



**Exploring ESL Learners' Anxiety towards Silent Letters in Pronunciation: A Case Study of Undergraduates of University of Sialkot, Pakistan**

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**Abstract**

Learning a second language gives learners aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time, learners face various problems in the Teaching/ learning process, especially when pronouncing silent letters. This research mainly focused on the problems and anxiety ESL learners face in acquiring English as a Second Language at the undergraduate level. All participants are from the English Department of the University of Sialkot, Pakistan and have been exposed to learning English as a second language for two to four years. A sample of 14 English language undergraduates was selected by simple random sampling. Data is collected through notes in which the students were given the silent letters used to occur in English words and were asked to read aloud. Direct observational testing was the focus of data collection. After that, a semi-structured interview developed by Hassan in 2014 that included six items was conducted. As this study was qualitative, the researcher applied the qualitative method to analyze the data for this purpose. Findings show that mother tongue, age, practice, lack of exposure to the second language and lack of motivation are the major factors that cause anxiety among ESL learners at the university of Sialkot. The present study's findings could be fruitful for English language learners in terms of implementing novel methods to cope with pronunciation issues in a Second Language.

**Keywords:** ESL learners, anxiety, pronunciation, silent letters

**1. Introduction**

This study focuses on the problem of anxiety that English as Second Language (ESL) learners face in pronouncing words containing silent consonants at the undergraduate level. Since all learners are non-native speakers, they need to be made aware of what kinds of letters in words are silenced. Regarding pronunciation, researchers pay such a rare consideration to students of the English language. The utterance of the English language has variations of interlocutors, which is the goal of most second language learners. However, it is impractical to offer a separate pronunciation course for this purpose in many second language programs. According to Breitreutz et al. (2001), instead, pronunciation instruction, when offered, is usually included as a supplemental component of speech instruction or 'moulded' in a relatively mild and systematic way throughout the program.

It is a common curiosity and longing of English language students to become similar to inherent orators in terms of utterance. Though their longing is hardly fulfilled, it may be since acquiring a native-like speaking style is often challenging as being fantasized. The utterance is not merely associated with the acquisition of a second language. However, many variables are interconnected with it, including age, disclosure, exercise, outlooks and approaches to the target language. It does not seem very easy for second language practitioners to overcome whole approaches which influence accent attainment. According to (Wong, 1987), second language learners' temperament might assist the practitioners in understanding what strategy can be helpful in the developing utterance of their language.

**1.1. Research Questions**

Why do ESL learners have anxiety pronouncing the consonants of the silent letters of English words?

What strategies do learners use to deal with the pronunciation anxieties of silent letter consonants in English words?

**2. Literature Review**

According to Crystal (2003), pronunciation is the opportunity to settle them locally or socially in one's place of origin. One's accent is a common consequence of teaching L2, perhaps the insight of second language learners into how the pronunciation of native speakers of English differs from their speech community. Various young English students consider themselves non-native speakers by adopting or imitating foreign accents (Derwing, 2005). Several polyglots promote the notion called the 'vital quantity Hypothesis', which helps to develop innate pronunciation. According to Lenneberg (1967), a learner must begin learning a language before she is seven years old.

It is proposed by writer and Derwing (1999) when the pitch of speech is high generally considered logical. When the pitch tone and beat in accent errors, it affects comprehension and exaggerated speech I have found that it seems to affect academic errors (individual sound errors). That's why accent analysis in English phonetics clinging with the pitch, tone and beat of (vowel and consonant sounds) and suprasegmental functions of language: in the view of Crystal; Low 2006 and Derwing, (1999) all natural languages have domain of specific rules either stress rules or linguistic unit rules. Either this is British English, American English or Dutch English, every human language has these key domains of stressed rules and linguistic unit rules. But each has different pitch, intonation,

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rhythm and accent. According to Crystal (2003) shorter syllables are spoken faster and vowels are reduced so that pitch, beat, and tone of stressed syllables is parallel.

Some words having some more than six syllables are strongly emphasized while the short words containing less syllables have always uttered bit faster with equal time between stressed syllables and vowel reduction so that each sentence takes about the same amount of time. According to David crystal (2003) some languages having non-native English intonation have chronologically parallel pitch, tone, and beat even stress pattern of vowel and consonant sounds such as Tamil, French, Malaysian, Spanish and Singaporean.

