

## Investigating the Problems of Letters-Based Pronunciation

Farukh Faisal

Instructor of English Department, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Badakhshan University, Afghanistan

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### ABSTRACT

Letters (alphabet) are important elements of writing and pronunciation in many languages around the world. In the English language, letters are useful only for writing, but in pronunciation, they're more problematic. There are a lot of exceptions in English spelling. The letters and their pronunciations are not fixed and do not match. This confuses foreign learners and speakers of the English language when they pronounce words based on letters. The data for this article was collected after reading and analyzing updated books and articles from reliable sources like libraries and internet sites. It is noteworthy that a descriptive-analytical method is used in this research. Since there is no research with the same title and subject, it can be interesting and useful work for those who want to study in this field. The current article discusses the problems that arise from letter-based pronunciation by considering the consequences between letters and sounds, some exceptions in letters or spelling, and inflectional morphemes.

**Keywords:** *Letters, Sounds, Vowels, Consonant, Silent Letters, Morphemes*

### 1. Introduction

English is a language that seems easy to learn, but it is not always easy to learn English, especially when it comes to a foreign language, because sometimes we may find it difficult and confusing. Especially, when we talk about pronunciation, most of us face difficulty. Pronunciation is the root cause of most problems. Pronunciation problems are one of the most common problems encountered by people learning English as a second language. In many languages, the letters of the alphabet are pronounced the same as they are written, but in the English language, there are many exceptions to the rule of pronunciation and spelling. For example, we often don't spell a word the same way as we pronounce it. Every sound in the English language is represented by multiple written letters or letter sequences; a single English letter might represent multiple sounds or none at all. This lack of consistency between

spelling and pronunciation can confuse foreign English learners and speakers and make them unable to understand when listening to native speakers; or when speaking, they can't pronounce words and parts of words (morphemes) correctly because they do not know the accurate pronunciation of them. Therefore, this article discussed the problems of letter-based pronunciation to explain the reasons why letter-based pronunciation is problematic and why we cannot judge pronunciation with the help of letters, as foreign English learners and speakers mostly pronounce words by the basic sounds of written letters.

Since English is the language of business, economics, politics, technology, education, etc. almost all over the world and people use this language in their daily communication, the correct pronunciation in this language is a serious requirement and very significant for the relationships between people to have meaningful communication and a good understanding of each other.

The main goal of this study is to give foreign speakers and learners of the English language new and significant information regarding pronunciation problems. It also helps them identify the common exceptions to English spelling and the ambiguity they cause in their pronunciation while speaking. Also, this article helps the readers get rid of their pronunciation and pronounce unfamiliar words correctly.

This article tries to answer very important questions about spelling and sounds, the exceptions in the spelling of words and morphemes, and how these exceptions make it difficult for learners and speakers of English as a foreign language.

## 2. Letters and Pronunciations

Pronunciation is the process of forming words vocally using various speech sounds. The alphabet is a collection of symbols known as letters that are used to construct words. Connor (1998) states that sounds and letters should never be confused. Sounds are spoken, and letters are written. Written letters are highly helpful in reminding us of related sounds, but they only serve this purpose. They cannot teach us how to pronounce sounds that we are not previously familiar with. The English alphabet consists of 26 letters in total, five vowels, and 21 consonants. However, foreign English learners and speakers may find it difficult to pronounce these letters correctly. It's not always clear what sounds the letters in regular English spelling represent. For instance, the letters (i, y, u, o, e, and a) in the words *city*, *busy*, *ladies*, *lovely*, *village*, and so on all stand for the same vowel sound—that is, the sound that occurs in the words. However, the letter (a) represents four distinct vowel sounds in the words *banana*, *bather*, *man*, and *many*. This is inconvenient in a book about pronunciation; it would be far more helpful if the reader could always be sure that a letter stood for one and only one sound so that he would know right away how to pronounce a letter (or at least what to aim for!). That's why, when working with English, it helps to use letters consistently. We assign a letter (or often two letters, if this is more convenient) to each of the twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels that we must take into consideration. By doing so, we can demonstrate clearly what the pupil ought to be attempting to convey.

