

# Identifying the Pronunciation Errors due to Silent Letters committed by ESL learners in Pakistan: A Case Study

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## Identifying the Pronunciation Errors Due to Silent Letters Committed by ESL Learners in Pakistan: A Case Study

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### Abstract

In this paper it is discussed that how pronunciation errors occur among students due to silent letters in English language. What type of errors are made by the learners? The research participants were twenty students. These students were selected from elementary level of public schools. This is a descriptive study based on qualitative and quantitative mode of research. A reading test was designed to collect the data for the study. This reading test contains 30 underlined words based on silent letters. The data was collected through recording voice of students while reading. As the learners are not familiar with the rules of silent letters in English language, so they endeavor to read words as they are written. This paper reveals that the students made pre-systematic errors. They need to be familiarized with some basic silent letters' rules. They need to be made aware that English words are not necessarily pronounced as how they are written.

**Key words:** Silent letters, pronunciation errors, reading test and pre-systematic errors.

### 1- Introduction

Nature has created a priceless gift in the form of language. Without it, humans would have remained nothing but a dumb animal. Language is all around us. It can be encountered in our imaginations and thinking, in our interactions and communications, in our prayers and mediations, as well as in our customs and beliefs. Language is the most productive tool for understanding well about past, perceiving the present and seeing into the future. Language binds society together including both verbal and non-verbal ways. According to (Sapir, 1921) language is essentially a human and non-instinctive system of consciously developed symbols for exchanging ideas, aspirations and emotions. English is packed with ambiguities, making it one of the most difficult languages to grasp. Since there is usually no correlation between written and spoken words, the inconsistency is in pronunciation. Words throughout English are not always pronounced accurately as they are written. Each sound is represented by more than one written letter or by a sequence of letters, but every letter

of the word can signify different sounds or none at all. As a result, it is crucial to become accustomed with the language's common sounds when learning English language.

The significance of pronunciation in language learning cannot be underestimated. (Manser & McGauran, 1995) defines, "Pronunciation is the way in which language or words are spoken." As mentioned in the term above, pronunciation is the production of significant sounds of the words that we use to communicate with others in attempt to implement a meaning; as a consequence, every speaker provides efficient pronunciation when interacting with others, as highlighted by (Odisho, 2003), "Pronunciation is the production of speech sound for communication, but to make the communication run well, those sound must be comprehended by another person."

Pronunciation often is acknowledged as the first and most significant thing a person perceives during a conversation. Grammar and vocabulary are essential, but they are worthless if the speaker cannot pronounce the structures or words correctly. Furthermore, even if the speaker commits grammatical errors, the audience will be able to perceive the speaker if the speaker adopts proper pronunciation. The communication process will be affected if the speaker has terrible pronunciation. As a consequence, one of the most critical factors of English, specifically in oral communication, is pronunciation. Every sound, stress, pattern and intonation has the aptitude to communicate information.

The study of pronunciation has become particularly prominent in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Students may experience challenges during the process of learning that must be identified and assessed. One of them is the reluctance to pronounce English words properly. The issues emerge from the unpredictable spelling of English, which provides inadequate pronunciation guidance.

It is evident from the statement that the gulf between word pronunciation and spelling generates a genuine challenge. The dilemma is that English is not a phonetic language, which means we do not pronounce the words in the same sequence as they have been spelled. It has nothing to do with the word's spelling or pronunciation. For instance, the letter <l> is not articulated in 'walk' and the letter <w> in word 'wrong'. The word 'walk' is pronounced as /wɑ:k/ not /walk/, and the word wrong is pronounced as /rɒŋ/ rather than /w.rɒŋ/. The concept of silent letters refers to letters that are unpronounced but visible.

Silent letter is a letter which is present in spelling but is omitted while pronouncing the words. (Podhaizer, 1998) defines, "Silent letters are letters that are not heard making their 'usual' sound in a word as silent." A silent letter is a letter that remains in the spelling but is not articulated. Silent letters definitely cause a divergence between how a word is written and how it is spoken in English. Students who already have merely heard a word and are intending to write it may leave out the letter because they have not heard it pronounced. When speaking, students that have seen a word written down may endeavor to pronounce a silent letter.

### **1.1- Significance of study**

The research findings are considered to be significant in the following ways:

- 1- To provide knowledge and information to readers, particularly students, to make it much easier for them to pronounce the word, particularly those containing silent letters.
- 2- To enable teachers identifying pupils' challenges pronouncing words having silent letters so that teachers can effectively educate their students.

