



Investigation into the pronunciation of English silent letters by Libyan secondary school students

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تحقيق في نطق الحروف الساكنة في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب المرحلة الثانوية الليبيين

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Abstract:

This study examines the pronunciation of English silent letters among Libyan secondary school students and identifies the most frequent pronunciation difficulties they encounter. It also investigates the main factors contributing to these errors and proposes pedagogical implications for improving learners' pronunciation performance. The study addresses a common problem among Libyan EFL learners, namely the difficulty of recognizing and producing silent letters accurately due to differences between Arabic and English phonological systems. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to analyze learners' pronunciation errors and explore the reasons behind them. The study was conducted in a secondary school in Tobruk, Libya, and involved female students aged 17–18 whose first language is Arabic. Data were collected through a pronunciation test, a structured questionnaire, and focus group discussion. These instruments were used to examine students' awareness of silent letters, their pronunciation performance, and their perceptions of the causes of difficulty. The findings show that students frequently mispronounce several English silent letters, particularly in word positions where spelling does not match pronunciation transparently. The errors were mainly attributed to first-language interference, limited exposure to spoken English, and insufficient classroom practice in pronunciation. The study recommends explicit pronunciation instruction and phonological awareness activities to improve students' performance. Overall, the research contributes to a better understanding of pronunciation difficulties among Libyan EFL learners and offers practical implications for teachers and curriculum developers.

Keywords: pronunciation, silent letters, Libyan secondary school students, EFL, error analysis, phonological awareness.

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص نطق الحروف الصامتة في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طالبات المدارس الثانوية الليبية، وتحديد أكثر الصعوبات النطقية شيوعاً، والكشف عن العوامل الرئيسية التي تسهم في هذه الأخطاء، مع تقديم دلالات تربوية يمكن أن تساعد في تحسين الأداء النطقي للمتعلّقات. وتتناول الدراسة مشكلة شائعة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في ليبيا، وهي صعوبة التعرف على الحروف الصامتة وإنتاجها بصورة صحيحة بسبب الاختلافات بين النظامين الصوتيين في العربية والإنجليزية. واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي النوعي لتحليل أخطاء النطق لدى المتعلّقات واستكشاف أسبابها. وقد أجريت الدراسة في إحدى المدارس الثانوية بمدينة طبرق في ليبيا، واشتملت على طالبات تتراوح أعمارهن بين 17 و18 سنة، وهن ناطقات أصليات بالعربية. وجمعت البيانات باستخدام اختبار نطق، واستبانة منظمة، ومناقشة جماعية مركزة. وقد استخدمت هذه الأدوات لفحص وعي الطالبات بالحروف الصامتة، وأدائهن النطقي، وتصوّراتهن حول أسباب الصعوبة. وأظهرت النتائج أن الطالبات يخطئن كثيراً في نطق عدد من الحروف الصامتة الإنجليزية، لا سيما في المواقع التي لا يتوافق فيها الرسم الإملائي مع النطق بصورة واضحة. وقد عزيت هذه الأخطاء أساساً إلى تأثير اللغة الأم، وقلة التعرض للغة الإنجليزية المنطوقة، وضعف التدريب الصفي على النطق. وتوصي الدراسة بتدريس النطق بصورة صريحة، وتنفيذ أنشطة تنمية الوعي الصوتي لتحسين أداء الطالبات. وبوجه عام، تسهم هذه الدراسة في تعميق فهم صعوبات النطق لدى متعلمي الإنجليزية في ليبيا، وتقديم تطبيقات عملية للمعلمين ومطوري المناهج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النطق، الحروف الصامتة، طالبات المدارس الثانوية الليبية، اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية، تحليل الأخطاء، الوعي الصوتي.

Introduction:

English pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence because it directly affects intelligibility, fluency, and the listener's ability to interpret meaning accurately (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Levis, 2018). Among the pronunciation features that challenge English as a foreign language learner, silent letters are especially problematic because they create a mismatch between spelling and speech. Learners who rely heavily on written form may attempt to pronounce letters that are not intended to be articulated, which can reduce accuracy and intelligibility.

This issue is particularly relevant for Libyan secondary school students because Arabic and English differ considerably in their phonological systems and in the relationship between spelling and sound (Al-Shehri, n.d.). In Arabic, the relationship between spelling and sound is generally more transparent than in English, so learners may expect every written letter to be pronounced.

