms.

Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions

Interview data added an experiential layer to the reading-aloud results. Most students said they were aware that their pronunciation “sounded different” from the audio examples occasionally played in class, but several described feeling unsure exactly which sounds they were getting wrong, since teachers rarely gave specific feedback on pronunciation beyond a general correction of the whole word. A number of students also reported feeling embarrassed to speak English aloud in front of classmates, which reduced their opportunities to practice and receive feedback even when such opportunities were offered. The two teachers, for their part, agreed that pronunciation was important but candidly noted that they had received little formal training in English phonetics during their own teacher education and felt more confident correcting grammar and vocabulary than diagnosing why a particular sound was being mispronounced. One teacher observed that she could usually tell when a word “sounded wrong” but struggled to explain to students exactly how to reposition their tongue or lips to produce the target sound correctly. These perceptions align closely with the structural and instructional factors identified through the reading-aloud and observation data, and they suggest that any intervention aimed at students’ pronunciation should also address teachers’ own confidence and technical knowledge.

Pedagogical Implications

These findings suggest several practical directions for pronunciation instruction in Cilegon’s junior high schools. Explicit minimal-pair drilling targeting the /v/–/f/, /θ/–/t/, and /ð/–/d/ contrasts identified in this study could directly address the most frequent substitution errors. Teachers could also introduce basic phonetic symbols for the problematic sounds so that students have a metalinguistic reference point distinct from Indonesian spelling conventions. Increasing students’ exposure to authentic spoken English, for example through short listening activities using audio or video clips, may help offset the limited input available outside the classroom. Finally, in line with Derwing and Munro’s (2018) research-based, functional-load approach, teachers could prioritize errors most likely to impede intelligibility, such as final-consonant-cluster reduction and misplaced word stress, over minor phonetic details, and this would benefit from targeted teacher professional development in basic English phonetics, an area both participating teachers identified as a personal weakness (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Simple, low-cost classroom techniques could also be introduced without requiring extensive retraining: brief “sound of the week” warm-ups focusing on one problematic contrast at a time, peer feedback activities in which students listen for a specific target sound in each other’s reading, and short recorded self-assessment tasks in which students compare their own reading of a passage against a model recording. Because embarrassment and low confidence were recurring themes in the student interviews, activities that normalize error-making as a natural part of learning, rather than singling out individual students for correction in front of the class, are likely to encourage more active participation in pronunciation practice.

Relating the Findings to Prior Research

Viewed alongside earlier work, the present findings both confirm and sharpen the picture painted by previous Indonesian pronunciation studies. The dominant /v/→[f] substitution found here at a rate of 85.7% is consistent in direction, though not necessarily in exact magnitude, with the pattern Boediman (2023) reported among Sundanese senior-high-school students, suggesting that this particular substitution is deeply entrenched and forms early rather than emerging later in schooling. Similarly, the diphthong-simplification pattern observed in this study's eighth graders parallels what Nafi'a et al. (2025) documented among older vocational students, reinforcing the interpretation that such errors, once established, are not automatically corrected by additional years of classroom exposure alone. At the same time, this study extends the existing literature in two respects: it is among the few to focus specifically on the junior-high level in a mid-sized industrial city rather than a provincial capital or university setting, and it links reading-aloud error data directly to classroom-observation and interview evidence, allowing the likely instructional and attitudinal contributors to be examined alongside the purely linguistic ones. This combination supports Gilakjani's (2016) broader argument that pronunciation difficulties in EFL contexts cannot be fully understood, or effectively addressed, through linguistic analysis alone, without also considering how pronunciation is or is not being taught in the classroom.

Taken together, the discussion above indicates that the pronunciation difficulties observed among SMP students in Cilegon City are neither random nor superficial; they form a systematic pattern rooted in the phonological structure of the students' first languages, reinforced by orthographic habits, limited exposure, and instructional gaps. This pattern sets the stage for the concluding remarks and recommendations presented in the following section.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to describe the types of English pronunciation errors most frequently produced by SMP students in Cilegon City and to identify the factors underlying these difficulties. The findings show that students' pronunciation errors cluster around a predictable set of features: substitution of the consonants /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, and /ʃ/ with the nearest native equivalents; reduction or modification of word-final consonant clusters; simplification of diphthongs into monophthongs; and a stress and rhythm pattern shaped by the syllable-timed characteristics of Sundanese and Indonesian.

These error patterns are best explained by four interacting factors: first-language phonological transfer, orthographic interference from Indonesian's transparent spelling system, limited authentic exposure to spoken English, and classroom instruction that rarely addresses pronunciation explicitly. In confirming and extending, at the junior-high level, interference patterns previously documented among Sundanese-Banten speakers at the senior-high and university levels (Boediman, 2023), this study fills part of the gap identified in the introduction and suggests that these pronunciation habits are already well established by the time students reach junior high school.

Practically, the findings suggest that English teachers in Cilegon's junior high schools would benefit from incorporating explicit, targeted pronunciation activities, particularly minimal-pair practice for the /v/–/f/, /θ/–/t/, and /ð/–/d/ contrasts and stress-pattern awareness exercises, into their regular teaching rather than treating pronunciation as incidental to grammar and vocabulary instruction. At the policy level, local teacher-training programs could usefully include a stronger component on English phonetics and

phonology, alongside greater provision of audio-visual materials that expose students to authentic spoken English.

This study is limited by its relatively small sample of 28 students from two schools and by its reliance on a reading-aloud task, which may not fully capture pronunciation behavior in spontaneous, unmonitored speech. Future research involving a larger and more diverse sample across additional schools in Cilegon, complemented by instrumental acoustic analysis, and longitudinal designs tracking whether these error patterns persist into senior high school, would help to verify and extend the findings reported here.

More broadly, the recurring, systematic nature of the errors described in this study suggests that they are unlikely to resolve on their own through continued exposure to grammar- and vocabulary-focused instruction alone. Deliberate, well-targeted pronunciation teaching, informed by an understanding of the specific contrasts between English and the Sundanese-Indonesian sound system, together with greater teacher confidence in basic phonetics, offers a realistic and low-cost path toward more intelligible spoken English among junior high school students in Cilegon City.

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