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## 1.2- Problem statement

While learning a second language, students make frequent errors. While writing and pronunciation of words with silent letters, students encounter challenges in understanding spelling. One of most essential factors for learners to perceive is that while writing, they should include silent letters in the spelling but not pronounce them. Proper spelling has a massive effect on pronunciation and constructive communication, and it is therefore crucial to study it thoroughly. As a result, this study will describe:

1. The learners' lack of experience to English listening vocabulary.
2. The habit of the learners to pronouncing the words wrong.
3. A lack of interest among the students for learning English.

## 1.3- Objectives of study

The following are the study's goals, which are based on the problem mentioned above:

- 1- To determine the types of errors students make during pronouncing words with silent letters.
- 2- To determine how pupils pronounce words with silent letters incorrectly.

## 1.4- Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. What sorts of errors do students make when pronouncing words with silent letters?
2. How can students make errors while pronouncing words with silent letters?

## 1.5- Research Limitations

It is not an easy task for the researcher to collect the data from the whole district Rahim Yar Khan. So, the research limitations are:

- 1- This research will have a limited scope of students from randomly selected public schools.
- 2- This research will be conducted in district Rahim Yar Khan. (Tehsil Sadiq Abad)
- 3- It is limited to the students of elementary schools only.
- 4-Only girls from public schools are included in research work.

## 2- Literature Review

### 2.1- Definition of Error

(MAHFUD, 2021) said error is any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics of causes of the deviation might be. Error deals with producing or making inappropriate words, phrases, or sentences of the learner's speech or writing. The process of language learning involves the making of errors. Errors are the flawed side of learners' speech or writing (1982, p. 138).

### 2.2- Error analysis

According to (Maulina & Wennyta, 2021) the fact that learners do make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, lead to a surge of study of learner's errors, called error analysis. The study of error is a form of research into the language acquisition process. It gives us a picture of a learner's linguistic improvement and may direct us in the orientation of learning strategies. (Crystal, 2012) defines, "Error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the

unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics.”

### **2.3- Types of errors**

According to the definition stated above, it may be inferred that error analysis is a systematic study used to analyze foreign language learners' errors by distinguishing, characterizing, and assessing the errors themselves. As a consequence, the researcher may acquire information that can be used to reduce errors. There are three basic forms of error that were applied in the study to evaluate the participants' errors. (Lord, 1974) categorizes three types of error based on their systematization as shown below.

**2.3.1-Pre-systematic error:** Errors made by the learners when they are not aware of a particular rule.

**2.3.2- Systematic error:** When the learners apply the incorrect rule.

**2.3.3-Post-systematic error:** When the learners apply the correct rule but they perform it inconsistently.

(Adapted from Corder, 1994)

## **2.4- Pronunciation**

### **2.4.1- Definition of Pronunciation**

Cook in (Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016) defines pronunciation as a process of producing language sounds. Pronunciation is learned by repeating the sounds and correcting them when the pronunciation is wrong. When a person learns pronunciation then he begins to form new habits and overcome difficulties obtained from the influence of the first language.

According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (Ivančič & Fabijanić, 2017), pronunciation is defined as the way in which a language is spoken. Because pronunciation is the way a language is uttered, it means we can interact with another person in our environment by pronouncing particular words. Pronunciation is the production of significant sound used by a particular language as part of the code of the language and used to achieve meaning in context. (Mahesarani, 2021).

Pronunciation is probably one of the most challenging aspects of learning English, since it demands a considerable amount of time and effort to improve understanding of how to pronounce words properly. While speaking English, the speaker and the listener have quite a mutual relationship, so they greatly affect each other. It suggests that the speaker must speak clearly in order for the listener to grasp what is being uttered. As a result, one of the most significant features of the language to develop is pronunciation.

### **2.4.2-Importance of Pronunciation in Language Learning**

Pronunciation errors can influence the efficiency of a person's communication; pronunciation plays a vital part in interaction. Morley (Keshavarz & Khamis Abubakar, 2017) states that pronunciation clarity is a component of communication competence. Pronunciation errors can influence the efficiency of a person's communication; pronunciation plays a vital part in interaction. As a consequence, a language teacher cannot disregard foreign language learners' pronunciation challenges. Language learners must consistently seek to enhance their pronunciation of the target language. The main goal of language acquisition, according to Harmer, is for pupils to be able to communicate in the target language. Communication can be interpreted in order to comprehend and be comprehended. Many language learners believe that being able to communicate in English

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fluently is sufficient. Their opinions are wrong for several reasons proposed by (Harmer, 2001), namely:

- (1) The teacher can immediately understand his pupils' speech as their ears are accustomed to hearing poor English.
- (2) Other students are from the same language speaker.
- (3) The class is not a realistic language setting because they are not communicating with native English speakers.