When they encounter words such as knife, listen, doubt, honest, and castle, this expectation can lead to pronunciation errors and misunderstanding.

Silent letters are not simply a matter of memorizing difficult vocabulary items. They reflect deeper differences between English orthography and phonology, as well as the historical development of English spelling. Many silent letters remain in words because spelling has preserved earlier pronunciations even after the spoken forms changed.

As a result, English orthography is less predictable than Arabic orthography, which places an additional burden on learners in contexts where pronunciation receives limited classroom attention.

From a pedagogical perspective, pronunciation should not be treated as a minor aspect of language learning. Although the goal of pronunciation teaching is intelligibility rather than native-like perfection, learners still need sufficient control of sound patterns to communicate clearly (Morley, 1991; Levis, 2018). Silent letters are important because they affect both speaking and reading.

If learners pronounce them incorrectly, they may sound unnatural or even change the intended meaning of a word.

This study is also informed by Error Analysis, which treats learner errors as meaningful evidence of developing interlanguage rather than random failure. In this framework, pronunciation errors reveal how learners process the relation between spelling and sound, how they transfer patterns from their first language, and where instruction may need to be strengthened.

Examining silent-letter errors can therefore provide useful insight into learner difficulties and classroom needs.

The present study focuses on Libyan secondary school students because pronunciation habits established at this stage may become stable if they are not addressed early.

Libyan secondary school students face recurring pronunciation difficulties due to phonological differences between Arabic and English (Alghazali & Elmagzob, 2024; Ali & Bianku, 2025).

Studies on Libyan learners show frequent pronunciation errors and a tendency to pronounce English words as they are written rather than as they are spoken (Alghazali & Elmagzob, 2024; [Author], 2024). Research on Arabic speakers also shows that silent letters pose a specific challenge because they create a mismatch between spelling and pronunciation ([Author], n.d.).

If silent-letter errors are repeated throughout secondary education, they may become fossilized and continue into higher education or professional communication.

For this reason, the present research is both descriptive and pedagogical, aiming to identify problem areas and support more effective pronunciation instruction in Libyan schools.

Research Questions:

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- Which silent letters are most frequently mispronounced by Libyan secondary school students?
- What patterns characterize Libyan secondary school students' pronunciation of English silent letters?
- What are the main causes of Libyan secondary school students' mispronunciation of English silent letters, particularly with regard to first-language interference and instructional factors ?

Objectives of the Study:

The present study aims to:

- Identify the English silent letters that are most frequently mispronounced by Libyan secondary school students.
- Examine the patterns of pronunciation errors produced by the participants when reading or pronouncing words containing silent letters.
- Investigate the main causes of these pronunciation difficulties, including first-language interference and limited pronunciation instruction.

Significance of the Study:

This study is significant because pronunciation is a central component of communicative competence and intelligibility in English. Silent letters are a persistent source of difficulty for EFL learners because English spelling does not consistently match pronunciation, unlike more transparent writing systems. For Libyan learners in particular, the mismatch between Arabic and English sound systems may increase the likelihood of mispronunciation and reduce spoken accuracy.

The study is also important pedagogically because it may help teachers identify the silent-letter patterns that require more classroom attention and design more effective pronunciation activities. In addition, it contributes to applied linguistics by using error analysis to explain how learners form interlanguage patterns in pronunciation.

Literature Review:

Silent letters have long been recognized as one of the most difficult features of English pronunciation for learners whose first language is not English. They are often the result of historical spelling conventions, borrowing from other languages, and sound changes that occurred while spelling remained relatively stable. Because of this, learners may rely on spelling to predict pronunciation and end up pronouncing letters that should remain silent.

Research on Arabic-speaking learners has consistently shown that first-language interference and orthographic differences between Arabic and English create pronunciation problems. Similar findings have been reported in studies on Yemeni, Saudi, Sudanese, Egyptian, and Nigerian learners, where silent-letter pronunciation errors were linked to L1 influence, limited exposure, and weak phonological awareness.

Recent studies have also shown that silent-letter errors are not random but systematic. These findings suggest that silent-letter pronunciation is best understood as a patterned error phenomenon rather than an isolated weakness. The literature further indicates that pronunciation instruction should be explicit and sustained. This is especially relevant for silent letters, because learners need help connecting written forms with their actual spoken forms.

Overall, the literature shows that silent-letter pronunciation is influenced by orthographic irregularity, first-language interference, and limited classroom attention to pronunciation. The present study builds on this work by focusing specifically on Libyan secondary school students and the errors they produce in English silent letters.

