

Error Analysis of Silent Letters Pronounced by the TESOL 1 Class Students of English Major at UNKLAB

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Abstract

This study investigated the silent letters errors in English pronunciation by the TESOL 1 Class students of English Major of UNKLAB. The objectives of this study were 1) to uncover the pronunciation errors made by the TESOL 1 Class students of UNKLAB, 2) to seek for the reasons that resulted in the errors, and 3) to find out the generally occurred errors in this issue. This study applied the theory proposed by Corder in Ellis (2008) about the stages of error analysis and the theory constructed Carney (2012) and Crystal (2012) regarding the silent letters. The study was carried out on the TESOL 1 Class students of Universitas Klabat. The participants were inquired to pronounce 40 English words containing various English silent letters in the initial, medial, and final positions of the words. The goal of this study was to analyze the pronunciation errors made by the students when pronouncing the English silent letters. The frequency of errors was measured in percentage. In this study, the researcher used descriptive qualitative method. The study proved that: 1) the participants mostly made post-systematic errors 2) the most frequent word that is mispronounced by the students are 'knight' in the initial position, and 'would' and 'autumn' in the medial and final positions. There were 108 errors made by the students with the percentage of 24.17%. Among the three positions of error occurrences, the medial position was found to be the most frequent category with 56% of error, 24% of error in the final position, and 19 % of error in the initial position. The participants' inattentive and less of practices in pronouncing the words were discovered as the main cause of the errors.

Keywords

Pronunciation, Error, Silent Letters



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INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a fundamental component of English language learning because it directly influences the intelligibility and effectiveness of oral communication. Learners who produce inaccurate pronunciation may experience difficulties conveying their intended meanings even when their vocabulary and grammatical structures are correct. Pronunciation encompasses both segmental features, including vowels and consonants, and suprasegmental features, such as stress, intonation, and rhythm (Kelly, 2001). For Indonesian learners of English, developing accurate pronunciation can be challenging because the sound systems of English and Indonesian differ considerably. In addition, the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English is often inconsistent. Consequently, learners cannot

always determine the pronunciation of an English word simply by referring to its written form. This condition makes pronunciation an important area that requires continuous practice and systematic instruction.

One of the specific pronunciation problems experienced by Indonesian learners is the pronunciation of English words containing *silent letters*. A *silent letter* refers to a letter that appears in the written form of a word but is not articulated in its pronunciation (Carney, 2012). English contains numerous examples in which the orthographic form does not correspond directly to the spoken form, such as the silent *b* in *comb*, the silent *l* in *could* and *walk*, and the silent *n* in *autumn*. This situation contrasts with Indonesian, in which spelling and pronunciation generally have a more consistent relationship. As a result, Indonesian learners may tend to pronounce letters according to their written forms, leading to pronunciation errors. Previous research has also indicated that first-language influence, spelling pronunciation, and differences between Indonesian and English phonological systems can contribute to learners' pronunciation difficulties (Khoirunnisa & Misnadin, 2022). The problem is particularly relevant in higher education because English major students are expected to demonstrate adequate pronunciation competence for academic and professional communication. At Universitas Klabat (UNKLAB), pronunciation is addressed through phonetics and phonology instruction; however, students in the TESOL 1 class still experience difficulties pronouncing English words, particularly words containing *silent letters*.

Several previous studies have investigated pronunciation errors and *silent letters* among English learners. Kuspiyah et al. (2021), for example, examined the pronunciation of *silent letters* among English Department students and found that learners continued to experience difficulties pronouncing words containing letters that were not represented phonetically. Arvian (2021) investigated *silent-letter* pronunciation errors among fourth-semester English Department students and identified errors involving *silent letters* occurring in different positions within words. Rumbardi and Lestari (2022) examined *silent-letter* pronunciation from the perspective of phonological patterns and classifications, demonstrating that the relationship between orthographic forms and pronunciation remains problematic for English learners. Similarly, Khoirunnisa and Misnadin (2022) investigated English pronunciation errors among Indonesian university students and reported that pronunciation difficulties were associated with several factors, including first-language interference and the tendency to pronounce English words based on their spelling. These findings demonstrate that pronunciation errors cannot be separated from differences between the learners' first language and English phonological systems.

