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.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation serves as a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, particularly in academic settings where standard communication is essential. However, achieving accurate pronunciation in English can be particularly challenging for learners whose native language phonology (sound system) differs significantly (Ibraheem 2008). One specific challenge lies in mastering silent phonemes/letters in written words that are not pronounced (Leek 2010). Despite its significance, certain elements of pronunciation, such as silent letters, often receive insufficient attention in language instruction materials or teaching methods. Such features create problems while reading too (Eide 2012). While resources like English Pronunciation Made Simple (Dale and Poms 2005), Clear Speech (Calandruccio et al. 2020), and Pronunciation Pairs (Baker and Goldstein 2008) offer valuable insights, their coverage of silent letters remains limited, if addressed at all. Consequently, English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, including those from Saudi Arabia, may lack awareness of when certain letters should remain unpronounced in specific linguistic contexts.

The presence of silent phonemes is a distinctive feature of English orthography (writing system) (Carrell 2018). Words like 'knife' (silent 'k') or 'debt' (silent 'b') pose difficulties for learners due to the mismatch between spelling and pronunciation. These mispronunciations can hinder communication and comprehension, ultimately impacting spoken English fluency (Fotos and Ellis 2018) or even writing skills. While taking notes of such words (with silent letters), learners write the same what they listen or speak, and what they read and write because they are not aware of such words. For Arabic-speaking EFL learners, silent phonemes present an even greater hurdle. The phonological systems of Arabic and English differ considerably, creating additional complexities in mastering silent letter pronunciation (Ibraheem 2008). While research on silent letter pronunciation difficulties in EFL learners exists, the studies specifically exploring the challenges faced by Arabic speakers remain somewhat limited. This gap in knowledge necessitates further investigation into the specific pronunciation hurdles encountered by the participants of the study. However, the unique linguistic background of EFL learners from Saudi Arabia warrants further exploration. Saudi learners often encounter specific challenges related to the phonological differences between Arabic and English, particularly in mastering English pronunciation. Arabic is a pho-

netic language unlike English, which is not so phonetic. In other words, what is written in English is not exactly pronounced. The phonetic system of Arabic differs significantly from English, with distinct consonant and vowel sounds that may pose challenges when acquiring English pronunciation, especially regarding silent letters. Understanding these unique challenges is crucial for tailoring effective pronunciation instruction and support strategies for this specific learner population. Vowel sounds are also different in English, therefore target learners face issues (Razak 2010).

This study addresses a notable gap in the literature by investigating the accuracy of pronunciation among EFL university students from Saudi Arabia, focusing specifically on words with silent consonants. By excluding silent vowels and consonants that exhibit similarities between Arabic and English, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of pronunciation challenges faced by EFL Saudi learners. The findings of this study are expected to shed light on the extent of pronunciation difficulties related to silent letters, thereby informing the development of more effective pronunciation instruction materials and strategies tailored to the needs of this learner population.

Moreover, addressing this gap in pronunciation instruction is imperative due to its significant implications for language learning outcomes. Pronunciation difficulties can hinder learners' communicative effectiveness, leading to misunderstandings and decreased confidence in language use. In academic and professional contexts, clear and accurate pronunciation is essential for effective communication and successful integration into English-speaking environments. Thus, by identifying and addressing these pronunciation challenges, educators can better support EFL Saudi learners in achieving linguistic competence and realising their academic and professional goals.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored the production of words containing silent letters across various linguistic contexts. While the literature encompasses a diverse range of settings, this review focuses on four key themes relevant to this study's scope, that is, defining silent letters, silent letter instruction, silent letter omission by non-native Arabic speakers, and silent letter omission by Arabic speakers. In synthesising this literature, the researchers aim to provide insights into the specific challenges faced by EFL learners, particularly those from Saudi Arabia.