Theoretical Framework:

The study is grounded in Error Analysis, a framework widely used in second-language acquisition to identify, classify, and explain learner errors. Error Analysis views learner mistakes not simply as failures but as evidence of developing interlanguage knowledge. In this sense, pronunciation errors can reveal how learners process the relationship between spelling and sound, as well as how they transfer patterns from their first language.

Within this framework, the errors produced by Libyan learners can be interpreted in relation to first-language interference, incomplete learning, and overgeneralization. The theory is appropriate because it allows the researcher to describe the errors systematically and to interpret their causes in a principled way. Therefore, Error Analysis offers a suitable lens for examining how silent-letter pronunciation difficulties emerge and why they persist.

Research Design:

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design because it aims to examine pronunciation errors in depth and explore the reasons behind them. Qualitative research is suitable here because it helps the researcher understand learner behavior in context and interpret pronunciation difficulties as part of real classroom language use.

The participants consist of female Libyan secondary school students aged 17–18 years, all of whom are Arabic native speakers. A purposive sampling technique is used to select the sample because the study focuses on learners who are likely to experience the pronunciation issue under investigation.

Data are collected through a pronunciation test, a structured questionnaire, and focus group discussion or interview-style interaction. The pronunciation test is used to identify which silent letters are mispronounced, while the questionnaire and discussion are used to explore students' awareness, attitudes, and perceived causes of difficulty. The data are then analyzed descriptively to identify recurring error patterns and interpret them in light of the theoretical framework.

Findings and Discussion:

The findings show that Libyan secondary school students frequently mispronounce English silent letters, especially in words where the spelling strongly suggests that every letter should be articulated. Incorrect responses were more common than correct responses across initial, medial, and final silent-letter positions.

This pattern indicates that learners are influenced by English orthography and by the more transparent sound-letter relationship in Arabic. Certain silent-letter patterns appear especially problematic, including initial clusters such as kn- and wr-, medial silent letters such as t in castle or listen, and final silent letters such as b in lamb or d in handkerchief. These patterns reflect the broader challenge learners face when spelling does not match pronunciation in a predictable way.

The discussion attributes these errors mainly to first-language interference, limited exposure to spoken English, and insufficient pronunciation practice in the classroom. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that EFL learners often depend too heavily on written forms and need explicit pronunciation support. The results therefore reinforce the view that silent letters should be taught systematically rather than assumed to be learned incidentally.

