



Investigating the Problems of Letters-Based Pronunciation

*Farukh Faisal**

*Department of English
Faculty of Literature and Humanities
Badakhshan University*

ABSTRACT

Letters (Alphabets) are the important elements of writing and pronunciation in many languages of the world. In English language, letters are useful only for writing, but in pronunciation it's more problematic. There are a lot of exceptions in English spelling. The letters and their pronunciations are not fixed and do not match. The lack of such consequence causes confusion for foreign learners and speakers of English language when they pronounce words based on letters. The data for this article is collected after reading and analysis of updated books and articles by referring the reliable sources like libraries and internet sites. It is mentionable that a descriptive analytical method is used in this research. Since there is no any research with the same title and subject, so it can be an interesting and useful article for those who want to study in this field. The current article discussed about the problems arise from letters-based pronunciation by considering the consequence between letters and sounds, some exceptions in letters or spelling, and in inflectional morphemes.

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

1. Introduction

English is a language which seems easy to learn, but Learning English as a foreign language is not an easy task, because sometimes we may find it difficult and confusing. Especially, when we talk about pronunciation, most of us face difficulty. It is the pronunciation issue that causes most of the problems. People face very common pronunciation issues when learning English as a foreign language. In many languages letters of the alphabet are pronounced in the same way as they are spelled, but in English language there are so 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. Each sound of English language is represented by more than one written letter or by sequences of letters; the same letter in English represents more than one sound, or it may not represent any sound at all.

These lack of consistencies between spelling and pronunciation, can confuse the 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 are not familiar with the accurate pronunciation of them. Therefore, this article discussed the problems of letters-based pronunciation to explain the reasons why letters based pronunciation is problematic, and we cannot judge pronunciation by 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, economic, politic, technology, education, etc. almost in all over the world, and people use this language in their daily communication; therefore, the correct pronunciation in this language is a serious requirement and very significant for the relationships between people to have a meaningful communication and good understanding of each other.

The main purpose of this research is to provide important and new information about the pronunciation issue for speakers and learners of English as a foreign language, and also helps them to identify the common exceptions of English spelling and the ambiguity they cause in their pronunciation during the speaking. Also, this article helps the readers to 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 spelling of words, morphemes, and how these exceptions make difficulty for the learns and speakers of English as a foreign language.

2. Letters and Pronunciations

The alphabet is the set of symbols known as letters that are used to form words; while pronunciation refers to the way in which these words are formed verbally, using different speech sounds. Connor says, letters and sounds must never be mixed up. Letters are written, sounds are spoken. It is very useful to have written letters to remind us of corresponding sounds, but this is all they do; they cannot make us pronounce sounds which we do not already know; they simply remind us (Connor, 1998, p.7). At its most basic, the English alphabet is composed of five vowels and 21 consonants for a total of 26

letters but, understanding the pronunciations of these letters are not easy for foreign English learners and speakers. In ordinary English spelling it is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for; for example, in the words *city*, *busy*, *women*, *pretty*, *village*, the letters (i, y, u, o, e, a) all stand for the same vowel sound, the one which occurs in *sit*. And in *banana*, *bather*, *man*, *many* the letter (a) stands for five different vowel sounds. In a book which is dealing with pronunciation this is inconvenient; it would be much more useful if the reader could always be certain that one letter represented one and only one sound, that when he saw a letter he would know at once how to pronounce it (or at least what to aim at!). That is why it is helpful to use letters in a consistent way when dealing with English. We have twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels to consider, and we give each of these forty-four units a letter (or sometimes two letters, if this is convenient). In that way we can show without any doubt what the student should be trying to say (Connor, 1998, Pp. 7-9).

