

Common mistakes in pronouncing silent letters for English education students

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Abstract

Mispronunciation of silent letters remains a persistent challenge for English Education students due to the irregularities and complexities of English phonology, often leading to confusion and communication difficulties. This study aims to examine common mistakes in pronouncing silent letters among English Education students and to identify which silent letters are most problematic. Using a quantitative approach, a pronunciation test was conducted with 50 students at Islamic Private University in Semarang, Indonesia. Participants were asked to read sentences containing silent letters, and the resulting data were analyzed to identify mispronunciations and calculate their frequency and percentage. The results revealed that the silent letter "l" was the most frequently mispronounced (23.00%), while "u" had the lowest mistake rate (1.60%). These findings highlight the varying levels of difficulty posed by different silent letters, suggesting that pronunciation instruction should prioritize those with higher mistake rates to enhance students' accuracy and overall proficiency.

Keywords: mistakes; pronunciation; silent letters

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is greatly impacted by a learner's pronunciation. Effective communication requires that learners be able to comprehend others and make themselves understood, which is ensured by proper pronunciation (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Levis, 2018; Warchol, 2020). Communication breakdowns and misunderstandings can result from mispronunciation (Phomprasert, 2017). Pronunciation is the significant sound production of words that are used to communicate with others in an effort to implement a meaning (Alaka, 2023). Pronunciation not only makes the meaning clearer but also leaves a better impression on the listener, especially in professional and educational environments (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). As suggested by Astuti et al. (2021), pronunciation refers to how a language or words are pronounced. Every sound, pattern, and intonation can convey meaning (Nolan, 2020; Rodero, 2011). However, English pronunciation can be difficult for non-native speakers due to differences in phonological rules, such as the presence of silent letters that do not exist in Indonesian. Therefore, understanding pronunciation, especially the principles of silent letters, is very important in improving the speaking ability of English students, especially for English



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education students who will eventually teach this language to their students.

A mistake is an unintentional action that leads to an outcome that does not align with the intended goal or expectation (Harris, 2023). In language education, a mistake often refers to errors made by students in the use or pronunciation of specific words, phrases, or structures. The mistakes usually stem from limited understanding, influence from the native language, or lack of practice. In the context of pronouncing silent letters, a "mistake in pronouncing silent letters" occurs when a student or second-language speaker pronounces letter that are meant Silent letters are letters in a word that are written but not pronounced. Silent letters create a problem for both native and non-native speakers of a language, as they make it more difficult to guess the spelling of spoken words (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Pusfarani and Puspita (2021) state that silent letters are letters that are not pronounced in a word; they appear in spelling but are missed in pronunciation. For example, in the word "knife," the letter "k" is not pronounced, and in the word "thumb," the letter "b" at the end is also silent. According to Rumbardi and Lestari (2022), they explain that silent letters are part of the evolution of the English language, which is influenced by other languages, such as Latin and French. According to Smith (2018), mistakes in the pronunciation of silent letters occur frequently because students tend to pronounce each letter according to its spelling without taking into account the rules regarding silent letters in English.

Silent letters in English are even more difficult for students to understand because they have different types and roles in a specific word (Rosemarie & Veniranda, 2022; Charpentier-Jiménez, 2022). Generally, silent letters are divided into two main categories: dummy silent letters and inert silent letters. Dummy silent letters are letters that do not change the pronunciation of the word. For example, in the word "knight," the letter "k" does not affect the pronunciation of the word (Godin et al., 2021; Quémart & Casalis, 2017). On the other hand, inert silent letters are not pronounced but play an important role in determining the pronunciation and meaning of other words in the same word family. An example is the letter "c" in the word "scene," which affects the preceding vowel to produce a long sound but is not pronounced (Bassetti & Atkinson, 2015). It is very important for English education students to understand how silent letters affect the pronunciation and meaning of a word.