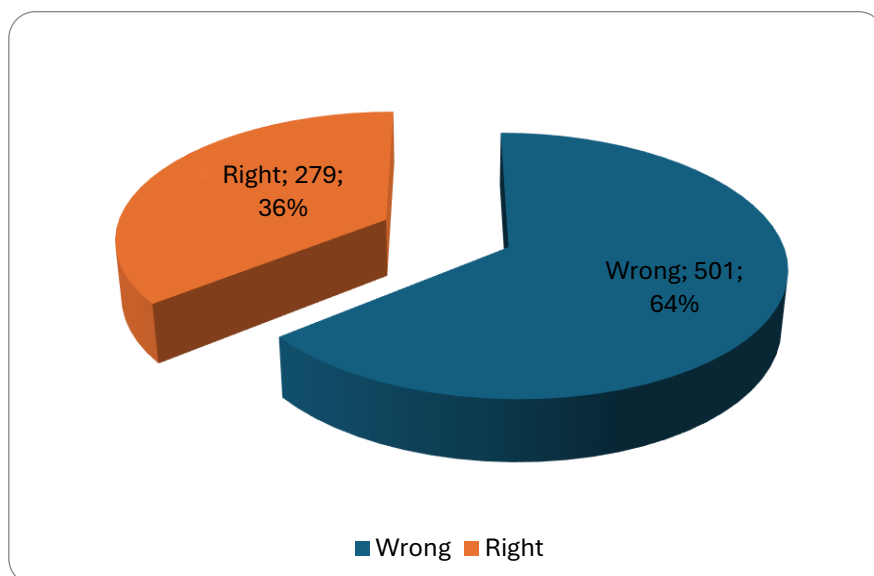


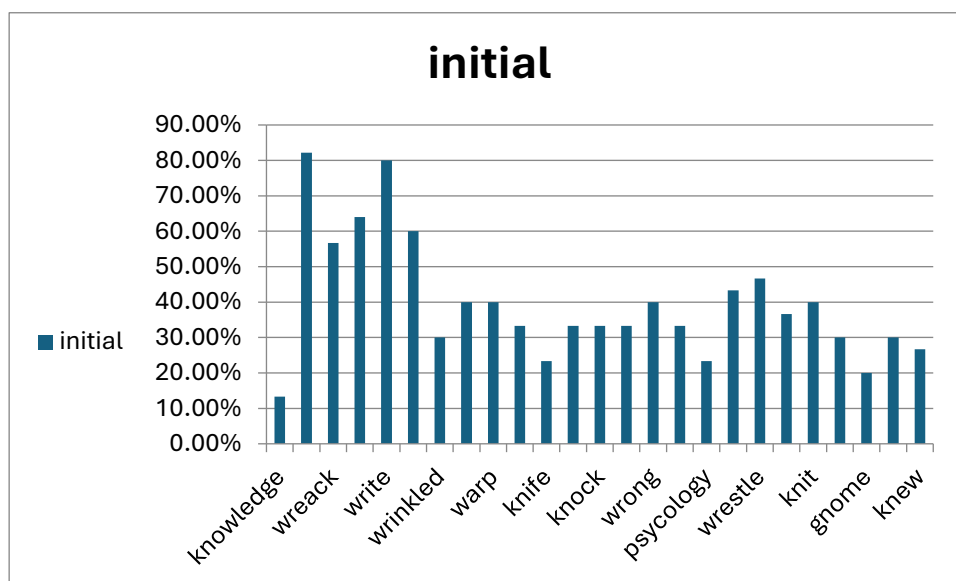
Figure (1): Percentage of right and wrong answers related to silent letter at initial of word

According to the figure 1, there were 353.62% more incorrect answers than right answers, with 217.38% of the answers being correct.

Overall results for English silent letter silencing the majority of participants do not make English silent letters silent as appropriate in Standard British English, according to the results of the general data collected from the participants.

Because it seems that the same number of students are answering properly, the following statistics show the convergence in the frequency rates of correct responses, but the big gap between the percentages of answers is not visible

Overall, 36.28% of English silent letters were appropriately muted, while a noteworthy 36.72% of those letters were articulated inappropriately only.



The chart shows that students' pronunciation errors in initial consonant sounds vary considerably across the word list, with some words attracting much higher error rates than others. Overall, the highest difficulties appear in words such as wreak, write, and knowledge, which suggests that silent-initial consonants and irregular English spelling patterns strongly affect learners' pronunciation performance.

This pattern may be explained by the mismatch between English orthography and pronunciation, since many of the tested words begin with letters that are not pronounced, such as k in knife and knock, w in write and wrong, and g in gnome.

By contrast, words with lower error rates, such as knowledge and knew, indicate that some students have already developed partial awareness of these spelling-pronunciation rules, although the data still show inconsistent mastery.

The results suggest that initial silent consonants remain a significant source of phonological difficulty for the study sample, and that explicit instruction and repeated exposure may be needed to improve accurate pronunciation.