Low pitch vowels usually have precedence in its place of high pitch vowels, additionally low pitched vowels model has always a susceptible type. Suppose john will sink in this phrase john and sink have utmost strain. An excellence among strain if West Germanic student be fluent in one tongue is absolutely distinctive rhymically unique train primarily centered on American or British English accent. know-how if not or now no longer a learner's tongue is strain primarily based totally on the whole based on the whole or linguistic unit primarily based totally can facilitate a instruct set up ideal accent practices.

Field (2005) requested skilled listeners to transcribe recorded fabric as soon as the variables of accessory and vowel great have been manipulated. He decided that when accessory is mistakenly shifted to a quick linguistic unit, at the same time as now no longer an change in vowel great, utterances vicinity unit notably much less intelligible than as soon as completely vowel great has deployed. L1 and L2 learners answered likewise as soon as choice making the understandability of phrases with out of place accessory.

Second Language learners' motivation starts with encouragement if they are bulling with and without classroom setting or cultural context, it may affect their stimulus of leaning non-native language. Whether their accent resembles with their speech community or they do not show ego of Englishman. If they are given fine exposure without accent bulling and joking, the stimuli towards phonetics will be increased thus they will overcome all the hurdles of accent, pronunciation and can develop the ego of language with respect to their cultural identity (Bernaus, Masgoret, Garder, and Reyes, 2004; Ali and Rehman, 2015).

According to Marinova-Todd et. al., (2000), if such pleasant exposure is given to second language learners, they could be transformed into an odd skillful person from being novice. What if they are non-native speakers, speaking in native like accent but will be furnished by getting positive input. Moyer (2007) says that ego of non-native language acquisition puts massive impact on the novice students of English who have longing to behave it like a native speaker does.

The scholars view that second language learners have to show self-efficacy to overcome their anxieties in dealt with phonetic words particularly of silent consonant letter words. In most cases the native tongue of non-native speakers of English language becomes one of the barriers in terms of overwhelming the challenges of phonetic. But every learner has inborn capability or even environmental influence of acquiring some fine pronunciations. In this regard many linguists discussed some supporting aspects like genetic inheritance, inborn phonetic capability, intoxication of language, motivation, and consistent practice on accent, utterance. All these aspects are working as a driving force behind pronunciation concerns (Brown, 1994; Celce-Marcia et al, 2000; Artificer, 1994; ken worthy, 1987).

In the field of phonetic, various studies have been conducted on the issues of pronunciation especially of silent letter sounds. In this regard, students of south were brought under inquiry to know their attitudes towards pronunciation issues they face while dealing with utterance concerns. One of the inquiries was done with Thai ESL learners by Kanoksilapatham (1992). In this research she found that Thai students were depressed dealing with four syllable words of second language when they were experienced with adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs. The results of the study showed an obscure phenomenon; the phenomena of bulling accent, flying misplaced words, ending syllables were supposed to be strained than of main syllables. Thai students vocal folds were naturally under controlled of their genetic therefore, despite putting efforts to pronounce alike native speakers, they were empowered by their native tongue.

According to Jarusan (1997) the listening capacity of non-native speakers determines their skill in the English phonetics which is considered one of the key factors in the fabrication of fine or refined accent. Another aspect is of English language exposure not only determines their accent in speech production but also refined pronunciation. When remote schooling Thai students were tested with phonetic sounds in English language, their lack in many ways because they were not exposed in such environment where they get exposure to develop their listening capacity.

English teachers and students do not focus on learning correct English pronunciation. They primarily focus on learning vocabulary and passing the final examinations. They do not take an interest in improving correct pronunciation but rather move forward with higher education. Teachers should be trained to ensure English pronunciation drills in the classroom to enhance pronunciation (Ali and Audi, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2022).