Silent Letters in English

Silent letters, also known as silent graphemes, are written units (letters) within words that lack their corresponding sounds during pronunciation (Adams 1990). This mismatch between spelling and pronunciation creates a challenge for language learners, particularly those whose native languages have more consistent grapheme-phoneme relationships (Carrell 2018). In English, silent letters are prevalent, appearing in words like 'knife' (silent 'k') or 'debt' (silent 'b') (Table 1).

Table 1: Some examples of silent letters

Silent /b/	Silent /k/
Climb, comb crumb, dumb, plumb, thumb, numb, succumb, lamb, limb, tomb, know, knot, knoll bomb, womb, debt, doubt, subtle	Knife, knight, knob, knock, knit, knuckle, knee, kneel, knick-knack, knowledge,

These inconsistencies can hinder learners' ability to accurately decode and pronounce English words. Silent letters pose unique challenges for language learners due to differences in phonetic-orthographic correspondence across languages (Lim et al. 2024). The teachers should not ignore the concept of 'over differentiation', wherein learners struggle to suppress distinctions made in their native language when acquiring a second language. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced for EFL learners from Saudi Arabia, who may rely on Arabic phonetic rules when extrapolating pronunciation in English. Silent letters, defined as graphemes that should not be articulated in any form, present a significant hurdle for learners (Bishop 1986; Celce-Murcia et al. 2010; Rey et al. 2000). While English features both silent consonants and

vowels, this study focuses primarily on silent consonants, which often manifest in digraphs, which are sequences of two letters representing one phoneme (Akmajian et al. 2017; Celce-Murcia et al. 2010) (Table 2).

Silent Letters in Other Languages

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying English words with silent letters and how they are pronounced or understood (Brown 2018; Ranbom and Connine 2011). Given the variation in pronunciation across languages, three key studies were chosen for this section. These studies focused on languages that share a common trait, that is, they are more phonetic than English. One such study conducted by Pospíšilová (2014a) explored how Czech learners of English grapple with silent letters, which represent a novel concept for them. The study aimed to assess the pronunciation proficiency of Czech learners in pronouncing words with silent letters. Results revealed that approximately one-fourth of the target words were mispronounced, with words containing silent 'b', 'h', 'p', and 'l' presenting the most significant challenges. This suggests that silent letters pose a notable hurdle for second language learners, influenced by phonological rules from their native language. Similarly, Ababneh (2018b) noted that Arab students, including Saudis, often pronounce English words based on their spelling due to the phonetic nature of Arabic (Farrah and Halahlah 2020a). Their study aimed to identify pronunciation errors made by Saudi students when pronouncing words with silent letters. Findings indicated that students from both English and non-English majors struggled with words like 'debt' and 'dough', indicating difficulties even for those with extensive exposure to English. Bassetti and Atkinson (2015) examined how Italian learners of English, coming from a Romance language background similar to Spanish, dealt with silent letters. They found that a significant percentage of participants added extra sounds to words with silent letters when reading aloud, suggesting that silent letters are a common cause of mispronunciation among ESL students. In other context, Pospíšilová (2014b) explored the ability of Czech students to pronounce those words which contained contain-

ing silent letters, consequently affecting the sound system. These studies highlight the challenges learners from various linguistic backgrounds face when navigating the complexities of English pronunciation, particularly with silent letters.

Silent Letters in Arabic: A Point of Contrast with English Silent Letters

While not directly central to this study, understanding silent letters in Arabic offers valuable context for exploring the challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners In Arabic, silent letters, also known as الساكنة الحروف (al-huruf as-sakina), but these function differently compared to English.

A study by McCarthy (2002) analysing a corpus of Arabic text found that silent letters constitute roughly 23 percent of all written characters, compared to a much lower percentage in English (estimated around 5% to 8% depending on source). This inherent difference in language structure can create challenges for Saudi learners when encountering the sparser use of silent letters in English pronunciation.