As a consequence, in the language learning process, teachers and students must pay particular attention to efforts to develop perfect pronunciation, as this is an important unit of speech.

### **2.5- Factors that influence learning of pronunciation**

(Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016) describes several important factors that influence pronunciation learning:

#### **2.5.1- Motivation and concern for good pronunciation**

Whenever it comes to preaching a new language pronunciation, motivation is the key. According to several research, somebody with a strong desire to learn languages can succeed in pronouncing the language in the same way that native speakers accomplish. According to Moyer and (Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016), self - confidence toward the language being studied was a key aspect in developing pronunciation that was indistinguishable to native speakers. Learners are generally less motivated to learn perfect English pronunciation. Learners might be reluctant when it comes to learning how to pronounce words. Students' motivation to pronounce Words properly is also regulated by their native language. There are two different types of elements in pronunciation, segmental and super segmental elements (Horppila et al., 2000). Phoneme is a segmental component that consists of a vowel and a consonant. And super segmental consists of intonation and stressing.

#### **2.5.2- Attitude and identity**

Since the accent is a primary factor of conveying the social and ethnic identity, learners' attitudes and identities frequently lead students to intentionally or accidentally resist to make changes to their pronunciation. They may unknowingly use a variety of ethnic identifiers in the spoken English. Building attention to the reality that we all communicate to different communicators in different ways can help learners feel more comfortable with the idea of improving their accent in different contexts.

#### **2.5.3- Age**

Language learning is affected by a variety of factors, particularly age. Whenever it comes to learning pronunciation, children will find it easier to learn from professionals. According to the hypothesis, there is a biological or neurological period that ends at the age of 12 years, according to Lenneberg in (Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016). It will be difficult to get perfect mastery of the language we are acquiring after this period, particularly regarding pronunciation. The accuracy of a language's pronunciation, on the other hand, varies greatly among individuals.

#### **2.5.4- Influence of Mother Language**

According to (Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2011), a person's first language sound pattern gets transferred to the second language they master, which might lead to unexpected sounds. Non-native speakers' pronunciation errors reflect the influence of their original language's sound, rules, accent,

and intonation. The sound system of the original language might affect the pronunciation of the target language for three reasons, according to (Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

1- The learner seems unable to pronounce sounds in the target language which do not exist in the learner's native language or vice versa.

2- When the principle of sound combination results in a word in the native language which is not pronounced appropriately in the target language.

3- The student will transfer this pattern into the target language because the rhythm and melody of the language influence the pattern of stress and intonation.

#### **2.5.5- Amount of exposure**

Another factor is the amount of English that the learners are exposed to. It's easy to disregard this as a question of whether the students belong to an English-speaking country or not. Even though many people live in English-speaking countries, they do not communicate in English. Many people, on the other hand, do not belong to an English-speaking country but speak and learn English. It implies that, although exposure is definitely a significant feature, but it is not a requirement for development of pronunciation skill.

#### **2.5.6- Phonetic ability**

Since there is no particular lesson on how to pronounce, the majority of students make errors in basic phonological skills. The students have distinct levels of intelligence. Some students are more responsive to foreign languages than others. In English, there are several phonetic abilities that could cause individuals to make an error, such as intonation, phone sounds, stress and other variables.

#### **2.5.7- Relation to the target language**

A profound sense of connection to the language being studied is demanded of a language learner. According to language acquisition theory, students learn languages chiefly by the feedback they get, and they must absorb a large amount of different information before being challenged to speak. A language student must seek out a range of sources associated to the language he is striving to learn in order to achieve a considerable amount of information.

### **2.6- The role of teacher in teaching pronunciation**

The English teacher plays a vital role in the classroom in eliminating pronunciation errors. When students make errors pronouncing English words, the teacher should always remind them. The teacher can encourage the students using a dictionary to determine an appropriate pronunciation. Teachers' function is to assist students in identifying sounds. Correcting the error in class is essential, because if the teacher does not illustrate correct pronunciation to the students, it could become a habit. Some teachers directly correct pronunciation and, on occasion, provide feedback in the final content. When it comes to discussing pronunciation errors, some teachers have a role to play. Those roles are: (Klimczak-Pawlak, 2014).