### 2.1. Vowel letters

A vowel is a letter that stands in for a speech sound produced with the mouth and vocal cords open and without touching the teeth, lips, or roof of the mouth with the tongue. A, E, I, O, and U are the only five letters that are regarded as real vowels. The letter Y is frequently referred to as a "semi-vowel" because it occasionally makes a soft consonant sound

(as in yard and bayou) and occasionally a vowel sound (as in myth, any, and fly). The letter W, which is usually thought of as a consonant, can also act like a vowel, although this only happens when it joins forces with another vowel to form a digraph (Farlex, 2017, p. 7).

Pronunciations of English vowel letters are a problematic issue for foreign learners and speakers. The five mentioned vowel letters represent twenty vowel sounds. As indicated in the above section, it is challenging to determine what sounds the letters represent. Different vowel letters produce only one sound, as the letter (i) in the words *city*, letter (u) in the word *busy*, letter (o) in the word *women*, letter (e) in the word *pretty*, letter (i) and (a) in the word *village* all represent one vowel sound that is /ɪ/ (Connor, 1998, p. 7); also, one letter may stand for different sounds; for instance, the letter (a) is sounded as a long vowel /ɑ:/ in the word *father*, a short vowel sound /æ/ in the word *man*, and a neutral vowel or schwa /ə/ in the term *among*, where it is not stressed. Consequently, there are at least three different ways to pronounce the letter (a) and produce various vowel sounds. (Linda & Smith, 2007, p. 5).

## 2.2. Consonant letters

The English alphabet also includes consonants in addition to vowels. Vowels represent speech sounds made with the mouth open, whereas consonants represent sounds produced when the vocal tract is partially or completely closed as they necessitate a particular positioning of the tongue, lips, and/or cheeks. B, C, D, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, P, Q, R, S, T, V, W, X, Y, and Z are the 21 consonant letters. Noting that W can also combine with vowels to create specific vowel sounds (as in grow [/groʊ/] or draw [/drɔ:/]), it cannot act as a vowel on its own. The letter Y can occasionally operate as a vowel (as in myth [/mɪθ/] or dry [/draɪ/]) (Farlex, 2017, P. 7).

Pronunciations of consonant letters are another challenge for foreign learners and speakers. In English, different compound consonant letters may produce only one sound. For example, different compound consonants such as (sh) in *shut*, (ch) in *machine*, (sc) in *conscience*, (ss) in *issue*, and singular (s) in *sugar* produce a single consonant sound [ʃ]. Also, one compound letter may produce different sounds, as in the compound letter (ch), pronounced /k/ sound in *chemistry*, /ʃ/ sound in *machine*, and /tʃ/ sound in *achieve*. Some consonant letters do not have any sound at all, which will be discussed in the next section.

## 2.3. Silent letters

Another challenge for foreign English learners and speakers is the existence of silent letters in the English language. One of the most challenging parts of English spelling and pronunciation is this. Joanne defines silent letters as those that are not spoken but have a significant impact on the meaning and occasionally the pronunciation of the entire word. The majority of these silent letters were initially uttered for the term centuries, after which they went silent but with a fixed spelling that today reveals the word's history and origin (Joanne, 2012). English has many silent letters; according to Varma (2015), almost 60% of all words in English contain silent letters.

Bismo stated that there are some primary rules for silent letters, including when and in which positions a letter can be silent, but the rules are full of exceptions, lack satisfaction, and sometimes confuse. Some common words that contain silent letters are *comb*, *bomb*, *thumb*, *climb*, *tomb*, *crumb*, *lamb*, *doubt*, *subtle*, and *debt*. Letter C in the words *scissors*, *ascent*, *fascinate*, *muscle*, *lock*, *block*, *puck*, *acknowledge*, *acquit*; Letter D in the words, *Wednesday*, *cadge*, *pledge*, *grudge*, *handsome*, *handkerchief*, *sandwich*; Letter E in the words *fore*, *table*,

before, write, give, hide, bored, fixed, smuggled, begged; Letter G in the words *design, foreign, sign, gnash, align*; Letters GH in the words, *high, light, thought, through alight*; Letter H in the words, *why, what, when, where, hour, honest, honor, heir*; Letter K in the words, *know, knock, knife, knight, knowledge*; Letter L in the words *calf, half, palm, would, should, could, folk, yolk*; Letter N in the words *column, damn, solemn, autumn*; Letter P in the words *psalm, psephology, pterodactyl, pneumonia, and pneumatic*; Letter S in words like *isle, islet, aisle, and island*; Letter T in words such as- *whistle, thistle, bustle, hasten, castle, Christmas, fasten, listen, often*, etc. Letter U in the words *guide, guest, guard, guess, and guano*; and Letter W in the words *write, wrest, wrong, wrack, and wrap*, are all silent letters.