In another study carried out by Korsuwan (2001) discussed the effect of integration to meet the challenges of speech production while speaking second language. Moreover, it is seen in his study that imitation or getting proper input, non-native speakers like Thai with the integration of West German culture, they promoted their linguistic capacity towards English phonetic sounds. Subsequently, the findings showed the importance of English language exposure to the non-native speakers' refinement of phonetic sounds. More they are exposed or live

amongst English speakers, better they will get improvisation. Remote Thai students were less sophisticated in terms of their phonetic sounds in comparison to those who were in an integration of West German speakers.

### 3. Methodology

Research methodology is a pathway wherefrom the journey of inquiry starts. It is like a map or address of the researcher's destination. If the address is correct, it will lead him/her in the right direction. Moreover, Research methodology is like a backbone of the research, which has many methods, procedures, and approaches. These all are known as the roads of discovery (Creswell, 2012). For the present study, the researcher has selected the qualitative method. The population is the overall number of participants, which needs to be reduced to meet the data collection criteria. For the present study, the researcher has selected 22,21,20,19 batches of the English department at the University of Sialkot, Pakistan. This was the overall population wherein 14 students were randomly selected. Semi-structured interviews were used with open-ended questions for the data collection process. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to avoid biases. This type of interview allows the participants to understand the phenomena and take time before sitting for face-to-face discussion. However, data were analyzed using content analysis in which interviews were recorded with mobile oppo-A5S. Through the content analysis process, the first original collection of data was recorded, then transcribed, filtered, central themes were coded, and finally interpreted by the researcher.

### 4. Data Analysis

Q1. Do you get hesitated while pronouncing the word containing more than two syllables having silent letters? i.e. word like (slaughter)

S1

I often misspelled such words while writing, even feeling hesitation in utterance because of the influence of my native tongue. Silent consonant features give a tough time to ESL learners because they are often less practiced. There is an urge to practicing on silent letters in words to grasp English language skills. Not only I but many students have hesitated while dealing with words like slaughter, laughter, etc.

S2

They are dealing with non-native languages, continuously developing anxiety among second language learners. There are certain things in English language words, mainly letters, either consonants or vowels. They have a pattern of voiced, unvoiced, and rhythm. Which needs much effort to comprehend the true essence of language?

Q2. How do you deal with words like debt, comb, and doubt?

S3

When I pronounce such words, I confuse about which letter should be skipped and which shall not be. To me, these silent letters are wonders in the English language. Due to the influence of my native tongue, I mostly pronounce each letter by stressing it.

S4

Though it is truly tough to understand the nature of English silent letter words, their music can be understood by watching videos of native speakers of the English language. Once, I also faced difficulty encountering these silent features of the English language. However, gradually by watching English speakers, I started to understand what these letters have inside.

Q3. Is there any way to get command over words like reign, gnat, gnaw?

S5

Yes, there are many possible ways of getting mastery over such words containing typical silent letters. One of them is if we understand the pitch of vowels between these words. Vowel sounds are the root of words that decide what letter to be silent and which not to use. If students are given practice on the nucleus of the words, they either carry silent consonants or double consonant letters.

S6

Another possibility behind understanding these silent consonant letters is the syllabic scheme of words. We cannot understand the music of silent letters only based on vowel sounds, but we need to listen to what each syllable music has. I have seen many students whose aptitude was at the bottom in spelling and pronouncing silent words, but they improved when they relied on the syllabic scheme of words. What if they took time and put in strenuous efforts?

Q4. How do you overcome pronunciation issues while dealing with silent letters in words?

Participant; 7

I mostly watch audio video speeches of native speakers of English. By watching videos, I imitate their accent and sound beats, incredibly stressed and unstressed patterns of words. If second language learners were given proper exposure with the correct teaching methods, these hurdles of silent words could be easily improved or removed.

Participant 8

Each word has different silent letters; some words have less than two syllables, and others have more than two, three, and four syllables having double or triple silent consonant sounds, so it becomes tough to understand their

music in words. However, by self-practice, one can gradually meet pronunciation challenges, but the teacher's role in this regard is vital to bring students into the domain of second language learning ego.

Q5. Do you think that silent letters pronunciation issues are less paid attention in the teaching/ learning practices?