In Arabic, silent letters often play a grammatical or morphological role, influencing aspects like verb tense or word derivation (Farrah and Halahlah 2020b). A study by Al-Khalifa and Harrington (1997) investigating the impact of silent letters on Arabic verb conjugation found that omitting these letters resulted in significant errors in grammatical accuracy. English silent letters, however, primarily impact pronunciation. For example, the letter 'ء' (hamza), is a common silent letter in Arabic, affecting the preceding vowel sound but often not pronounced itself (Versteegh 2008). In contrast, the silent 'k' in English 'knife' has no influence on surrounding sounds.

These contrasting features of silent letters in Arabic can lead to pronunciation difficulties for Saudi EFL learners. A study by Ibraheem (2008) exploring contrastive analysis of Arabic and English phonology found that Saudi learners often transferred their understanding of silent letters in Arabic (grammatical role) to English, leading to mispronunciations. This highlights the importance of explicitly addressing these differences in silent letter usage during pronunciation instruction. For example, in the

word 'قلب'(qalb), meaning heart, the hamza is silent, but it changes the pronunciation of the preceding 'a' vowel sound.

Another instance of silent letters is found in the letter 'و' (waw) when used as a long vowel marker, known as 'واو الطويلة' (wâw al-mawîla). In words where 'و' serves as a long vowel marker, such as 'كتاب'(kitâb), meaning book, the letter itself is not pronounced. Instead, it indicates that the preceding vowel sound is elongated. Additionally, Arabic words may contain silent letters based on their position within a word or specific phonetic contexts. For example, in the word 'أكل' (akaltu), meaning 'I ate', the final 'ت' (ta) is silent in spoken Arabic but is essential for indicating the grammatical tense of the verb.

Thus, understanding the complexities of silent letters in Arabic, particularly their frequency, grammatical rules, and specific examples, provide a valuable contrast to silent letters in English. This contrastive analysis sheds light on the potential challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners. Accustomed to the significant influence of silent letters on grammar and morphology in Arabic, they might struggle to grasp the primarily phonemic role of silent letters in English pronunciation. This highlights the need for targeted instruction that explicitly addresses these differences and equips Saudi EFL learners with the necessary tools to navigate the intricacies of silent consonant pronunciation in English. By acknowledging these contrasting features and their impact on the learning process, educators can develop more effective instructional strategies to bridge the gap between Arabic and English silent letter usage, ultimately enhancing Saudi EFL learners' pronunciation accuracy and fluency in English communication.

Silent Letters Rules

Here are some rules about when one does not articulate certain letters.
1. Silent 'B': Mostly when 'b' is preceded by 't' (like in 'doubt') or followed by 'm' (like in 'climb').
2. Silent 'C': When 'c' comes before 'e', 'i', or 'y' after 's' (like in 'scissors'), it is silent. Also, when 'c' and 'k' are together (like in 'clock'), 'c' is not pronounced.

3. Silent 'D': Normally, you articulate 'd', except in the words like 'adjacent' or 'judge'.
4. Silent 'G': If 'g' is followed by 'n' (like in 'benign') or 'm' (like in 'paradigm'), it is usually silent.
5. Silent 'GH': In words like 'delight', one does not say 'gh'. Sometimes, 'gh' is silent at the end of words, like in 'sleigh', though.
6. Silent 'L': When 'l' is in 'alm' (like in 'calm') or 'lk' (like in 'chalk'), one does not articulate it if the vowel(s) before it are 'T' or ' ɔ ' or ' o ʊ '. Also, 'lf' (like in 'half') and 'ld' (like in 'could') can sometimes be without the 'l'.
7. Silent 'N': If 'n' comes after 'm' (like in 'column'), it might not be said.
8. Silent 'S': In words like 'island', one does not say 's' between 'i' and 'l'.
9. Silent 'T': Sometimes, one does not say 't' in 'tch' (like in 'stretch') or 'stle' (like in 'hustle').
10. Silent 'W': In words like 'write', one does not articulate 'w'.