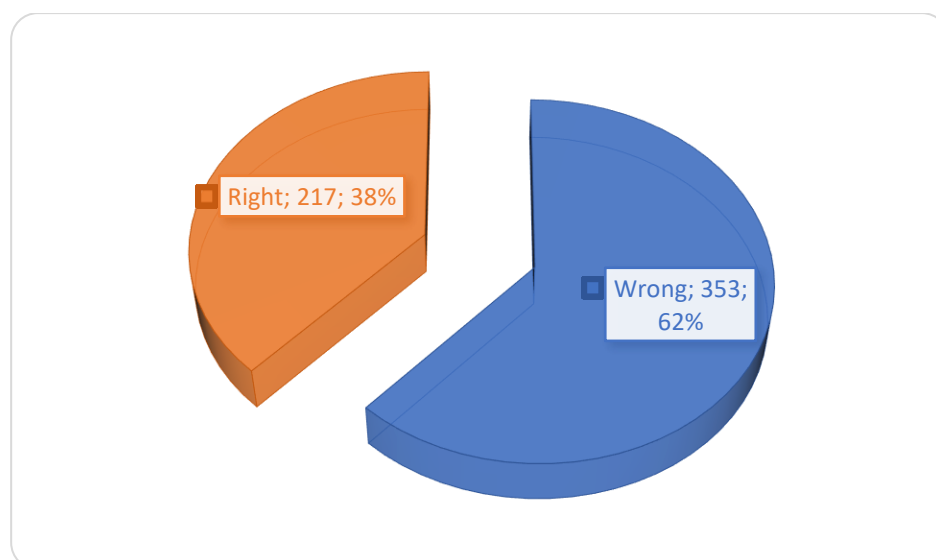
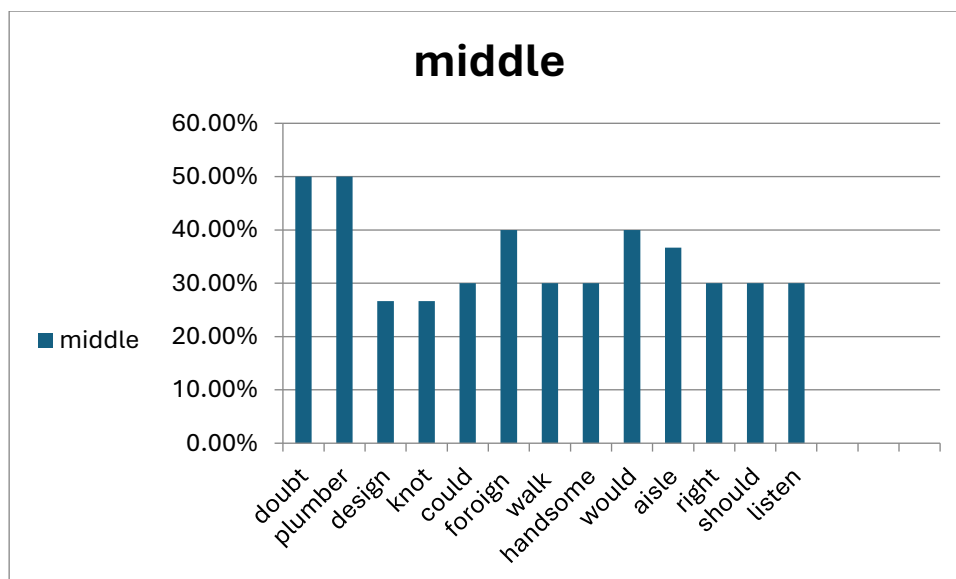


Figure (2): Percentage of right and wrong answers related to silent letter at middle of word.

The frequency of right answers, which is 279.36%, and wrong responses, which is 501.64%, are displayed in the accompanying figure. This demonstrates the wide range of responses students gave when asked where the silent letter should appear at the middle of a word.



Based on the chart titled “middle”, which presents the percentage of pronunciation errors associated with English words containing silent consonants, the results indicate a moderate level of difficulty among participants in accurately pronouncing these lexical items. The highest error rates were observed in the words doubt and plumber (50% each), suggesting that silent consonants in these words posed a significant challenge for learners. Relatively high error frequencies were also recorded for foreign and would (40% each), while aisle showed an error rate of approximately 37%. In contrast, words such as design, knot, could, walk, handsome, right, should, and listen demonstrated error rates ranging from approximately 27% to 30%. These findings suggest that learners encounter varying degrees of difficulty in mastering the pronunciation of silent consonants, particularly when there is a discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation. The results support previous research indicating that orthographic interference often leads learners to pronounce silent letters that are not realized in spoken English, highlighting the need for explicit instruction and increased exposure to irregular pronunciation patterns in English phonology.