Participant; 9

Yes, it is true; I have been going through this experience, and these skills are considered minor in second language practice. That is why most students have been facing issues with handling silent consonant letters in speaking or writing. So, these primary and core skills are the roots of language trees. A language can only be appropriately taught if these roots are adequately grounded in the ground (mind) of novices.

Participant10

I have similar opinions on this question that silent letters are rarely placed in these practices of a second language. If students face these pronunciation issues, it may be due to not being given awareness from basic. Most students, including I, lack background knowledge of these silent letters, which is why problems related to pronunciation have become mature but still can be managed if such research is frequently done to create awareness among ESL practitioners and learners.

Participant11

Mainly at the university and college level, these things are ignored in an ego. Students have now reached a mature stage. However, teachers must learn that students come from different cultures, so they differ in their background knowledge. Another vital part is that English is being taught functionally, but the syllabus design needs these basic things to be taught. Therefore, we feel anxiety and depression while dealing with novel approaches to a new language.

Participant 12

What if these phonetic skills are not included in the course outline? Students can overcome these things by involving themselves. We cannot rely on what teachers are bringing to us, but we can feel our urges and longing for new language learning. Many students do experience these issues, but they are witty and conscious. Their difficulties awaken their ego to do complex tasks.

Q6: where do you feel difficulty while dealing with silent letters in words?

Participant13

I mostly misspelled the double silent consonant sounds. I rarely hesitate when pronouncing them, but I need to improve my writing. There are two ways to overcome these issues: to practice syllables and phonetic sounds or to memorize the spelling of silent letters, which are often placed at the start or middle of the words. So the best way is to keep practicing on their placement to understand the pitch of sounds.

Participant14

This is an acceptable way, but another thing can be helpful to understand these silent features, which are placed in words, i.e., reading books and newspapers, listening to music, and watching movies with subtitles. Another thing is understanding them through native sounds interconnected with a new or foreign language. These things should be done in learning a new language formally or informally.

## 5. Findings

*Silent letters* are letters written in a word but are not pronounced when the word is spoken. These letters can influence the position of the tongue when a word is pronounced, even though they are not pronounced themselves. For example, in the word "knife," the "k" is a silent letter, but it still affects the position of the tongue when the word is pronounced. In order to pronounce the word correctly, the tongue must be positioned behind the teeth to pronounce "n" and "f" sounds. The "k" may also influence how the vowel sound is pronounced, as the tongue may need to be positioned differently to produce the correct vowel sound. Similarly, in the word "gnat," the "g" is a silent letter, but it still affects the position of the tongue when the word is pronounced. In order to pronounce the word correctly, the tongue must be positioned behind the teeth to pronounce the "n" sound, and the "g" may also influence how the vowel sound is pronounced.

In general, silent letters can influence the tongue's position in a word, even though they are not pronounced. This is because the position of the tongue is closely tied to the sounds being pronounced, and the presence of a silent letter may affect how these sounds are produced.

Several factors can contribute to the pronunciation of students learning a new language. Some of these factors include:

### 5.1. Native language

The native language of the student can have a significant impact on their pronunciation in a new language. For example, a student whose native language is French may have difficulty with the vowel sounds in English, as the vowel sounds are pronounced differently in French.

### 5.2. Age

Children tend to have an easier time learning and perfecting new sounds in a language compared to adults. This is because their brains are more flexible and better able to learn new sounds.

### 5.3. Exposure

The more exposure a student has to the new language, the better they will be able to learn and pronounce the sounds correctly. This can include listening to native speakers, watching movies or TV shows in the new language, and interacting with native speakers.

#### **5.4. Practice**

Regular practice and repetition of the new sounds can help students improve their pronunciation. This can include practicing with a tutor or language exchange partner, listening to recordings of native speakers, and using pronunciation tools and resources.