A detail of nearly all popular silent letters are given in Appendix C.

In conclusion, this section provides a simplified overview of some common silent letter rules in English, focusing on those relevant to digraphs (two-letter combinations representing one sound). These rules serve as a starting point for understanding silent consonants, but it is crucial to acknowledge their limitations for Saudi EFL learners.

Effective instruction should delve deeper, incorporating minimal pairs (words that differ only by one sound, like 'right' versus 'write') to illustrate silent letter effects (Derwing et al. 2004). Additionally, leveraging technology like audio recordings and pronunciation software can enhance practice and self-monitoring (LeBel and Leask 2018). By going beyond this simplified list, educators can equip Saudi EFL learners with the tools they need to master the intricacies of silent consonant pronunciation in English.

Even though vowels and isolated consonants are left out in English, Saudi learners still need to know these ten rules to improve their pronunciation. Often, language books or courses do not teach these rules well or skip them

altogether. More information on how students deal with these rules is needed to help them improve their pronunciation.

Importance of Understanding Silent Letters

A comprehensive understanding of silent letters is crucial for Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language (EFL) due to several reasons, impacting both pronunciation and overall language proficiency, which includes pronunciation accuracy in particular.

Arabic phonology (sound system) differs significantly from English. The presence of silent letters in English words can be particularly challenging for Arabic speakers, leading to mispronunciations. For instance, the silent 'k' in 'knife' or the silent 'b' in 'debt' can create difficulties in accurate articulation (Ibraheem 2008). Khan (2011) analysed the pronunciation errors of Arab EFL learners and found a strong correlation between a lack of knowledge about silent letters and mispronunciations of words containing them.

Silent letters directly affect the pronunciation of English words. Arabic learners unfamiliar with the concept and their influence on spoken English may struggle to understand spoken language in natural conversations (Al-Ghareeb 2016). Ababneh (2018a) dealt with the pronunciation challenges faced by EFL learners in the Jordanian context. A study by Derwing et al. (2004) demonstrated that learners who received explicit instruction on silent letters showed significant improvement in their ability to identify and understand spoken words containing them compared to those who did not receive such instruction. Wang (2013) studied the effects of explicit instruction on considering the aspect of

silent –letter pronunciation faced by adult Saudi EFL learners.

Mastering silent letters is vital for Arabic speakers to develop accurate spelling and reading skills in English. Without such awareness, knowledge and skills, Arabic learners while learning English might misspell words like 'castle' or 'island', leading to challenges in written communication (Carrell 2018). Silent letters contribute to overall language fluency. This mastery enhances their confidence and ability to express themselves accurately in various contexts (Fotos and Ellis 2018).

Since, it is understood that silent letters create learning problems, instructors or teaching faculty are responsible for designing certain teaching strategies that can minimise the issues (Table 2).

Silent Letter Instruction

While pronunciation instruction is crucial for EFL learners, research suggests that silent letters are often overlooked in traditional language teaching materials (Juan-Checa 2017a). This can lead to limited learner awareness of silent letter patterns and persistent mispronunciations. Effective silent letter instruction requires integrating explicit lessons into language curricula, providing targeted practice opportunities, and offering learners constructive feedback (Shariatmadari 2020). However, current research on silent letter instruction effectiveness reveals a lack of consensus on optimal instructional approaches (Derwing et al. 2016). Additionally, there is limited data on how teachers currently address silent letters in their classrooms, particularly in the context of Saudi EFL learners (Yildiz and Sarac 2018). Research suggests that traditional lan-

Table 2: Commonly mispronounced words

A	apostle, autumn, adjust, aisle	M	Muscle
B	bridge, budget, bomb	N	Nestle
C	calf, castle, column, conscious, climb, condemn	O	
D	design, debts, doughnuts, debris, descend	P	Palms
F	folks, fasten	R	ridge, reign
G	gnome	S	solemn, scene, sovereign salmon, scratch, sighed
H	half, hymn	T	thighs, thumb,
I	island	U	
J	judge	W	wrote, wrongdoing, weigh, wrestling
K	knowledge, knot	Y	Yacht
L	lamb	Z	

guage instruction materials often overlook silent letters, resulting in learners' limited awareness of their pronunciation rules (Juan-Checa 2017b). To improve pronunciation instruction, educators must integrate explicit lessons on silent letters into language curricula, providing learners with targeted practice and feedback (Shariatmadari 2020). Mompean et al. (2016) also suggested pronunciation instruction considering specific phonetic features of English.