Additionally, silent letters can be classified based on their position and phonological function. Positional silent letters depend on their placement within a word, such as the initial "k" in "knee" or "w" in "write," which remains unpronounced but serves as an orthographic marker (Kondrotiene, 2016). Phonological silent letters, however, affect pronunciation within specific phonetic contexts, like the silent "e" in "made," which lengthens the vowel sounds of the preceding letters (Dalton-Puffer, 2015). The presence of silent letters also helps distinguish homographs or words that have the same spelling but different meanings. As quoted by Rumbardi and Lestari (2022) "The function of silent letters is often related to the origin of the word or as a differentiator from similar words." For example, in the words "comb" (hair) and "bomb." In this word, the letter "b" is not pronounced, but is pronounced differently. Understanding the function of silent letters is important for English education students to avoid mistakes in pronunciation that can affect communication and overall Silent letters also play a key role in affecting vowel length, particularly through the presence of the silent "e" at the end of certain words. This silent "e," as seen in words like "rate" or "hope," indicates a long vowel sound in the preceding syllable, distinguishing it from shorter vowel sounds in similar words without the silent "e," such as "rat" or "hop" (Miller, 2018). This shows that silent letters, despite not being spoken, actively contribute to the formation of English pronunciation and meaning.

A study conducted by Smith (2018) found that many English language students have difficulty pronouncing silent letters, which leads to mistakes in spoken English. The researchers' first observation at Islamic Private University in Semarang found that English education students often have difficulty pronouncing silent letters. The reason for this is that they are still pronouncing the letter that's supposed to be silent in some words. Some students are still pronouncing the words exactly as they were spelled. They are not aware of the presence of silent letters. Because English spelling rules are complex and inconsistent, these students may have difficulty recognizing which letters are silent in a word. Many Indonesian students have difficulty understanding English pronunciation because the words they hear and speak often differ from the written version (Astuti et al., 2021). The students pronounce all the letters in English words as they pronounce them in Indonesian, and it creates the mistakes.

While several studies have explored pronunciation challenges in EFL contexts, including those related to phonemes and word stress, there has been limited focus on the specific issue of silent letter mispronunciations among Indonesian learners. Compared to previous research that primarily addresses general pronunciation difficulties (e.g., Astuti et al., 2021), this study provides a more focused investigation into the types of silent letters that are most problematic for learners. This gap highlights the need for more targeted research on silent letter awareness and its role in English pronunciation proficiency.

This highlights the importance of addressing this issue in language teaching to strengthen students' ability to pronounce silent letters correctly and improve their overall language proficiency. The aim of this study is to identify and analyze common mistakes in the pronunciation of silent letters made by students in an English education program. In addition, this research aims to provide insight into aspects of pronunciation teaching that need to be strengthened in the English language education curriculum. By understanding the common mistakes in silent letters, it is hoped that this study can provide a basis for developing more effective teaching methods to improve students' pronunciation skills, communicate accurately in English, and better prepare them to be competent educators in the future. Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research question: what are the common mistakes in pronouncing silent letter by students in the English education program.

METHOD

This study used descriptive quantitative method. As cited by Sudjiono in Ayumi (2018), the descriptive quantitative method is a method that described the state of a phenomenon that has been done by the measuring instrument, the processed following the function. The quantitative approach was chosen because it provides a systematic basic for exploring pronunciation mistakes, allowing researchers to process numerical data objectively and draw statistically significant conclusion (Creswell, 1999). Through simple statistical analysis, this study identifies specific silent letters that are most frequently mispronounced and offer insights into effective teaching strategies to address these challenges.

Respondents

This study was conducted among English Education students at Islamic Private University in Semarang, Semarang. The researchers employed a purposive sampling method, in which the sample was deliberately selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study. According to Nugraha (2015), purposive sampling enabled researchers to choose participants who were most likely to provide rich and relevant data, making the findings more representative of the phenomena under investigation.

In this study, the criteria for selecting participants included: (1) students who were enrolled in the English Education Program, (2) students from the 1st to 7th semester to ensure a broad range of exposure to English pronunciation instruction, and (3) students who had completed or were taking pronunciation or speaking-related courses. A maximum of 50 students who met these criteria were selected to accurately capture common pronunciation mistakes, particularly those involving silent letters in English.

Moreover, the students were proportionally selected across different semesters to ensure fair representation from each grade level. This proportional distribution allowed the researchers to relate students' performance in pronouncing silent letters to their academic level or batch, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the progression of pronunciation skills over time.