2.1. Vowel letters

A vowel is a letter that represents a speech sound made with one's airway (the mouth and vocal chords) open and without touching one's tongue to the teeth, lips, or the roof of the mouth. There are five letters that are considered to be true vowels: A, E, I, O, and U. The letter Y is often considered to be a "semi-vowel" because it functions sometimes as a vowel sound (as in *myth*, *any*, and *fly*) and sometimes as a soft consonant sound (as in *yard* and *bayou*). It's worth mentioning that the letter W, which is typically considered a consonant, can also behave as a vowel, but this only occurs when it combines with another vowel in 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 above section, it is difficult to know what sounds the letters stand for; 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 stand for the same vowel sound /i/ (Connor, 1998, p. 7); also one letter may stand for different sounds; for example, the letter *a* in the word *father* is pronounced as a long vowel /a:/, in the word *man* it is a short vowel sound /æ/, and in the word *among*, where it's not stressed, it is a neutral vowel or schwa /ə/. Thus the letter *a* can be pronounced in at least three different ways and produce different vowel sounds. (Linda & Smith, 2007, p. 5).

2.2. Consonant letters

In addition to vowels, the English alphabet also consist of consonants. While vowels represent open-mouthed speech sounds, consonants represent sounds that are made when part or all of the vocal tract is closed. Because they require a specific position of the lips, cheeks, tongue, etc. There are 21 consonant letters: B, C, D, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, P, Q, R, S, T, V, W, X, Y, and Z. Note that Y can sometimes function as a vowel (as in *myth* [mɪθ/] or *dry* [draɪ/]), so it is often referred to as a semi-vowel, and W can also function alongside vowels to form certain vowel sounds (as in *grow* [groʊ/] or *draw* [draʊ/]), but it can't function as a vowel on its own (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 *champagne*, *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 the compound letter *ch*, pronounce /k/ sound in *chemistry*, /j/ sound in *machine*, /tʃ/ sound in *achieve*. Some consonant letters do not have any sound at all, which will be discussed in next section.

2.3. Silent letters

Another challenge for foreign English learners and speakers is the existence of silent letters in English language. It is one of the trickiest aspects of English spelling and pronunciation. According to Joanne, silent letters are the letters in words that are not pronounced but make a huge difference to the meaning and sometimes the pronunciation of the whole word. Most of these silent letters were pronounced for centuries then they became silent but their spelling remained already fixed, and now they show the history and origin of the word (Joanne, 2012). There are a lot of silent letters in English, it's said that around 60 % of words in English have silent letters (Varma, 2015).

There are some primary rules for silent letter, when and in which positions a letter can be silent, but the rules are full of exceptions, lack of satisfactions, and sometimes cause confusions. Some common words which contain silent letters are: letter *B* in the words, *comb*, *bomb*, *thumb*, *climb*, *tomb*, *crumb*, *lamb*, *doubt*, *subtle*, *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*, *pneumatic*; Letter *S* in the words, *aisle*, *island*, *isle*, *islet*; Letter *T* in the words, *castle*, *Christmas*, *fasten*, *listen*, *often*, *whistle*, *thistle*, *bustle*, *hasten*; Letter *U* in the words, *guide*, *guest*, *guard*, *guess*, *guano*; and Letter *W* in the words, *write*, *wrest*, *wrong*, *wrack*, *wrap* (Bismo).

3. Inflectional morphemes and Pronunciations

Another reason for causing problem in communication 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

Regular nouns in English form their plural by 'adding an -s or es at the end of singular nouns to change in 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 denotes one person or thing, is said to be in the singular number; and a noun that denotes more than one person or thing, is said to be in the plural number. (Wren & Martin, 1999, p. 10). The difference of the paired words is always in the second words or in the plural ones that signaling the key distinction between singular and plural numbers (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 52).

The rules of adding (s or es) are not applicable for irregular nouns. In English, we have word form pairs like *ox/oxen, goose/geese, and sheep/sheep*, where the difference between the singular and the plural is signaled in a way that departs from the regular pattern, or is not signaled at all (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 52). The irregular category should memorize individually when you acquire English, whether natively or as a second language. This is because there is no way to predict the plural forms of these words.

Even cases considered regular, with the final (s or es), are not so simple; the (s) in *dogs* is not pronounced the same way as the (s) in *cats*, and in a plural like *dishes*, an extra vowel appears before the s. These cases, where the same distinction is effected by alternative forms of a word, are called allomorphy (Ahmadi, 2011, p. 52). According to Andrew (2009), the plural suffix (s or es) goes under phonological process, and appears as /s/, /z/ or /əz/. The following A, B, C identify the phonological conditions of allomorphy (/s/, /z/, /əz/).