In recent years, there has been more research on what teachers think about pronunciation and how they teach it. But, not many studies have looked at what teachers think about teaching silent letters directly. Here are some of the main ideas from studies that have explored this area.

A study by Bodorík (2017) also revealed the importance of teaching English pronunciation. The study found that most teachers thought pronunciation was important and spent time teaching it. They often used techniques like circling silent letters, but students still had trouble with silent letters. Another study by Zhang (2018) asked ESL teachers in Canada how confident they felt about teaching silent letters. Most teachers felt pretty confident about teaching silent letters, whether they were native English speakers or not. This shows that teachers understand the importance of teaching silent letters and think they can do a good job of it. In addition, Buss (2016) found that Brazilian English teachers thought teaching silent letters was important, even though they did not always focus on them specifically in their lessons. So, overall, it seems like teachers know that teaching silent letters is important and spend time on it. But, even with this attention, students still find silent letters tricky, especially if their native language does not have the same pronunciation rules as English.

The English language is said to be quite unphonetic (what is written is not pronounced in addition to certain exceptions). These rules offer a simplified framework, but they do not capture the full complexity of silent consonants in English. There are numerous exceptions (for example, 'gnat' for silent 'g') and contextual variations that influence pronunciation (Crystal et al. 2011). This highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to instructing Saudi EFL learners on silent consonants.

Filling the Research Gap

Understanding the specific challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in pronouncing words with silent letters is crucial for developing targeted instructional interventions that address their pronunciation needs effectively. By identifying the patterns of silent letter omission and the underlying factors influencing pronunciation accuracy, educators can design tailored pronunciation instruction materials and strategies that enhance Saudi EFL learners' linguistic competence and communicative proficiency in English. Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the accuracy of pronunciation among EFL university students from Saudi Arabia, with a specific focus on words containing silent letters in general and consonants in particular.

Research Questions

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:
1. What are the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Saudi university students enrolled in English language programs when pronouncing words containing silent consonants,
2. How do these pronunciation challenges impact their overall oral communication skills?

Research Objective

The present study aimed to achieve the following objectives:
1. To identify the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Saudi university students enrolled in English language programs when pronouncing words containing silent letters.
2. To assess how these pronunciation challenges impact the overall oral communication skills of Saudi university students enrolled in English language programs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, however simple occurrences of errors were calculated to support the findings. Descriptive qualitative research is a methodology that aims to provide detailed descriptions of phenomena, occurrences, and events that are happening in the current moment. According to Creswell et al. (2007), the objective of descriptive qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of the current situation. Creswell (2012: 274) defines descriptive qualitative research as a systematic approach to obtaining a full explanation and description of the research subject. Descriptive qualitative research seeks to provide a comprehensive and detailed description, explanation, and understanding of the problem under investigation by studying individuals, groups, or events to the fullest extent possible. This study employed descriptive qualitative research methodology to elucidate the phenomena surrounding difficulties encountered by non-native students in producing problematic sounds. Furthermore, on the elements that contribute to difficulties in pronunciation.

Participants

The target population for this study comprises 50 Saudi EFL learners enrolled in English language programs at the University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. A purposive sampling technique was utilised to select participants who meet the following inclusion criteria, that is, they are Saudi students, are currently enrolled in an English language program, and are not diagnosed with hearing impairments.