More recent studies have continued to demonstrate the persistence of this problem. Andini and Ekaningsih (2025) investigated *silent-letter* pronunciation errors among 50 English Education students and found that certain *silent letters*, particularly *l*, generated considerable difficulties for learners. Their findings indicate that even university-level English learners may continue to pronounce letters that should not be articulated. Barzakh et al. (2026) further examined *silent-letter* mispronunciation among Indonesian EFL learners and identified factors associated with learners' difficulties in producing appropriate pronunciation. Aryanika (2026) specifically investigated *vowel silent letters* among English Education students and found that learners continued to make various pronunciation errors, including errors involving the addition of sounds. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that *silent letters* remain a relevant pronunciation problem among Indonesian learners of

English, including students at the university level.

Although previous studies have provided important insights into pronunciation errors involving *silent letters*, several gaps remain. First, some previous studies have focused primarily on identifying the frequency or types of pronunciation errors, while others have examined pronunciation more generally rather than concentrating specifically on *silent letters*. Second, several studies have investigated students from different educational institutions and academic levels, but limited attention has been given to the specific context of TESOL 1 students at UNKLAB. Third, studies that focus specifically on silent letters have not always simultaneously explored the reasons underlying students' pronunciation errors. Therefore, further investigation is needed to connect the identification of silent-letter pronunciation errors with an analysis of the factors that contribute to those errors. The novelty of the present study lies in its specific focus on TESOL 1 students at UNKLAB and its attempt to examine not only the forms of silent-letter pronunciation errors but also the reasons underlying students' difficulties. This contextual and analytical focus is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of *silent-letter* pronunciation problems within the specific learning environment of Indonesian university-level English learners.

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) identify and describe the pronunciation errors made by TESOL 1 students at UNKLAB when pronouncing English words containing *silent letters*, and (2) investigate the factors or reasons underlying the students' pronunciation errors. By addressing these objectives, the study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of *silent-letter* pronunciation difficulties and provide information that may support English pronunciation instruction for university-level learners. These objectives are consistent with the research questions formulated in the original study, which focus on identifying the pronunciation errors made by TESOL 1 students and examining the reasons for those errors.

METHODS

This research used the qualitative method. According to Steven Dukeshire and Jennifer Thurlow (2002) in Sugiyono (2020: p. 3), qualitative metode is 'research involving the use of non-numerical data and often entails the collection and analysis of narrative data'. According to Fraenkel dan Wallen (1993: p. 23), a descriptive qualitative research is a methode used to describe, classify, and analyze the data by various techniques, e.g., survey, interview, questionnaire, and observation. According to Bogdan and Taylor (2001, p. 7) in Moleong (2011, p. 5), qualitative method is a research approach that generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words as well as observable behavior. Kirk and Miller (1986: p. 9), states that qualitative research is a specific tradition in the social science that fundamentally depends on human observation both from their environment and terminology. Since this study focuses on analyzing the participants' spoken production, particularly their pronunciation of English silent letters, a qualitative approach was considered matched with the objectives of this research.

The data used in this study were dug up from the participants' spoken utterances, specifically their pronunciation of English words containing silent letters. The pronunciations of the participants were recorded using their handphone with recording devices application. The recorded data of pronunciation were transcribed manually by the researcher using the broad phonetic transcription to determine whether the pronunciations corresponded with the standard pronunciations provided in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Afterward, the findings were described and interpreted qualitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study were obtained from the participants' pronunciation test. The analysis was conducted to identify the pronunciation errors made by the participants when producing English words containing *silent letters*. The participants' pronunciations were transcribed and compared with the standard pronunciations provided in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The errors were then classified according to the position of the *silent letters* within the words: initial, medial, and final positions.

The distribution of pronunciation errors according to word position is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of Pronunciation Errors by Word Position

Position	Total Items	Errors	Error Percentage
Initial	40	21	19%
Medial	40	61	56%
Final	40	26	24%
Mean			24.1%

Note. The table presents the distribution of participants' pronunciation errors according to the position of silent letters in the tested words. As shown in Table 1, pronunciation errors occurred in all three positions. The medial position produced the highest number of errors, followed by the final and initial positions. The overall mean pronunciation error was reported as 24.1%. Based on the error-analysis framework adopted in this study, the overall performance was categorized as a post-systematic error. This indicates that the participants appeared to have some knowledge of the pronunciation rules but were not able to apply the rules consistently in their pronunciation.

