

An Analysis of Pronunciation Errors in The Production of Silent Letters of English Language by Secondary School Students in Borno State

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Abstract

Perfect pronunciation as one of the effective language skills in communication greatly affects teaching, learning and usage of English as a second language because it enhances transfer of information from source to target. This paper adopted Corder explanation of errors and mistakes which sees them as gaps/deficiencies in learners' knowledge of a language as theoretical framework and analysed pronunciation errors of the English silent letters by Senior Secondary School students of five schools in Biu, Kwaya-Kusar, Hawul, Bayo and Shani Local Government Areas of Borno State Nigeria via purposeful sample of ten (10) students. The data were collected through reading task: twenty sentences containing words with the selected silent letters. The results show dominant pre-systemic errors with a total number of one-hundred and sixty (160) errors from two hundred (200) pronunciation exercises. The study emphasizes how learners' competence is affected by a lack of phonological awareness and suggests specific pedagogical approaches to correct these mistakes, such as more teacher training, phonetic drills, and frequent assessments. Pronunciation can also be enhanced by creating an atmosphere where students are encouraged to practice speaking English aloud. This study enhances the teaching and learning of English pronunciation, especially in multilingual situations like Nigeria, by highlighting the significance of silent letters in the language and offering precise instructions.

Keywords: English language, errors, pronunciation, silent letters, secondary school

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that English as a second language to the greater percentage of the world population has dominated all spheres of life the world over because of its numerous functions. This shows that it is a multifaceted means of communication that has grown beyond its original borders. In most third world countries, it is the official language, language of education and lingua franca across divergent multi ethno-linguistic entities. Based on this, it has become pertinent for people to learn and use the language to satisfy the ever-growing needs of the language.

For second language learners to be able to acquire and use the English language effectively there are

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four skills to be mastered: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students of English as a second language all over have to master the four skills to function appropriately. Of the four skills, speaking is the most important and is greatly affected by pronunciation (a sub-skill of listening) since the nature of language is speech. With the vital role of English as language of communication globally, learning good/correct pronunciation is vital. Pufarani et al., (2021) argues that incorrect or wrong pronunciation would be transferred in learning and also leads to misinterpretation and

misunderstanding [1]. Yate (2017) also uses the concept perfect pronunciation is to speak so that people listen to what we say not how we say it. Because of the inconsistencies abound in the phonological and orthographical system of English, second language learners and user face difficulties in pronouncing many English words [2]. Words are not pronounced the way they are spelt; some letters are pronounced differently depending on the contexts, some sounds are represented by different letters in different contexts while some are not pronounced in certain contexts etc [3]. Silent letters as letters that are not heard making their usual sound in a word. This accounted for the differences in spelling and pronunciation in English. Andi-Pallawa and Alam (2013) sees it as a universal problem and Stenton (2009) observed that speaking difficulties are caused by mother-tongue and inhibition [4,5].

Nwigwe and Izuagba (2017) sees error as a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker which are caused by lack of competence [6]. In the same vein, as cited by Jauro and Ahmed (2018) believed that carelessness, interference from learners' mother-tongue, translation from mother-tongue, contrastive analysis, general order of difficulty, overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, material induced error, and a part of language creativity are the causes of errors [7].

There are many literature materials on pronunciation difficulties or challenges by users of English as second language across the globe that would serve as link with the current study. The pronunciation of the silent letter G in words by elementary and advanced level students of English Made Easy (EME) English course to find out their pronunciation and the phonological processes involved using fifteen words [8]. The percentage of error at the elementary level is higher while the opposite is the case at the advanced level with percentage 88% for words with g,n in context and 52% with g,h,t in context with correct pronunciation.

Rafael (2019) took a look at errors in the production of silent letters H and W by Non-English Department Students to ascertain the type and causative factors for the errors [9]. The study ended up with a total of 162 errors subdivided into 67 for silent letter h and 95 silent letters w. Pre-systemic in words with silent letter w in word final position and Systemic in words with letter h in all contexts while errors silent letter w is discovered in word final positions. The results also indicate mother-tongue interference.