#### **2.6.1- To provide feedback to students**

The teacher must provide feedback from the error in the process of learning to let students know about the error they performed. The teacher should inform them of the specifics of their performance.

#### **2.6.2- To Help learners to make sounds**

Since some sounds do not appear in other languages, the teacher can demonstrate the correct sound first. Students sometimes can reproduce a new sound, but if they can't, the teacher must illustrate how to sound it.

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## 2.6.3- To illustrate what's going on

Students comprehend what they should concentrate on and work on. Because reading and speaking are the most unconsciously regulated skills, students are more likely to have problems in important areas. When they communicate, for example, they pronounce some words inaccurately, so the teacher should point out the error and make the students conscious of the capability of pronunciation.

## 3- Research Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative mode of research is used to collect the data. This is a descriptive study. The goal of this study is to find out how students face difficulties in pronouncing words containing silent letters. This will describe the common pronunciation errors made by the elementary level students while reading English spelling. These errors affect not only on their pronunciation but their writing skill also.

### 3.1- Population and Sample

This research is conducted in the district Rahim Yar Khan. The elementary level students have been randomly selected from public schools to conduct this research work.

Students have been selected from eighth class of public schools. This research is designed for populace of twenty students.

### 3.2- Data Collection and Instrumentation

To show the impact of silent letters on pronunciation of students, the data have been collected from students of elementary level. The data have been collected through recording of reading test. The test for recording of students contains 30 underlined words based on the silent letters. This test is adopted to collect data about the students' errors. After this, the collected data has been analyzed through error analysis theory. Through this theory, students' errors are identified, described and explained in this study.

### (Test for data collection)

I woke up on Wednesday morning in the early hours because it was Christmas and I had so much work ahead of me. First, I wanted to decorate the tree. I brought colored lights and a ladder. I climbed up to fasten them on the tree but something went wrong and I fell down like a bomb. I landed on my knees and wrists. When I stood up I tried if I could walk. Fortunately, I had only pulled a muscle. Nevertheless, after this accident, I was only able to wait for the guests and meanwhile listen to some carols. My friends arrived in John's vehicle at half past five. They put the presents under the tree and I tried to guess what was inside. Later, I discovered that they bought me a psychological science-fiction book in which I found a forgotten receipt. Apart from that, I got a pocket knife, a wooden sword, a paper model of a castle and some toy knights. Then we talked about my accident and late at night I went to sleep.

## 4- Findings and Discussions

Pronunciation test is conducted to find out the types of errors. There are 20 students who participated in this research. In conducting the test, the researcher asks the students to read the test aloud. There are 30 English words in the test containing silent letters. In pronouncing the silent

letters, the researcher finds errors made by the students. The following table shows the number and types of errors made by the students of elementary level.

**Table:**

<b>Sr.#</b>	<b>Words</b>	<b>Correct Pronunciation</b>	<b>Number of students who commit Errors</b>
1	Wednesday	'wenzdeɪ	12
2	Hours	'aʊə	15
3	Christmas	'krɪsməs	18
4	Brought	brɔ:t	12
5	Lights	laɪt	10
6	Climbed	klaɪm	16
7	Fasten	'fɑ:s(ə)n	16
8	Wrong	rɒŋ	14
9	Bomb	bɒm	12
10	Knees	ni:	17
11	Wrists	rɪst	17
12	Could	kʊd	05
13	Walk	wɔ:k	09
14	Muscle	'mʌs(ə)l	16
15	Guests	gest	17
16	Meanwhile	'mi:nwaɪl	13
17	Listen	'lɪs(ə)n	08
18	Vehicle	'vi:ɪk(ə)l	17
19	Half	hɑ:f	06
20	Bought	bɔ:t	14
21	Guess	ges	12
22	What	[wɒt]	00
23	Psychological	saɪkə'lɒdʒɪk(ə)l	18
24	Science	'saɪəns	05
25	Receipt	ri'si:t	20
26	Knife	naɪf	18
27	Sword	sɔ:d	17
28	Castle	'kɑ:s(ə)l	18
29	Knights	naɪt	12
30	Talked	tɔ:k	10

The silent letter words are listed in the first column of the table in the order they appeared in the text. The data was gathered by recording. The data collected was used to evaluate the situation. The



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number of students who made reading errors is displayed in the table. The assessment became more challenging in certain instances since the respondents spoke a completely different word. Most learners, for example, puzzled with the term psychological. They described it as physiological, philosophical, and "philological." Furthermore, the word *vehicle* was once pronounced as "vicicle" and word *receipt* was pronounced as "recipat" and "recept.