The detailed performance of the participants for each tested word is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Pronunciation Performance on Words Containing Silent Letters

Position	Word	Errors	Pron.	Error (%)
Initial	<i>knife</i>	3	5	60
Initial	<i>knee</i>	3	5	60
Initial	<i>knight</i>	4	5	80
Initial	<i>know</i>	5	5	100
Initial	<i>knowledge</i>	4	5	80
Initial	<i>knock</i>	2	5	40
Medial	<i>logically</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>Wednesday</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>sign</i>	0	5	0

Medial	<i>calf</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>handsome</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>foreign</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>calm</i>	5	5	100
Medial	<i>musically</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>handkerchief</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>dynamically</i>	5	5	100
Medial	<i>resign</i>	0	5	0
Medial	<i>champagne</i>	5	5	100
Medial	<i>folk</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>numerically</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>design</i>	1	5	20
Medial	<i>half</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>salmon</i>	4	5	80
Medial	<i>assign</i>	0	5	0
Medial	<i>talk</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>chronically</i>	3	5	60
Medial	<i>walk</i>	2	5	40
Medial	<i>would</i>	2	5	40
Final	<i>bomb</i>	2	5	40
Final	<i>climb</i>	0	5	0
Final	<i>autumn</i>	4	5	80
Final	<i>comb</i>	1	5	20
Final	<i>dumb</i>	3	5	60
Final	<i>hymn</i>	2	5	40
Final	<i>lamb</i>	0	5	0
Final	<i>column</i>	0	5	0
Final	<i>limb</i>	0	5	0
Final	<i>tomb</i>	4	5	80

Final	<i>solemn</i>	4	5	80
Final	<i>womb</i>	3	5	60

Note. "Errors" refers to the number of participants who produced an inaccurate pronunciation, whereas "Pron." indicates the total number of participants who pronounced each word.

Table 2 shows variation in participants' ability to pronounce words containing *silent letters*. Several words received an error rate of 100%, namely *know*, *calm*, *dynamically*, and *champagne*. In contrast, *sign*, *resign*, *assign*, *climb*, *lamb*, *column*, and *limb* were pronounced accurately by all participants. The findings therefore indicate that pronunciation difficulty varied according to the particular word and *silent-letter* pattern rather than occurring uniformly across all words.

Discussion

The results indicate that the participants experienced difficulties in producing English words containing silent letters, with the greatest concentration of errors occurring in the medial position. This finding suggests that the position of a silent letter within a word may influence the difficulty experienced by learners. Words containing silent letters in the medial position often require learners to suppress the pronunciation of a written letter while simultaneously producing the surrounding sounds accurately. The participants' errors may therefore reflect the difficulty of processing the relationship between English orthography and phonology.

The overall error pattern can be interpreted using Corder's error-analysis framework. The mean error rate of 24.1% was categorized in the original study as a post-systematic error. In a post-systematic error, learners have already acquired knowledge of the relevant linguistic rule but fail to apply it consistently during actual language production. The participants' performance is consistent with this interpretation because they successfully pronounced some words containing similar silent-letter patterns while incorrectly pronouncing others. For example, *sign*, *resign*, and *assign* were pronounced accurately by all participants, whereas *calm*, *dynamically*, and *champagne* produced errors from all participants. This variation suggests that the participants were not completely unfamiliar with the concept of silent letters; rather, their application of pronunciation rules was inconsistent across lexical items. The findings can also be explained through differences between Indonesian and English phonological and orthographic systems. Indonesian generally has a relatively transparent relationship between spelling and pronunciation, whereas English orthography contains numerous inconsistencies. Indonesian learners may therefore develop an expectation that written letters should correspond to audible sounds. When this expectation is transferred to English, learners may pronounce letters that should remain silent. This explanation is consistent with the finding that words such as *know*, *knife*, *knight*, *autumn*, *comb*, and *walk* caused substantial difficulty. The participants may have relied on the written representation of these words rather than their established phonological forms.

This interpretation is supported by previous research on Indonesian EFL learners. Kuspiyah et al. (2021) found that Indonesian university students experienced difficulties in pronouncing English words containing silent letters. Similarly, Arvian (2021) reported a 24.17% overall error rate among fourth-semester English Department students and found

that the medial position produced the highest proportion of errors. The present study therefore affirms the findings of Arvian (2021), particularly regarding the prominence of medial-position errors. Arvian reported that medial silent letters accounted for 31.5% of the errors, compared with 26.5% in the final position and 14.5% in the initial position.