A comparative study of the Javanese student's mispronunciation of Silent Letter B and the correct pronunciation according to Longman Pronunciation Dictionary to understand the phonological processes involved in the mispronunciation based on the differences between the two languages [10]. Most of the words used were mispronounced by the students especially monosyllabic bebt and doubt and in all the bisyllabic words. Apart from insertion of b which is the most common, cases of deletion, simplification and substitution were also identified. The phonological systems of the two languages and English spelling system accounted for the errors.

Errors in the production of silent letters by fourth semester students of English at STBA JIA to errors, causes and the dominant ones. Pre-systemic errors were not found while systemic and post-systemic errors were identified in pronouncing words with silent letters. Phonetic system of the Indonesian language was also identified as a contributory factor. The commonest/dominant errors occur in word medial positions at 70%. The words ballet and buffet are the most common in word final position with 70% and no error recorded in autumn and damn.

The study attempts to study errors in the production of ten consonant sounds (P,B,T,D,K,G,H,N,I,S) to identify, classify, describe and proffer solutions. The similarity between this research and the problem previous ones centred on the problems associated with difficulties in pronouncing English language silent letters by second language learners and users from the perspectives of their regions and language backgrounds. The disparities between this research and the previous ones reviewed are: (i) ten consonants are selected. (ii) Secondary school students across five Local Government Areas in Borno

state Nigeria as the population of study. This study will be of significance in identifying areas for improvement, developing effective instruction and feedback, enhancing pronunciation skills, improving communication competence and in increasing learner's confidence and motivation [11,12].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Corder explanation of errors and mistakes was adopted as theoretical framework for this study. He is of the believed that errors are results of gaps or deficiencies in the learner's knowledge of a language whereas mistakes are bound to occur when a learner is yet to learnt how to master a certain grammatical forms or structures [13]. Error Analysis as a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors. From the various methods or approaches of investigating second language learners use of language that can be applied for the purpose of collecting data, Error Analysis which involves collection of learners samples of productive English for analysis is the best method.

There are five basic steps adopted from Cordes's model (1974) captured in as collection of samples of learner's language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors [13]. The audio-visual production obtained reveals the learner's pronunciation knowledge and evidence of how much the learners really know how to pronounce words containing Silent letters of the English language.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design was employed in this study because it is centred on errors in the pronunciation of the silent letters of the English language. This is in agreement with assertion for the use of descriptive design to specify the nature and causes of a given phenomenon. The study also incorporated Mixed mode: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative involves massive dependence on statistics to interpret the data collected which requires a large number of items for reliability and qualitative that involves collection, analysis and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e. non-numerical) data to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest.

The corpus of the study was obtained from transcriptions of the recorded audio-visual production of sentences containing words with the selected silent letters of the English language by Senior Secondary students of selected schools in the First Term of the 2024/2025 session. Purposive sampling technique was used to identify key persons or information with specific knowledge on the topic of study. The corpus contained words with silent letters of the English language from which pronunciation errors were checked, identified and analyzed.

The ten students drawn from the five schools (two students from each) through Purposive Sampling Technique were tested with reading task (sentences with words containing silent letters) where errors in the production of the silent letters were identified, recorded as corpus and transcribed.

The transcribed corpus identified from the audio-visual recordings as data in the forms of pronunciation errors of the silent letters of the English language were analyzed using Corder model of error analysis often used within Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Five steps in error analysis in the model: collection of data, identification of errors, description, explanation and evaluation of errors respectively [14].

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The researcher identified the errors in the production of the silent letters through transcriptions which produced errors in silent letters P, B, T, D, K, G, H, N, L and S. The researcher displayed the collected data via data reduction and data display as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. This displayed the sentences where the selected silent letters are presented in words where the students were asked to read, and errors identified. There are twenty (20) sentences, two for each of the selected silent letters.

Table 1. Words with the selected Silent Letters in sentences.

S/N.	Letter	Words With Silent Letters in Sentences
1	P	The acronym NYSC stands for National Youths Service Corps. There was a military coup in the country last year.
2	B	The plumber will fix the leaking tap today. If you are in doubt, ask your teacher always.
3	T	The students must listen to their teachers always. Trying to travel to America is like building a castle on the air.
4	D	The team was handpicked by the coach today. He wiped his face with a clean handkerchief.
5	K	Let me break my knuckle. The knapsack was damaged by the student.
6	G	The diaphragm separated the lungs from the stomach. A fly called gnat landed on the plate of food yesterday.
7	H	A good leader is expected to be honest always. The boy is the sole heir to the properties.
8	N	I do not give a damn on who gets the contracts. The man is singing a nice hymn.
9	L	I want to include salmon fish in my soup today. I would have loved to go with him.
10	S	Two people were found under the debris. The beautiful isle was surrounded by clear waters.

