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Challenges of Learning Silent Phonemes/Letters: The Case of Saudi English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT Silent phonemes, present in written English but absent in normal pronunciation, challenge non-native speakers, especially foreign language learners (Saudis) who rely on spelling clues for pronunciation instruction. This study examines how Saudi First Year English Language Program (FYEP) university students face problems in pronunciation of words with silent phonemes. The differences between Arabic and English phonological systems make silent phonemes in English vocabulary difficult for Arabic-speaking learners. Following descriptive qualitative methodology, this study included 50 EFL students. Two raters evaluated the participants' speech with silent phonemes using a preset checklist that stressed pronunciation standards. The study revealed that most of the students had trouble pronouncing words with silent phonemes, particularly ending consonant clusters. The study also revealed specific terms that consistently affected student performance, supporting literature related to the issues of the silent and pronunciation. These findings suggest using instructional methodologies and pronunciation drills to gradually and methodically integrate silent phoneme pronunciation norms into tertiary language learning. Arabic-speaking EFL learners would benefit from this tailored approach, improving pronunciation accuracy, spoken English proficiency, and language learning.