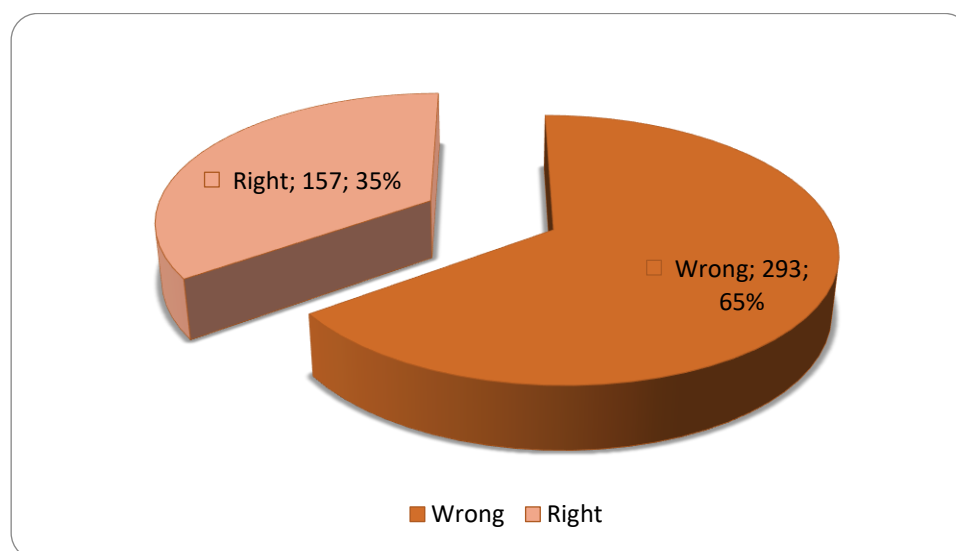
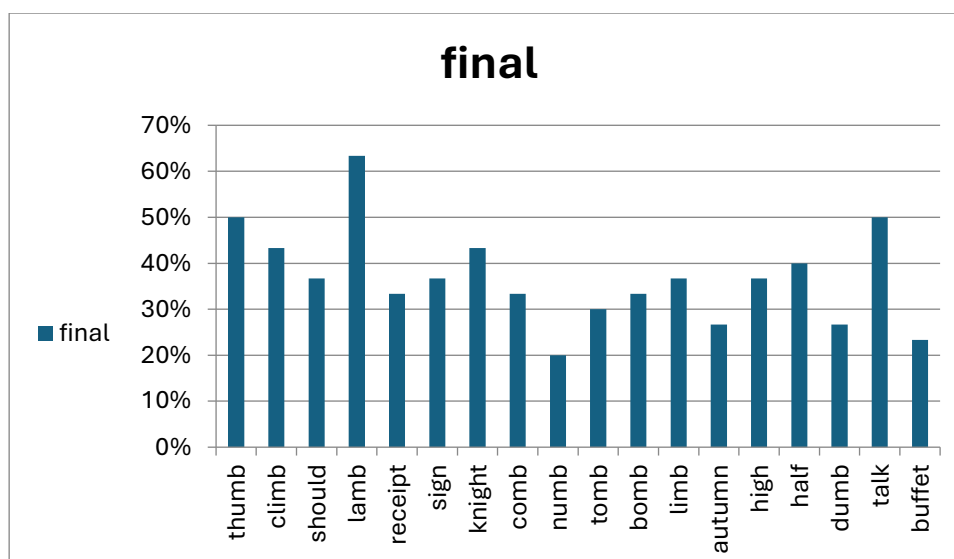


Figure (3): Percentage of right and wrong answers related to silent letter at final of word

The third figure displays the distribution of responses concerning silent letters at the ends of words. Correct responses accounted for 157.35%, while incorrect responses accounted for 293.65%. Therefore, when a student selects the position of a silent letter at the end of a word, the proportions of responses are as reported above.



Based on the results presented in the final-position silent consonant category, the data reveal considerable variation in learners' pronunciation accuracy across the selected words. The highest error rate was recorded for lamb (63.3%), indicating that the silent final consonant posed a substantial challenge for participants. High percentages of mispronunciation were also observed in thumb and talk (50% each), followed by climb and knight (43.3%). Moderate error rates were found in words such as half (40%), should, sign, limb, and high (36.7%), while receipt, comb, and bomb each accounted for approximately 33.3% of the errors. Lower error rates were recorded for tomb (30%), autumn and dumb (26.7%), buffet (23.3%), and numb (20%), which was the least problematic item in this category. These findings suggest that learners experience persistent difficulties with silent consonants occurring in word-final positions, particularly when orthographic representations encourage the articulation of letters that are absent in actual pronunciation. The results further indicate that the inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation continues to be a major source of phonological interference, emphasizing the importance of focused pronunciation instruction and increased awareness of silent-letter patterns in English vocabulary acquisition.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications:

This study has shown that English silent letters present a substantial pronunciation challenge for Libyan secondary school students. The difficulties arise from the interaction between orthographic irregularity, first-language transfer, and limited classroom attention to pronunciation. Error Analysis has proven useful in explaining the nature of these errors and in highlighting the need for more focused instruction.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that teachers should provide explicit pronunciation teaching, raise students' phonological awareness, and include regular practice with silent-letter patterns. Classroom activities should connect spelling with pronunciation in a systematic way and give learners repeated opportunities to hear, say, and recognize problematic forms. Curriculum developers may also consider including more pronunciation-focused content in EFL materials used in Libyan secondary schools.

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