### 3. Inflectional Morphemes and Pronunciations

Another reason for the communication problems of foreign English learners and speakers is the pronunciation of English inflectional morphemes. These morphemes consist of English regular plural nouns, third person singular, possessive -'s, and regular past tense morphemes. The mentioned bound morphemes attach to the words, but even the pronunciation of one of them can be different with different word endings.

#### 3.1. Regular plural nouns

In English, regular nouns are made plural by appending a (s or –es) to the end of the singular form to change it to plural, such as *cat/cats, dog/dogs, dish/dishes* (Andrew et al., 2009, p. 154). In each pair, the first words denote one thing, and the second words denote more than one. A noun that represents or points out one person or thing is called the singular number, and a noun that indicates more than one thing or person is called the plural number. (Wren & Martin, 1999, p. 10). Ahmadi (2011) illustrated that the difference between the paired words is always in the second word or in the plural ones, presenting the key difference between singular and plural numbers.

The rules of adding (s or es) are not applicable for irregular nouns. In word form pairs like *ox/oxen, goose/geese, and sheep/sheep*, the distinction between the singular and plural is either not indicated at all or is signaled in a way that deviates from the usual pattern (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 52). When learning English, whether as a second language or a native tongue, each item in the irregular category should be memorized separately. This is due to the fact that it is impossible to foresee how these nouns will pluralize.

Even in regular situations, the final (s) or (es) are not always easy; for example, the (s) in *dogs* and *cats* are not pronounced the same way and do not produce one sound, and the (s) in a plural word like *dishes* has an additional vowel (e) before it. In this case, the alternative forms of words are called allomorphy (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 52). According to Andrew (2009), the plural suffix (s or es) goes through the phonological process and appears as /s/, /z/, or /əz/. The following A, B, and C identify the phonological conditions of allomorphy (/s/, /z/, /əz/).

A. cats, caps, kites, desks

B. dogs, cabs, bags, beds, etc.

C. dishes, buses, watches, languages /əz/

In above A, the last (s) of each plural noun is pronounced as /s/ (a voiceless, alveolar, and fricative sound). In the B section, the last (s) of the plural nouns is pronounced as /z/ (a voiced, alveolar, and fricative sound). Finally, in C, the final (s or es) of the plural nouns is

pronounced as /əz/. However, A, B, and C indicate a regularity that the last sound of each word determines the pronunciation of (s or es) in three different ways.

Fromkin's idea (2011), expand this part by considering the words *cab* and *cap*, which respectively take the allomorphs /z/ and /s/ to create the plural forms. Clearly, the last parts of every two mentioned nouns are responsible for these variations. Similarly, the final segment of the word *bag* or *badge* determines their different plural allomorphs as /z/ and /əz/. Therefore, the last or final segments of the singular nouns are the reason for the three different pronunciations of the plural morpheme (s or es).

### 3.2. Third-person singular

In English, the simple form of the verb is the base form of the verb, such as *write*, *read*, and *rush* (Andrew, 2009, p. 135). The same as the English regular plural nouns, verbs also take (s or es) suffixes at the end of base form to show the relationship of the verb with the subject (third singular person) in simple present tense and form the words *writes*, *reads*, and *rushes*. These take a special form that combines the base form with an ending (s or es). When a word or phrase refers to the person doing the activity of *writing*, *reading*, or *rushing*, this version is employed. For any other person (I, we, you, and they), the (s or es) form is inapplicable (Andrew, 2009, p. 135). Verb morphemes (s or es) follow the same way as the regular plural nouns did, so the (s or es) adds at the end of simple verbs and has three different pronunciations, thus the final (s) in the verb *writes* pronounce /s/, in the verb *reads* pronounce /z/, and in the verb *rushes* pronounce /əz/.

### 3.3. Possessive

The general rules for the formation of possessives are: The possessive case is formed with ('s) when the noun is singular, as in the phrase "*the king's crown*." When the noun is plural and ends in (s), the possessive case is created by adding only an apostrophe (') at the end of the plural noun, as in "*boys' school*," and when the noun is in plural form but does not end in (s), add an apostrophe plus (s) or ('s) the same as singular nouns possessive, as in the phrase "*children's books*" (Wren & Martin, 1999, p. 17). Similar to regular plural nouns and verb suffixes (s or es), the possessive 's morpheme goes under the phonological process and appears as an allomorphy. Thus, the possessive- 's of words *ship's*, *women's*, and *judge's* pronounce /s/, /z/, /əz/.