Instruments

In the pronunciation test, the researchers tested 10 lists of words containing English silent letters. The students were then asked to pronounce sentences that included these words. The selection of the words was based on several considerations: (1) the words represent commonly used English vocabulary across various proficiency levels, (2) they include different types of silent letters (e.g., *b*, *k*, *l*, *t*, *w*) to reflect a range of phonological challenges, and (3) they are frequently mispronounced by non-native English learners, especially Indonesian students. These considerations ensured that the test items were relevant, pedagogically meaningful, and able to effectively identify common pronunciation mistakes related to silent letters.

Table 1. List of words with English silent letters

NO	WORDS WITH ENGLISH SILENT LETTERS
1	Mom's been a wreck since your visit this morning
2	Sign another one for more money
3	I need the scissors to cut this
4	It's a long hustle, but it keeps me real busy
5	Charlotte going to knock on his door
6	They built a new bridge
7	I hope you like salmon
8	Take a guess at my age
9	I read an article about him in the journal of criminal psychology
10	Rose waited him for an hour

The instrument in this research was adopted from an instrument developed by Pufarani & Puspita's (2021) study entitled Students' Pronunciation Errors in English Silent Letters, with modifications that are relevant for the context of this research.

Procedures

This study mainly used pronunciation test to collect data. In the pronunciation test, the researchers ask the students to read 10 sentences that containing words silent letters such as "w", "g", "c", "t", "d", "l", "u", "p", and "h". Each silent letter was selected based on its phonological complexity, frequently of occurrence in English vocabulary, and its potential

to cause mispronunciation mistakes (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Alaka (2023) states that pronunciation test was very important in assessing students' phonological abilities, especially in languages that have different phonetic and phonological rules than their native language. To ensure the accuracy of the collected data, the researchers use audio recording as a media to record the students' reading the sentences. Audio recording is highly effective for researchers analyzing pronunciation tests as it provides a permanent record of speech that can be revisited multiple times for detailed analysis (Lepore, 2014).

Data Analysis

The collected data is analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. The first step of the analysis is to identify the pronunciation mistakes in the recorded speech by recording each mistake based on the type of silent letter that is most frequently pronounced. The researchers then counted the total number of mistakes for each silent letter and analyze the mistakes based on their frequency. The formula used to calculate the mistakes rate is:

$$\text{Total percentage} = \frac{\text{Number of Mistakes}}{\text{Total number of mistakes}} \times 100\%$$

Using this formula, researchers can determine the percentage of mistakes for each mispronounced silent letter, allowing them to identify which letter are most difficult for students to pronounce. Researchers present the results in tables or graphs to facilitate easier interpretation and identify the silent letters that pose the greatest challenge for students to pronounce. The quantitative analysis ensured that the findings were objective, replicable, and statistically valid, supporting the study's conclusions about silent letter pronunciation mistakes (Miller, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the pronunciation test data demonstrated that a considerable proportion of students experienced difficulties in correctly articulating English words with silent letters, with specific silent consonants being more frequently mispronounced than others. **From the pronunciation test results, there were 187 mispronounced silent letters produced by 50 students.**

Table 2. Summarized result of the students' mistakes

Silent letter	Words	Frequency of Incorrect Pronunciation	Percentage (%)
l	Salmon	43	23.00%
w	Wreck	29	15.51%
p	Psychology	23	12.30%
t	Hustle	22	11.76%
c	Scissor	21	11.23%
k	Knock	16	8.56%
h	Hour	15	8.02%
d	Bridge	8	4.28%
g	Sign	7	3.74%
u	Guess	3	1.60%
TOTAL		187	100%

The pronunciation test was conducted on November 19th–20th, 2024, with a total of 50 students participating in the research. During the test, the researchers asked the students to pronounce ten English words containing silent letters, including “w”, “g”, “c”, “t”, “k”, “d”, “l”, “u”, “p”, and “h”. To accurately capture the students’ pronunciation, the researchers set up an audio recorder and recorded each participant as they read the sentences containing the selected words. From the pronunciation test results, there were 187 mispronounced silent letters produce by 43 students mispronounced word “salmon”, the students made mistakes by pronouncing letter “l”. The correct pronunciation was (‘sæm.ən), but the students still pronounced it with (salmon). This indicates that this letter is particularly difficult for participants to pronounce correctly. Its high mistake percentage could be attributed to its complex phonological features, inconsistent silent letter rules in English, or its occurrence in less frequently encountered words.