Table 2. Displays of the extracted words, their correct pronunciations (British), total pronunciation, errors recorded and percentages for each silent letter

S/N.	Letters	Words	Correct pronunciations	Total pronunciations	Number of errors	Errors %
1	P	Corps & coup	/kɔ:/ & /ku:/	20	18	90%
2	B	Plumber & doubt	/'plʌmə/ & /daʊt/	20	17	85%
3	T	Listen & castle	/'lɪsən/ & /'kæsl/	20	20	100%
4	D	Handpicked & handkerchief	/hænd'pɪkɪd/ & /hæŋkətʃi:f/	20	12	60%
5	K	Knuckle & knapsack	/'nʌkl/ & /'næpsæk/	20	10	50%
6	G	Diaphragm & gnat	/'daɪəfrəm/ & /næt/	20	19	95%
7	H	Honest & heir	/'ɒnɪst/ & /eə/	20	18	90%
8	N	Damn & hymn	/dæm/ & /haɪm/	20	10	50%
9	L	Salmon & would	/'sæmən/ & /wʊd/	20	16	80%
10	S	Debris & isle	/'deɪbrɪ/ & /aɪl/	20	20	100%
	Sum-total			200	160	80%

The study of the errors in the production of selected silent letters of the English language was conducted on the 7th-10th of October 2024 where the participants were subjected to the rigorous exercise of reading the twenty sentences containing the words with the silent letters. Errors in the production of the words: corps, coup, plumber, doubt, listen, castle, handpicked, handkerchief, knuckle, knapsack, diaphragm, gnat, honest, heir, damn, hymn, salmon, would, debris and isle were identified and recorded. A total number of one hundred and sixty (160) errors in the production of the selected silent letters of the English language were recorded from two hundred (200) pronunciation exercises. It can be observed in the Figure 1 that the following number of errors with frequency and percentages for the twenty (20) pronunciations are recorded for each selected silent letter: P: 18 (90%), B: 17 (85%), T: 20 (100%), D: 12 (60%), K: 10 (50%), G: 19 (95%), H: 18 (90%), N: 10 (50%), L: 16 (80%) and S: 20 (100%) respectively. And also, one-hundred and sixty (160) errors from the two hundred (200) pronunciation exercises constitute 80% of the whole exercise.