Data Collection Instruments

Silent Letter Pronunciation Test

A researcher-developed silent letter pronunciation test was the primary data collection instrument. The test consisted of a list of English words containing various silent consonants (for example, 'debt', 'debris', 'island'). Of 15 sentences, participants were instructed to read each sentence

aloud individually. (Appendix A) Their pronunciation was recorded using an audio recorder.

Data Analysis Procedures

Silent Letter Pronunciation Test

The recorded audio data was analysed by the two researchers and a trained rater who is a native English speaker with expertise in assessing pronunciation. The raters (including the researcher) listened to each recording independently and assessed the accuracy of silent letter pronunciation using a pre-determined scoring rubric. The rubric categorised pronunciations as correct, partially correct (that is, slight hesitation before omitting the silent letter), or incorrect. The listing of words follows their occurrences in the reading text (Table 3).

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Saudi university students enrolled in English language programs when pronouncing words containing silent consonants?

The error analysis of the reading (Appendix B) leads to the findings that students face distinct pronunciation challenges while dealing with words containing silent letters, especially consonants. Following groups of silent sounds were identified and categorised into groups, and specific analysis was done for some letters/phonemes. Specific issues related to silent letters were deal in Appendix-C. Rest of the target letters/phonemes were analysed generally as the causes of errors nearly remain the same.

1. **Silent /b/:** Students faced problems in articulating words ending with /b/ preceded by /m/. For example' when pronouncing the word 'climb', they tried to articulate even /b/ in the end. 20 out of 50 (40%) students pronounced incorrectly, while 9 out of 50 (18%) were hesitant and they struggled to hardly pronounce correctly.

2. **Silent /c/:** Silent position of /c/ in chick or chicken does not seem to be much problematic because these words are quite common, and these are pronounced in daily use. Hence, the students made er-

Table 3: Error analysis of the words pronounced by 50 participants

Target words (Silent category)	Correct	Partly correct	Incorrect	Possible reasons
Conscious (s)	7	32	11	Not aware
Weightlifting (gh)	29	11	10	Long word
Wrestle (w, t)	12	13	25	Partly aware
Thighs (gh)	9	18	23	Silence of /gh/
Knees (k)	14	7	29	/k/ is silent, not expected at the first place
Wrists (w)	8	13	29	/w/ is not pronounced
Columns (n)	19	7	24	/n/ is silent
Debts (b)	9	14	27	/b/ is silent
Budget (d)	8	19	23	/dg/combination is difficult for them to learn
Foreign (g)	24	8	26	/g/ is silent before /n/
Climb (b)	21	9	20	/b/ is silent as usual followed by /m/ in such cases
Descend (s)	11	18	21	/s/ is silent
Ridge (d)	7	13	30	New word to the students
Diaphragm (g)	3	14	33	ESP word, unknown
Autumn (n)	12	11	27	/n/ is silent as it is extra
Yacht (t)	7	13	30	/t/ is silent
Islands (s)	19	7	24	/s/ is silent
condemn (n)	8	11	31	/n/ is silent as per the rule
Wrongdoing (w)	14	9	27	/w/ is silent, no phonetic role
Calf (l)	15	7	28	/l/is silent and they are not used to
Palm (l)	17	11	22	/l/ is silent
Thumb (b)	22	7	21	/b/ is mostly silent in final position followed by /m/
Strengthen (g)	9	12	29	/g/ is additional, and silent
Muscle (s)	17	8	25	/s/ silent
Chick (c)	29	4	17	/c/ seems additional
Nestled (t)	12	9	29	/t/ is silent
Bomb (b)	13	11	26	/b/ is silent in such cases
Bridge (d)	17	9	24	/d/ is silent
Castle (t)	8	14	38	/t/ is silent
Debris (s)	5	21	24	/s/ is silent and extra
Drought (gh)	2	9	39	/gh/ is silent here but pronounced in different combination
Salmon (l)	19	7	24	/l/ is silent
Lamb (b)	16	8	26	/b/ is silent
Doughnuts (gh)	23	11	16	/gh/ is silent
Schedule (British) (c)	26	5	19	/c/ seems extra an unpronounced
Design (g)	9	22	19	/g/ is silent preceded by /n/ at final position
Hour (h)	24	5	11	/h/ is silent in some cases but not silent in 'horrible'.

rors by missing /ch/ sound with /sh/ sound in the first position. When asked which letter is silent, they were not supposed to be clear.