Similarly, letter “w” was the second highest mistakes rate with 15.51%. The total 29 students were made mistakes in pronouncing silent letter “w” in the word “wreck”. The correct pronunciation was (rek) without pronouncing the silent letter “w”, but students still pronounced it with (wrek). Letter “p” also exhibit relatively high mistake with 12.30%. A total 23 students were mispronounced word “psychology”. The students pronounced it with (psi’kɒl.ə.dʒi). The students made mistakes by sounding the letter “p”. The correct pronunciation was (saɪ’kɒl.ə.dʒi) without pronouncing the letter “p”. The letter “t” had a mistake rate of 11.76% with total 22 students were mispronounced word “hustle”. The students pronounced it with (‘hʌs. təl). The students still pronounced the silent letter “t”. The correct pronunciation was (‘hʌs. əl). The percentage of mistakes for the letter “c” was 11.23% with 21 students were mispronounced word “scissor”. It was incorrect because the students pronounced it with (‘skɪz.ər). The correct pronunciation was (‘sɪz.ər) without pronouncing the silent letter “c”.

Mispronunciation of the letter “k” accounted for 8.56% with total 16 students were mispronounced word “knock”. The students pronounced it by (knok). The correct pronunciation was (nɒk) without sounding the letter “k”. The letter “h” had a mistake rate of 8.02% with 15 students were mispronounced word “hour”. The correct pronunciation was (aʊər) where the letter “h” should not be pronounced but the students still pronounced it with (haʊər). The letter “d” accounted for 4.28% of mistake. A total 8 students were mispronounced word “bridge”. The students pronounced it with (brɪddʒ). The sentence should be pronounced (brɪdʒ), but the students still pronouncing the silent letter “d”. The letter “g” is the second lowest mistake rate of 3.74% with total 7 students mispronounced word “sign”. The students pronounced it with (saɪn). The correct pronunciation was (saɪn) without pronouncing silent letter “g”. The letter “u” demonstrates the lowest mistake rate, contributing only 1.60% of total mistakes, and only 3 students mispronounced word “guess”. The correct pronunciation was (ges), but 3 students still pronounced the letter “u” with (gues). These findings suggest that these letters are easier for learners to pronounce, possibly due to their simpler phonological properties, higher frequency in familiar contexts, or closer alignment with the learners’ existing phonological knowledge.

There were also differences in difficulty across grade levels. First-semester students had the most difficulty pronouncing silent letters. They tended to pronounce words as they were written and had little awareness of which letters should be silenced. This was likely because they had little familiarity with English phonological rules and were heavily influenced by the reading patterns of their native language. Third-semester students showed moderate progress, with some students able to understand and recognize silent

letters, but others still had difficulty. These students were in a transitional stage where their understanding was growing but their application was inconsistent. On the other hand, the fifth-semester students developed a greater understanding of silent letters and made fewer errors. They were better able to distinguish which letters should be silenced, but difficulties remained in certain complex cases. This suggests that experience and exposure to English significantly influences one's ability to understand and apply the concept of silent letters.

These findings highlight the need for structured, targeted interventions tailored to students' levels to address challenges related to silent letters. Pronunciation courses are typically introduced over several semesters and developed in stages, which affects how exposed students are to concepts such as silent letters and the extent to which they are able to master them.

For first-semester, the focus should be on building basic understanding. At this level, students typically learn basic phonological concepts, such as the relationship between letters and sounds. Lessons should focus on raising awareness of the existence of silent letters, as many first graders are unfamiliar with the term and tend to pronounce English words as they are written. Activities such as reading simple words that contain silent letters (e.g., "knee," "bomb") and listening practice can help create initial explanations and examples of how silent letters function in pronunciation. Repetition is used to reinforce what has been learned.

In the third semester, students typically progress to intermediate-level pronunciation courses and begin to explore more complex phonological patterns. At this stage, the curriculum should include situational exercises that require students to recognize and apply the rules of silent letters as they read and write. For example, students could assign students to read sentences or lists of words that contain silent letters, and then have a whole-class discussion about why certain letters are silent. Partner or group activities that require identifying silent letters in different word families can also improve comprehension. This stage is critical because students are in a transitional period where they are understanding but not applying it consistently.