1 P 2 B 3 T 4 D 5 K 6 G 7 H 8 N 9 L 10 S 10 SUM-TOTAL

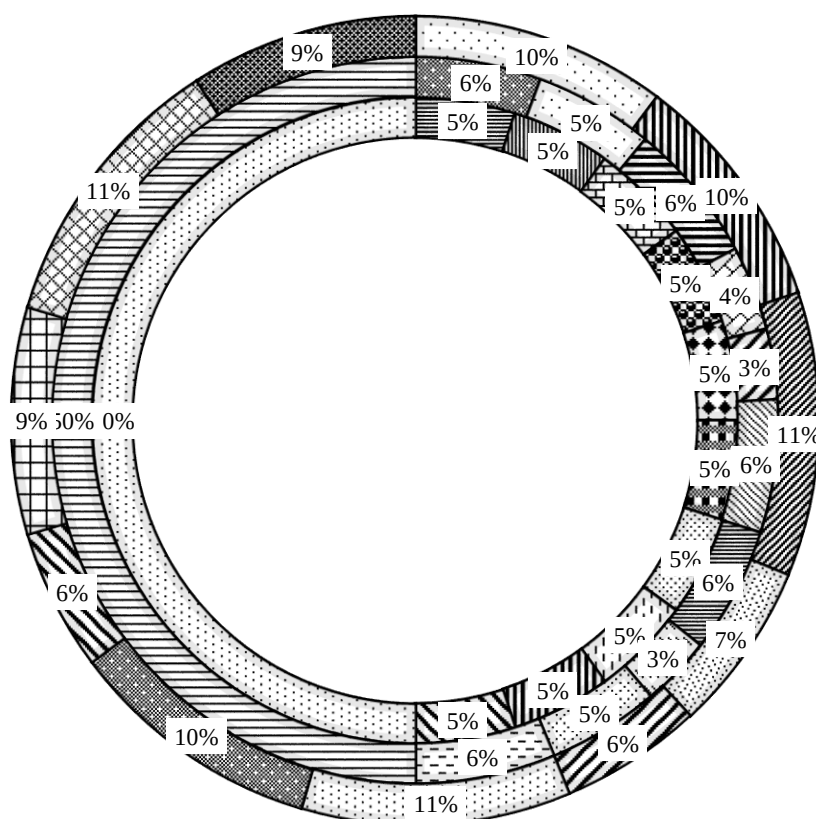


Figure 1. Representation of the data in chart.

DISCUSSION

The completed analysis revealed that all the errors recorded are pre-systematic errors where errors are made by learners before they have fully acquired the language system. These errors are characteristic of the early stages of language development.

There are categorically three types of these errors:

- Developmental errors*: these are from learners' natural language acquisition process.
- Nterlingual errors*: these are caused by transfer of language habits from learners' native language or first language.
- Intralingual errors*: these come from learners' incorrect application of language rules. Again, these errors can be phonological, grammatical, lexical, semantic or pragmatic. Pre-systematic phonological errors which is our major concern here encompass pronunciation errors, inaccurate stress pattern, vowel substitution etc.

The analysis shows that silent letters T and S recorded the highest number of twenty (20) errors which stood at 100% each in listen, castle, debris and isle. This is followed closely by silent letters G with 19 errors at 95% errors recorded in diaphragm and gnat. Silent letters P and H with 18 errors each at 90% in corps and coup and honest and heir respectively. Silent Letter B with 17 errors at 85% in plumber and doubt. Silent Letter L with 16 errors at 80% in salmon and would. Silent letter D with 12 errors at 65%. Silent letters K and N with 10 errors each at 50% in knuckle and knapsack and damn and hymn respectively.

CONCLUSION

Based on the display, explanation and description above, it can be summed up that Senior Secondary School Students in Biu, Kwaya-Kusar, Hawul, Shani and Bayo Local Government Areas of Borno State commit many pre-systematic errors in the production or pronunciation of English Silent letters where a total number of one-hundred and sixty (160) out of two-hundred pronunciation exercise which stood at eighty percent (80%) for the following reasons:

1. *Language transfer*: Errors occur when speakers or learners apply the phonological rules, sound patterns, or pronunciation habits of their mother tongue or native language (L1) to the target language (L2), accounting for the errors. The transfer includes vowel substitution, syllable stress, deletion, insertion etc.
2. *Limited exposure to the target language*: Errors occur here when learners and users have limited exposure to authentic language input and opportunities for spoken practice (interaction with native speakers, access to authentic materials, sufficient language instructions, maximum opportunities for spoken practice etc.). This can lead to inadequate: phonological development, vocabulary acquisition, listening and speaking skills, pronunciation habits, fluency and confidence.
3. *Insufficient practice*: This is a situation where learners and users have limited or insufficient practice especially by learners contribute significantly to pronunciation errors thereby creating inconsistency in pronunciation, inaccurate sound production (intonation & stress etc.), reduced fluency and possible fossilization of errors.
4. *Cognitive processing limitations*: Difficulty or limitation in cognitive factors (attention, memory, perception, processing speed, etc.) create difficulties for learners and users to focus, store, retrieve, distinguish and differentiate sounds and their pronunciation (stress, intonation, fluency etc.).
5. *Affective factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes and emotions)*: These greatly affects learners and users thereby creating rooms for pronunciation errors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion of this research, the following pedagogical remedies are suggested to improve teaching and learning English as a second language and specifically pronunciation and thereby limiting or minimizing pronunciation errors. Teaching and Teacher Implications: Teachers of English as a second language should adopt the following using different teaching strategies:

1. Focus or pay attention to pronunciation from the onset.
2. Employ the use of authentic materials (books, audio-visual materials).
3. Teachers encourage self-directed practice by learners.
4. Targeted feedback should be provided always by the teacher.
5. Incorporate pronunciation as a skill into all language tasks.

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