The similarity between the present findings and Arvian's results is particularly noteworthy because both studies examined university-level English learners and used words containing silent letters in initial, medial, and final positions. The recurrence of medial-position difficulties across the two studies suggests that the problem may not be limited to a particular group of learners. Instead, it may reflect a broader difficulty in processing English orthographic forms when the written form does not correspond directly to pronunciation. The findings are also consistent with Nurmila et al. (2023), who identified pre-systematic and systematic errors among Indonesian EFL learners and attributed pronunciation difficulties to limited English learning experience, the perceived difficulty of pronunciation, mother-tongue influence, and students' learning models. However, the present study differs from their findings in terms of the dominant error stage. Whereas Nurmila et al. reported pre-systematic and systematic errors, the present study classified the participants' overall performance as post-systematic. This difference may indicate that learners' error patterns can vary according to their educational level, learning experience, and familiarity with pronunciation rules.

The findings further correspond with recent research showing that Indonesian learners tend to experience difficulties because of the inconsistent relationship between English spelling and pronunciation. Andini and Ekaningsih (2025), for example, found that certain silent letters, particularly *l*, were frequently mispronounced by English Education students. More recently, Barzakh et al. (2026) found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently produced addition errors by pronouncing letters that should remain silent. The study attributed these errors to learners' reliance on English orthography, limited exposure to authentic spoken input, and negative interlingual transfer from Indonesian. These findings support the interpretation that the participants in the present study may have relied heavily on orthographic representations when producing unfamiliar English words.

A similar pattern was reported by Aryanika (2026), who found that addition was the dominant error type among English Education students when pronouncing vowel silent letters. The errors were associated with interlingual transfer, reliance on spelling, limited phonological awareness, and insufficient pronunciation practice. The present findings therefore provide further affirmation that pronunciation errors involving silent letters remain a persistent problem even among university students preparing for careers related to English language education. Nevertheless, the word-level findings in the present study provide an important additional perspective. Not all silent-letter words caused difficulty. Words such as *sign*, *resign*, *assign*, *climb*, *lamb*, *column*, and *limb* were pronounced accurately by all participants. This indicates that the presence of a silent letter alone does not necessarily determine pronunciation difficulty. Learners may have greater difficulty with particular lexical items depending on their familiarity with the word, exposure to its spoken form, knowledge of pronunciation patterns, or the degree to which its spelling encourages a literal pronunciation. Thus, the findings suggest that pronunciation instruction should not treat all silent letters as equally difficult. The high error rates for *know*, *calm*, *dynamically*, and *champagne* also suggest that lexical familiarity and orthographic complexity may interact with phonological knowledge. For example, *know*

contains an initial k that is not pronounced, whereas champagne reflects a spelling pattern influenced by its historical and foreign-language origin. Learners who rely primarily on grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence may therefore find such words particularly challenging. The findings support the view that explicit instruction concerning irregular spelling–pronunciation relationships is necessary, particularly for learners whose first language has a relatively transparent orthographic system.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the participants' pronunciation errors were associated not only with a lack of knowledge of silent-letter rules but also with difficulty applying those rules consistently. The results consequently provide both confirmation and refinement of previous research. They confirm earlier findings concerning the persistent difficulty of silent letters, the influence of Indonesian phonological patterns, and the importance of spelling–pronunciation inconsistency. At the same time, the word-level analysis demonstrates that errors vary substantially across lexical items, even when the words contain comparable silent-letter patterns. This finding highlights the importance of combining rule-based pronunciation instruction with repeated exposure to authentic pronunciation and explicit phonological practice. From a pedagogical perspective, the results indicate that pronunciation instruction for Indonesian EFL learners should explicitly address the relationship between orthography and phonology. Teachers should provide learners with opportunities to compare written forms with phonemic representations, listen to authentic models, identify silent letters, and repeatedly produce words containing problematic patterns. Such activities may help learners move from knowledge of pronunciation rules toward consistent application of those rules in actual speech.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study and data analysis about the pronunciation error analysis of English silent letters the conclusions are as follow: first, the Tesol 1 class students of English Major of UNKLAB made post-systematic errors in pronouncing silent letters in English words; second, among the three types of errors according to Corder, the pre-systematic error is not found in this study. The students only made the post-systematic error and systematic error in pronouncing the English words containing silent letters. The pronunciation is produced by applying the rule of Indonesian phonotactic constraints. They applied the rules of syllable structure and possible sequences of sound of Indonesian. It happened because they were lack of knowledge about the pattern.

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