#### **5.5. Motivation**

Students motivated to learn a new language and improve their pronunciation are more likely to succeed. This can include setting goals for improvement and being persistent in practicing and learning new sounds. Motivation and concern for proper pronunciation are essential factors in learning a new language. Proper pronunciation is crucial because it allows the speaker to be understood by others and helps to convey the intended meaning of words and sentences. Motivation drives the learner to put in the time and effort required to improve their pronunciation. Students who are highly motivated to learn a new language are more likely to seek resources and opportunities to practice and improve their pronunciation. They may also be more willing to put in extra effort to work on complex sounds or accents. Concern for proper pronunciation is also significant because it helps the learner to pay attention to the details of the language and to focus on speaking clearly and accurately. Students concerned about their pronunciation are more likely to seek feedback and correct any mistakes they may be making. This can help them progress more quickly and achieve a higher level of proficiency in the language. Motivation and concern for proper pronunciation are critical factors in learning a new language. By being motivated and concerned about their pronunciation, students can work towards achieving clear and accurate speech and better communication in the new language.

### **6. Discussion**

Pronunciation problems faced by English as Second Language (ESL) learners while learning a second language at the undergraduate level can significantly hinder their overall language acquisition. One particular area where many ESL learners struggle is with silent consonant letters in words. These silent letters can be confusing and difficult to pronounce correctly, leading to mispronunciations and difficulties in understanding and being understood by native speakers. One joint silent consonant letter that causes problems for ESL learners is the "b" in words like "debt," "doubt," and "comb." In these words, the "b" is not pronounced, but many ESL learners will pronounce it as if it were a regular consonant. This can lead to confusion and misunderstanding when communicating with native speakers, as the correct pronunciation of these words is essential for effective communication.

Another silent consonant letter that can be problematic for ESL learners is the "g" in words like "gnat," "gnaw," and "reign." In these words, the "g" is not pronounced, but many ESL learners will pronounce it as if it were a regular consonant. This can lead to confusion and misunderstanding when communicating with native speakers, as the correct pronunciation of these words is essential for effective communication.

Silent consonant letters can also be found in common words like "knight," "knife," and "knot." In these words, the "k" is not pronounced, and many ESL learners will pronounce it as if it were a regular consonant. This can lead to confusion and misunderstanding when communicating with native speakers, as the correct pronunciation of these words is essential for effective communication.

One strategy that can be helpful for ESL learners when it comes to silent consonant letters is focusing on the word's vowel sounds. Many silent consonant letters are found in words with long vowel sounds, so paying attention to the vowel sound and practicing making the correct vowel sound can help ESL learners better understand and pronounce these words. Another helpful strategy is to practice listening to native speakers and repeating their words. By listening to and repeating words with silent consonant letters, ESL learners can get a feel for the correct pronunciation and improve their understanding of these words. It is also essential for ESL learners to be aware of the context in which certain words are used. For example, the word "knight" can be pronounced with or without "k" depending on the context in which it is used. By understanding the context in which a word is used, ESL learners can better understand the correct pronunciation and use of these words.

Overall, silent consonant letters can be challenging for ESL learners to learn a second language. By focusing on vowel sounds, listening to and repeating native speakers, and understanding the context in which words are used, ESL learners can improve their understanding and pronunciation of these words and more effectively communicate with native speakers.

### **7. Conclusion**

Pronunciation problems faced by English as Second Language (ESL) learners while learning a second language at the undergraduate level can significantly hinder their overall language acquisition. One particular area where many ESL learners struggle is with silent consonant letters in words. These silent letters can be confusing and difficult to pronounce correctly, leading to mispronunciations and difficulties in understanding and being understood by native speakers. One strategy that can be helpful for ESL learners when it comes to silent consonant

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It is common for students learning English to feel anxious or self-conscious about their pronunciation, especially when it comes to silent consonant letters. These letters can be particularly challenging because they must be pronounced and still influence how a word is spoken. Some students may feel anxious about the presence of silent letters because they are not used to them in their native language. For example, many languages do not have silent letters, so students may need help incorporating them into their speech. Others may feel anxious about making mistakes when it comes to silent letters. They may worry that they will mispronounce a word and be misunderstood or make a mistake others will notice. Students need to remember that learning a new language, including how to pronounce silent consonant letters, is a process that takes time and practice to improve. It is also helpful for students to seek out resources and practice opportunities to improve their pronunciation, such as working with a tutor or language exchange partner, listening to recordings of native speakers, and using pronunciation tools and resources. Feeling anxious or self-conscious about pronunciation is normal when learning a new language. However, with practice and support, students can improve their pronunciation and feel more confident in their speaking abilities.

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