### 3.4. Regular past tense

Regular verbs in English take (d or ed) at the end of the simple form to shape their past and past participle, or, in other words, follow the common pattern base form of the verb plus (d or ed), as in: *walked*, *played*, *waited* (Yule, 2014, p. 70). According to Guarin (2019), the endings of all these verbs are the same, as ended in (ed), but what differentiates between them is their ending pronunciation. Past tense morpheme (d or ed): pronounce /t/ in the verb *asked*; produce the sound /d/ in the verb *agreed*; and pronounce /əd/ in the verb *accepted*.

The regular verb rules are not applicable to irregular verbs. Like irregular plural nouns, some irregular verbs do not have any particular rule, so they must be learned separately. Some examples of these kinds of verbs are *go/went*, *sing/sang*, and *hit/hit*. (Fromkin, Hyams, & Nina, 2011, p. 270). The past tense suffixes (d or ed), like the above-mentioned suffixes, undergo phonological allomorphy, appearing as /t/, /d/, or /əd/.

#### 4. Solution

The English language was under the influence of French, German, and Dutch at different periods of time, and English inherited and included many foreign words. Therefore, we cannot pronounce the words with the help of letters, and there are so many exceptions to the rule of pronunciation and spelling in the English language.

In the case of morphemes, the three different pronunciations of regular plural nouns, third person singular, and possessive refer to the concise consideration of the final sounds of words. The reasons for the three different pronunciations of the mentioned morphemes are: first, words end in voiceless consonant sounds such as: /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /θ/ except /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, (s or es) of regular plural nouns, third person singular and possessive -'s suffixes which add at the end of them, pronounce /s/. Second, words end with all vowel sounds and voiced consonant sounds such as: /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /a/, /ɪ/ except /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, (s or es) of regular plural nouns, third person singular and possessive -'s suffixes which add at the end of them, pronounce /z/. Third, words end in voiceless consonant sounds such as: /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, and voiced consonant sounds: /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, (s or es) of regular plural nouns, third person singular and possessive -'s suffixes which add at the end of them, pronounce /əz/ (Fromkin, Hyams, & Nina, 2011, p. 269).

Like the above morphemes, the pronunciation of the past tense morpheme (d or ed) is determined in three different ways based on the final sound of each word. There are also three groups to identify the phonological condition of this morpheme. First, when a verb ends with a voiceless sound, like /p/, /k/, /f/, /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /θ/, but except /t/, the past tense suffixes (d or ed) pronounce /t/. (Note that it is the sound that determines the related groups of the word, but the written letters do not always play by the same rules.) For example, even though the word dance ends with (ce), its sound is that of /s/, so it belongs to the voiceless sounds group. Second, if the verbs end with voiced sounds such as /b/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /a/, /ɔɪ/, /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, and also vowel and diphthongs, except /d/, then the past tense suffix (d or ed) is pronounced as /d/. Third, when a verb ends with a /t/ or /d/ sound, pronounce the added (d or ed) endings as /əd/, Guarin (2019).

Therefore, to solve this problem, foreign English learners should arrange their pronunciation based on Standard English or (Received Pronunciation). There are 44 symbols in this system, and each of them stands for only one sound. When foreign English learners and speakers want to pronounce new words or parts of words (morphemes) correctly, they should consult a reliable dictionary that contains the phonetic symbols of Received Pronunciation.

#### 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the investigation into the problems of letter-based pronunciation has shed light on the challenges that learners face when attempting to master the complexities of pronunciation in a language. The article has highlighted various issues, including the inconsistencies in letter-to-sound correspondence. It is evident that relying solely on letters to determine pronunciation can lead to confusion and misinterpretation, hindering effective communication.

In addition, there are so many exceptions in the pronunciation of words based on letters; written letters cannot help us pronounce the sounds that we do not already know, and it is difficult to know what sound the written letters produce; therefore, pronunciation based on letters is problematic and confuses foreign speakers of the English language.

Finally, addressing the problems of letter-based pronunciation requires a collaborative effort from educators and learners. By recognizing the challenges, implementing effective strategies, and embracing the importance of accurate pronunciation, the learners should develop the necessary skills to communicate fluently and confidently in their target language.

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