For students within the fifth term, pronunciation instruction regularly gets to be more progressed, focusing on fluency, exactness, and nuance in English phonology. At this level, students are expected to have a clearer understanding of silent letters and their role in pronunciation. Classes ought to center on honing abilities and settling any remaining disparities. Activities such as reading extended passages, participating in debates, and presentations that require exact pronunciation of silent letters can offer assistance students build confidence and fluency. Technology such as pronunciation apps and recording devices can provide instant feedback, permitting students to self-monitor and redress their pronunciation. Furthermore, students ought to be exposed to authentic English language materials, such as podcasts and videos, to encourage internalize native speakers' natural use of silent characters.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that highlights the specific challenges posed by silent letters in English pronunciation. Smith (2018) reported that the silent letter "l" in words like "salmon" and "calm" is among the most commonly mispronounced, accounting for a significant proportion of mistakes in pronunciation test. Similarly, this study found that silent letter "l" contributed to the highest percentage of mistakes with 23.00%, reinforcing the complexity of this particular silent letter in both recognition and application.

Dalton-Puffer (2015) observed that the silent letter “w” as found in words such as “wrist” and “wrong”, is another common source of mistakes due to its high occurrence in less familiar vocabulary. This align with the results of this study, where the silent letter “w” has a notable mistake rate of 15.51%, ranking as the second most challenging silent letter. Furthermore, previous studies, such as Kurniawan et al., (2022), showed that silent letters like “p” in “psychology” and “receipt” are often problematic for learners, with similar findings in this study showing a high mistake rate of 12.30% for the silent letter “p”.

Overall, the graded structure of pronunciation courses provides excellent opportunities for incremental progress throughout the semester. However, these courses must be carefully designed to accommodate students' developmental levels and build foundational skills while engaging them in ongoing challenges. Introducing silent letter concepts early, reinforcing them at the intermediate level, and refining them in advanced courses can help students achieve better pronunciation outcomes (Astuti et al., 2021; Pusfarani & Puspita, 2021).

Considering the findings of this study, which show a high rate of mispronunciation of specific silent letters such as “l”, it becomes evident that pronunciation instruction should be more targeted and responsive to learners' common difficulties. Teachers need to emphasize these problematic silent letters during instruction, using both phonetic training and auditory discrimination activities. Additionally, integrating diagnostic pronunciation assessments early in the course can help educators tailor instruction according to students' specific needs. By doing so, language teaching becomes more effective in addressing persistent errors and ultimately improves students' communicative competence in spoken English.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that the most commonly mispronounced silent letter was “l,” accounting for 23.00% of all mistakes. This suggests that words containing the silent letter “l” (e.g., salmon) pose significant challenges for students, possibly due to unfamiliarity with this particular rule or its inconsistent application in English phonology. On the other hand, the least frequently mispronounced silent letter was “u,” with a lower error rate of 1.60%. Words containing the silent “u” (e.g., guess) appear to pose less of a problem, possibly due to their simpler phonological context or higher frequency in learning materials. Overall, the data emphasize the uneven challenges presented by different silent letters, highlight the specific difficulties that students encounter when dealing with less predictable phonological rules in English pronunciation.

The findings of this study emphasize the significance of integrating focused on pronunciation activities into English language teaching. Silent letters with high mistake rates, such as “l”, “w”, and “p”, ought to be given specific consideration within the classroom to assist students build accuracy and confidence. Teachers can utilize pronunciation test as a diagnostic tool to recognize and address particular silent letter challenges faced by their students. Moreover, the results recommend that joining silent letter patterns into pronunciation teaching materials can offer assistance students internalize these rules, reducing common mispronunciations and improving their generally speaking proficiency. By focusing on the particular comes about of this study, teachers can create more educated and viable guidelines techniques tailored to their student needs.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Together with Author 2, Author 1 supplied the source, examined the information, and penned the conclusions and debates. Additionally, before submitting, proofread the article drafts multiple times. Author 2 examined the data, provided an alternative interpretation of the results, and verified the text using the journal template.

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