The word *climbed* was sometimes found challenging as well because some students mumbled the endings of these words. It was therefore necessary to examine the recordings several times with longer time intervals. Among these we can find some common words, such as *Wednesday*, *wrong*, *talked* and *walk* but also some more challenging words, such as *climbed*, *muscle*, *fasten*, *psychological* and *sword*. The three words that turned out most problematic will be brought forward such as *bomb*, *vehicle* and *receipt*. The sound *w* in *wrist* was pronounced by 17 students who admitted that the word was new to him. Although the incorrect pronunciation might have been caused by the unfamiliarity with the word, we should take into consideration that respondents pronounced the *w* also in *wrong* and therefore it seems that the reason for the mistake is rather the incorrect adoption of the pronunciation pattern. In the word *guest*, 17 students pronounced the *u* sound. In the word *guess* the *u* was omitted and the incorrect pronunciation of the former might be thus perceived as accidental. Finally, we should mention that the word *castle* was pronounced incorrectly by 18 participants. Silent *t* was dropped by the word *listen* in some instances but we cannot claim that silent *t* is trouble-free as it was sounded by 16 respondents in the word *fasten*. The reason for the correct pronunciation of *listen* by mostly students is probably its frequent usage and the same could be applied to *could* and *science*.

Apart from this, the collected data revealed another interesting fact. In some instances, the number of errors was actually higher by the students. They made more pronunciation errors in the words *Psychological*, *Christmas*, *Knights* and *castle*. These words cause difficulties to students while pronouncing and should be focused on in the classes.

We can establish that silent *h* causes problems in medial places, like *vehicle* whereas it is correctly omitted in the letter combination *wh* like *what*. One of the most unexpected findings of the study was that few students made errors with the word *half*. Silent *b* was another silent letter that led to problems. Only eight persons left it out in the word *bomb*, while sixteen people sounded it in the word *climbed*. Although certain words appeared to be simple for the participants to pronounce, the leftover words proved to be more difficult.

Although we can overall observe that the performance of the students is not convincing as they failed to pronounce the target words correctly. The reasons for the excessive number of errors cannot be attributed to the students' unfamiliarity with the tested words, because the enormous majority of the words were not unknown to them. All of the learners acknowledged to not knowing the word *receipt* and pronouncing it wrong as a result. This might show that the participants did not adopt the correct pronunciation pattern and have been unable to apply it to new words. They didn't understand the rules of silent letters because they were not acquainted with them.

### 5- Conclusion

The issue of silent letters was the subject of this paper. We can generalize from this research that learners made pre-systematic errors the majority of time. The objective of this paper was to

demonstrate that the English language is not as chaotic as many learners perceive. Students must be given some critical facts about the history of the English language, since it will help them to improve and understand the relationship between spelling and pronunciation. Teachers can adequately describe the silent letters by emphasizing that while English spelling tend to stay constant throughout time, pronunciation fluctuates.

As a result, we can assume that pupils will not master to pronounce words with silent letters adequately on their own. Deeper explanations are needed; thus English language teachers should put more emphasis to silent letters in the classroom. Teachers should educate learners about the existence of silent letters and also provide a comprehensive explanation of what silent letters are and how they came to be. Furthermore, if we inform learners that silent letters have quite a range of purposes in the English language, they will be more inclined to learn better pronunciation since they will comprehend how significant they are.

## 6- Suggestions

On the basis of the results of a study, the following suggestions are proposed.

1- English teachers/lecturers who give guidance in regard of pronunciation may continue using the rule pattern when they mention or utter English words with silent letters. This is one of the solutions for learners who have difficulty pronouncing words correctly. Students' natural inclination is to imitate their teachers; thus, teachers should serve as a role model by modeling proper word pronunciation.

2- Students may be asked to try pronouncing English words with silent letters in order to become more attentive of proper word pronunciation. The purpose of asking students to pronounce English words is that when they first learn English, they tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than pronunciation. As a result, the longer they speak English without comprehending how to pronounce appropriate words, the more errors they will make and the more undesirable habits they will adopt. Paying attention to pronunciation may actually help them enrich spoken input because once they are aware of the concept, they will become accustomed to the correct manner of pronouncing it, which will reduce errors in pronouncing the words and automatically strengthen their communicative competence.

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