- A- Cats, caps, kites, desks /s/
- B- Dogs, cabs, bags, beds /z/
- C- Dishes, buses, watches, languages /əz/

The final sound of the plural nouns from A is a /s/—a voiceless alveolar Fricative; For B the plural ending is a /z/—a voiced alveolar fricative; and for C it is /əz/. Also, there is a regularity in columns A, B, and C. the last sound of each words determine the pronunciation of s or es in three different ways.

For example, consider *cab/cap*, which respectively take the allomorphs /z/ and /s/ to form the plural. Clearly, the final segment is responsible, because that is where the two words differ. Similarly, for *bag/badge*, their final segments determine the different plural allomorphs /z/ and /əz/. Apparently, the distribution of plural allomorphs in English is conditioned by the final segment of the singular form (Fromkin, Hyams, & Nina, 2011, Pp. 268-269).

3.2. Third person singular

Verbs in English have simple form, such as *write, read, and rush*, which called the base form (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 between verb and subject (third person singular) in simple present tense, and form the words *writes, reads, and rushes*; these are in a special form, consisting of the base form plus an ending (s or es). This form is used whenever the word or phrase referring to the person doing the *writing, reading, and rushing*. The (s or es) form is not applicable for any other person (I, we, you and they) (Andrew, 2009, p. 135). Verb morphemes (s or es) take the same phonetic form as the regular plural nouns, and pronounce in three different ways such as writes with a final [s], reads with a final [z] and rushes with a final [əz].

3.3. Possessive -'s

The general rules for formation of possessive - 's are: when the noun is singular, the possessive case is formed by adding 's to the noun; as, *the king's crown*; when the noun is plural, and ends in s, the possessive case is formed by adding only an apostrophe ('); as, *boys' school*; and when the noun is plural but does not end in s, the possessive sign is formed by adding 's as, *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 phonological process, and appears as 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 form their past and past participle forms by adding a d or ed at the end of base form of the verbs; 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). All of these verbs look alike, ending in ed, but what does differ between them, though, is the pronunciation of the ending. Past tense morpheme d or ed in some verbs pronounce as a voiceless sound like /t/ as in *asked*; in some verbs as a voiced sound /d/ as in *agreed*; and in some verbs pronounced like /əd/ as in *accepted* (Guarin, 2019).

The regular verb rules are not applicable in irregular verbs. Like irregular plural nouns, some irregular verbs conform to no particular rule and must be learned individually, such as *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 undergoes phonologically to produce allomorphy, and appearing as /t/, /d/ or /əd/.

4. Result

English language was under the influence of French, German and Dutch at different period of times, and English inherited and includes many foreign words. Therefore, we cannot pronounce the words by the help of letters, and there are so many exceptions in the rule of pronunciation and spelling in English language.

In the case of morphemes, the three different pronunciations of regular plural nouns, third person singular, and possessive -'s refer the concise consideration of the final sounds of words. The reasons for three different pronunciation of the mentioned morphemes are: 1st, 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/. 2nd, Words end with all vowel sounds and voiced consonant sounds such as: /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /a/, /ɔ/, /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/. 3rd, 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 past tense morpheme (d, ed) in three different ways, determines by the last sound of each words. There are also three groups to identify the phonological condition of this morpheme. 1st, If the verb ends with a voiceless sound, such as /p/, /k/, /f/, /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /θ/ except /t/, the past tense suffix (d or ed) pronounce as a /t/. (Note, it is the sound that determines the group that a word belongs to, not always the written letter. For example, even though *dance* ends with a -ce, its sound is that of /s/, so it's in this voiceless group.). 2nd, if the verbs end with voiced sounds such as /b/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /a/, /ɔ/, /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, also vowel and diphthongs, except /d/, then the past tense suffix (d or ed) pronounce as /d/. 3rd, if the last sound in the verb is a /t/ or /d/, pronounce the added (d or ed) endings as /əd/. (Guarin, 2019).

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the investigation into the problems of letters-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, and hindering effective communication.

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

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

One of the way to solve this problem, foreign English learners should arrange their pronunciation based on the Standard English or Received Pronunciation. There are 44 symbols in this system and each of them stands only for 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 which contains the phonetic symbols of Received Pronunciation.

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