

The Problem of Silent Letters in ESL Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

English is an unphonetic language. There is no match between the letter that we write and the sound we produce. When the same subject is taught in the class and students are asked to acquire proper pronunciation in English it is very difficult on their part to speak or pronounce with proper accent or pronunciation because of the interference of certain barriers. One of the most important barrier other than the mother tongue interference. Educational background is the existence of silent letters in English vocabulary which really intensifies the problem of acquiring the right pronunciation in English.

Index Terms: Silent letter, Barriers, Pronunciation

Introduction

In English pronunciation silent letter is an informal term for a letter of the alphabet (or a letter combination) that's usually left unpronounced, such as the b in subtle, the c in scissors, the g in design, the t in listen, and the gh in thought. Also called dummy letter.

Silent letters are the ghosts of pronunciations past. The word 'knight', with its silent 'k', and silent 'gh', is cognate with the German word for servant, 'knecht', where every letter is pronounced.

Silent 'e' (eg, tot vs tote) is a bit more of a complicated story. In Chaucer's day, the 'e' was pronounced. So, in a word like 'bite' (not a real old-English example, but simpler for exposition) the 'e' at the end would have meant that the word was pronounced bi.te, with two syllables. In the Germanic language, open syllables had long vowels, so 'bit' would be short 'i', 'bite' would be long. Nowadays, the distinction between long and short vowels in English is actually more than just length because of the Great Vowel Shift.

So, whereas before, 'bite' would have been something like 'beetuh', the Great Vowel Shift and the eventual elision of the final 'e' makes its modern pronunciation 'byt' – silent 'e'.

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Another process occurs when we borrow words from other languages. 'Tsunami' was borrowed from Japanese, and 'psychology' was borrowed from Greek. The initial consonant sounds in these words are not used in English, at least to start words. English ends words with those clusters, though: 'hats', 'chops'. The initial 'p' in 'psychology' (and 'pterodactyl', and other words from Greek) has become silent in English. Some English speakers – not all – simplify the word 'tsunami' by not pronouncing the initial 't', so that it fits in with the phonological rules of English.

Joe Devney, linguistic consultant

Often silent letters in English are actually diacritic letters. This means that rather than being pronounced, they change the pronunciation of another syllable. Compare the words 'fin' and 'fine'. The 'e' isn't pronounced, but it changes the pronunciation of the vowel by lengthening it. Consider also: 'fat'/'fate', 'hat'/'hate', 'don'/'done'.

Zeibura S Kathau

There's another factor, too – when the printing press came to England, many of those who brought the new technology were Flemish and German. The printers had free rein, since spelling at that time was so non-standard. They added in a little something extra to make the words look more like the way they'd pronounce them back home. And because of the power of the printing press, their depredations on English spelling stuck.

In an alphabetic Writing system, a silent letter is a letter that, in a particular word, remains silent, i.e. it does not correspond to any sound in the word's pronunciation. The term silent designates a letter in the written form of a word which is not sounded or pronounced in speech. Given the arbitrary and unpredictable aspect of the English spelling, many letters could be said to be silent in certain context.

British spelling is slightly more archaic than American. In the early part of the 19th century, the pioneering dictionary maker in America introduced many reforms in English spelling. Many abstract nouns in American English end in -our, and Last'r' sound is not pronounced. It remains silent. Such words are armour, behavior, colour etc.

Spelling and Pronunciation :

In many English words, the spelling is different from pronunciation. This is mainly because our pronunciation has changed a good deal the last few hundred years, while our spelling system has stayed more or less the same. Second language learners have serious problems in acquiring intelligible pronunciation in English, because of the existence of silent letters rather than the other difficulties like MTI, Age, Education, etc.

Learners' Age

Children seem to pick up accents very quickly; and the ability to do seems to diminish with age and the knowledge of their native language to a large extent acts as annoying interference while to their second language learning. Meanwhile, Pronunciation is considered to be the most difficult parts of a language for adult learners to master. Adults may not pronounce the English words efficiently as like the children because some times they feel shy when they come across with different new sounds.

Learners' Attitude and Psychological Factors

The students needs to be positively motivated and they should develop a positive attitude towards learning English pronunciation rather than ignoring the importance of actual pronunciation and retaining their own existing pronunciation skill. Which needs a correct attitude to learn English pronunciation. A number of researchers have claimed that work on pronunciation should need to be tied in with on the individual's value set, attitudes and socio-schemata (Pennington, 1994). Sometimes, motivation for learning can accelerate the learners' attitude formation. Attitude for learning can either support or hinder pronunciation skills development.

Similarly, the way an individual pronunciation has much to do with his or her personality and psychological or emotional state at a given time. Acton (1984) sees “preparing students psychologically as a necessary correlate to improving their pronunciation. Phonology, he says, has both ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside-in’ dimension which function in a kind of loop: ‘Not only does personality or emotional state show in pronunciation ... but the converse is also true:

Mother Tongue Interference :

Each language has a different set of phonological semantic and syntactic rules. Oriya for example has different rules from English .

A person who usually speaks one language has to switch to a different set of rules when he/she tries to speak in a different language. Often the speaker is not aware of the differences between the rules of his/her own language and those of the other language. In such a situation , the speaker will tend to use the rules of his/her own language to communicate in the other language. This is sometimes known as Mother-tongue interference.

Observation :

A group of engineering students of different branches were assigned with a list of English words and asked by the teacher to pronounce them. The list of English words are stated below

sl no	word assigned	pronunciation by student	actual pronunciation
1	dumb	sound of “b” retained	/dʌm/
2	wednesday	sound of second “d” in the word retained	/wenzdɪ/
3	what	sound of “h” retained	/wɒt/
4	knife	sound of “k” retained	/naɪf/
5	hour	sound of “h” retained	/aʊə/
6	autumn	sound of “n” retained	/ɔ:təm/
7	isle	sound of “s” retained	/aɪl/
8	calm	sound of “l” retained	/kɑ:m/
9	sign	sound of “g” retained	/saɪn/
10	folk	sound of “l” retained	/fəʊk/

Most of the students failed to pronounce the exact pronunciation as shown in the table given above under the heading actual pronunciation. The students retained the silent letters in the given words by producing wrong pronunciation.

There are several reasons why the students failed to pronounce the words exactly.

1. Lack of exposure to English listening vocabulary.
2. Lack of knowledge of English phonemic transcription.
3. Habit of producing wrong sounds of the given words.
4. Lack of interest in learning English pronunciation.
5. Lack of motivation by the teachers to give stress on listening skill.
6. Lack of requisite time hour to practice English vocabulary and pronunciation.
7. Lack of appropriate knowledge by the teachers to train the students in English.

Methods to be adopted to develop the Pronunciation Skills of Students:

1 .Engaging Students in Speaking activities

What learners most want (Willing, 1993; Volkoff & Golding, 1998) - and what will help them most - is plenty of authentic conversation practice (Burns & Joyce, 1997), supplemented by expert guidance on how to understand and correct their mistakes.

Teachers should take the help of maximum resources and develop different kinds of tasks and activities and engage the students to do that. Which can not only help the students to identify their problem areas in pronunciation with relation to silent letters and other problems but also help them to have intelligible pronunciation .

2 .Giving stress on practicing pronunciation

Maximum time should be spent by the students in pronouncing vocabulary especially vocabularies which have silent letters in them and teachers should make a list of those vocabulary and ask the students to practice the same in presence of them .

3 .Appropriate guidance

The second language learners of English need an appropriate guidance and training to have a neutral accent. They should under go rigorous training and should acquire intangible pronunciation which could be understood by one and all. The teacher should see the problems and mistakes the students commit while pronouncing the words and according they should guide the students to overcome the same. Where a learner has difficulty in pronouncing specific sounds or sound sequences of English, they need *appropriate* description of how to *think* about the sounds in terms they can understand and 'latch on to'. They need to be terms based on the way the learner thinks about the sounds, not the way English speakers do. A variety of 'tricks' can be found for most learners (Burns & Joyce, 1997).

4. Listening observation

Students speech/pronunciation should be recorded and the recording should be played by the students so that they can make a comparison to the native speakers pronunciation which will help them to pronounce the words intelligibly and they can overcome the problems the face during the pronunciation . Special emphasis should be given by the teacher when there are silent letters in the words and it should be told to the students instantly to keep a record of the same in the mind as well as in the note to have actual pronunciation .

5. Suggestions for participation in international English Tests

The students after going through rigorous practices in Listening skills as well as other skills of English like Reading , Writing skills, they should participate in various international English exams like GRE,TOEFL,IELTS to measure their ability in different areas of English skills as mentioned above.

6. Teachers training and material development:

Teachers those who teach English in different schools , colleges, or technical institutes need to upgrade and update their existing knowledge in English by undergoing different kinds of training with special reference to pronunciation , design materials for pronunciation, accessing different websites for their ready reference which will not only enhance the skill of learning the for the teachers at the same time it could help in teaching English for the second language learners in acquiring the skill of English.Existing. It is recommended that there should be a conference of people interested in the area of ESLpronunciation to discuss a range of issues. It seems likely that it would be possible to integrate a range of existing practices into a coordinated approach to pronunciation teaching, or at least to identify opposing schools of thought which can be articulated and evaluated so as to allow teachers and teacher trainers to choose which they wish to adhere to (Forman, 1993).

6. Conclusion

Pronunciation with reference to silent letters to in English vocabularies has been a major problem for the second language learners of English . The problem of pronunciation compounds when it mixes with other problems like age, lack of motivation , MTI etc. The above problems can be overcome by giving stress in drilling more of vocabularies with silent letters with appropriate guidance by the teachers .The schools , colleges,and technical institutes should spend maximum time in focusing more on listening skill with special emphasis to silent letters in vocabularies . The teachers should develop special task and activities which will help the students to develop their pronunciation skills the students should be given with more references, materials to have an access with the knowledge of silent letters in words and how to pronounce them. More of lab hours should be spent by the students as well as teachers to practice vocabularies with silent letters. The student should be advised to follow a very good English pronouncing dictionary where they can understand which letter or sound remain silent while pronouncing word by consulting dictionary. They should be advised to watch English movies with sub titles where they can understand the pronunciation of different words.

A list of vocabularies with silent letters can be given to students so as to develop their pronunciation skills in English.

Here is a list of common letter combinations with silent letters in alphabetical order.

This list contains most of the silent letters that give English as a second language students difficulties.

Silent B

B is not pronounced when following M at the end of a word.

climb - I climbed the tree in the park.

crumb - There's a crumb of bread on your lapel.

dumb - That's a really dumb question.
comb - Do you carry a comb with you?

Silent C

C is not pronounced in the ending "scl."

muscle - He's building up muscle with that exercise.

Silent D

D is not pronounced in the following common words:

handkerchief - Adding a handkerchief to your suit provides a touch of class.
Wednesday - I'm not working this Wednesday.

Silent E

E is not pronounced at the end of words and usually makes the vowel long.

hope - I hope to see you soon.
drive - I'll drive the car to Seattle tomorrow.
gave - Jennifer gave him a book for his birthday.
write - Do you write letters anymore?
site - We visited the monument site last week.

Silent G

G is not often not pronounced when followed by an N.

champagne - Let's drink champagne!
foreign - She works for a foreign bank.
sign - The sign says 'exit'.
feign - Don't feign that you care!

Silent GH

GH is not pronounced before T and at the end of many words.

thought - I thought about you last week.

through - Let's take a drive through the park.
daughter - My daughter was born in Pisa.
light - There's a beautiful light in the sky.

Silent H

H is not pronounced when following W. Some speakers whisper the H before the W.

what - What did you say?
when - When does the train leave?
where - Where are we going?

H is not pronounced at the beginning of many words. Use the article "an" with unvoiced H. Here are some of the most common:

hour - I'll see you in an hour.

honest - To be honest, this is difficult.

honor - It's an honor to have you over for dinner.

Silent K

K is not pronounced when followed by N at the beginning of a word.

knife - I cut the fish open with a knife.

knee - Bend your knees and jump.

know - Do you know the answer?

Silent L

L is often not pronounced before L, D, F, M, K.

calm - It's a calm day in paradise.

salmon - Let's have salmon for dinner.

talk - Let's talk soon.

should - You should come over next week.

Silent N

N is not pronounced following M at the end of a word.

autumn - It's a beautiful autumn day.

hymn - Open to hymn 25 and let's sing.

Silent P

P is not pronounced at the beginning of many words using the [suffix](#) "psych" and "pneu".

psychiatrist - The psychiatrist asked lots of questions.

pneumonia - Pneumonia can be a very dangerous disease.

Silent S

S is not pronounced before L in the following words:

island - We took a ferry to the island.

Silent T

T is not pronounced in these common words:

castle - The castle stood upon the hill overlooking the valley.
 fasten - fasten your seatbelts and lets go for a ride.
 listen - Listen carefully to what I say.

Silent U

U is not pronounced before after G and before a vowel.

guess - I guess I don't know the answer.
 guitar - While my guitar gently weeps.
 guest - She's our guest tonight.

Silent W

W is not pronounced at the beginning of a word followed by an R.

wrap - Wrap up the present for Tom.
 write - I need to write an essay tomorrow.
 wrong - I'm afraid you are wrong.

W is not pronounced with these three pronouns:

who - Who do you know in town?
 whose - Whose job is it?
 whom - Whom should we ask.

silent letters	word in which they remain silent
b	comb,tomb
c	muscle
ch	yacht
d	handkerchief
e	rope,come
g	sign,campaign
gh	thought,light
h	honest,hour
i	business
k	knife,knot
l	calm,half
n	autumn
p	psychiatrist
s	isle
t	castle,fasten
th	asthma
u	guess
w	wrap,write

x	faux
z	rendezvous

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