3. **Silent /d/:** Usually, /d/ is silent in /dg/ combination, but the students despite being instructed face issues. The test revealed that 30 out of 50 (60%) students struggled to correctly pronounce the word /ridge/, however, it is quite difficult to separate two sounds of /d/ and /g/, the learners tried, though.

4. **Silent /g/:** Regarding the test of silence of phoneme /g/, 38 percent of students made errors in pronunciation of the word 'design'. On the other hand, while pronouncing the word 'foreign', 52 percent committed errors.

5. **Silent /gh/:** Students face trouble in articulation of /gh/ due to silent letters. For

example, 46 percent of students committed errors in pronouncing 'thighs', while 36 percent were partly correct.

6. **Silent /k/:** Letter /k/ is almost always silent in the first place if it is followed by /n/ as in 'knee', 'know', 'knowledge' (two phonemes silent), 'knot', etc.

In general, students demonstrate proficiency in pronouncing some words, which were known to them due to popularity or frequent uses. Therefore, they performed somewhat okay, and demonstrated some understanding of the pronunciation rules associated with these silent letters in some words.

Possible Causes of Errors

First and foremost cause of silent letter errors is attributed to the difference between L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English). In addition, confusions, generalisations and lack of practice are other possible causes.

Overall, the findings suggest varying levels of proficiency and challenges among students in pronouncing words with silent letters. While some demonstrate a strong grasp of pronunciation rules, others struggle with consistency and encounter difficulties with specific silent letters. These insights underscore the importance of targeted instruction and practice to improve students' pronunciation skills in dealing with silent letters (Table 4).

Research Question 2: How do these pronunciation challenges impact their overall oral communication skills?

The pronunciation challenges identified in the study have significant implications for the overall oral communication skills of Saudi university students enrolled in English language programs. The mispronunciation of words containing silent consonants affects the clarity and accuracy of their spoken English, potentially hindering effective communication in academic, professional, and social contexts. Words commonly mispronounced, such as 'people', 'calf', and 'donuts', indicate areas where students struggle the most, highlighting the need for targeted instruction and practice to improve pronunciation skills and enhance overall oral communication proficiency.

By refining the findings in correspondence with the research questions, it provides a clear linkage between the identified challenges and their impact on students' oral communication skills.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resonate with prior research on the pronunciation challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, highlighting the multifaceted nature of difficulties across different aspects of English phonology. The findings are in line with the results concluded by Pusfarani et al. (2021) and Shilfany and Pasoloran (2023), while earlier investigations by Komariah (2018) focused on specific consonant and vowel sounds among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Mohammed (2021) and Purba (2018) underscored the influence of native language phonetics on English pronunciation. These studies, alongside Binturki (2008), Ammar and Alhumaid (2009), and Ahmad (2011) collectively emphasise the varied challenges learners face in mastering English phonemes, whether consonants, vowels, or silent letters.

Previous studies primarily focused on identifying pronunciation errors and their causes, while this investigation extends the discourse by specifically examining the challenges posed by silent letters in English pronunciation. By employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this study identified specific areas of difficulty,

Table 4: Causes of errors

Target sound(s)	Confused with	Possible causes
Thoug**h**	Roug**h**, enoug**h**, roug**h**, toug**h**	Generalisation, lack of rule knowledge, L1 transfer
Honour	**H**orse, **h**ouse, **h**orrible	In both the case, /h/ is in the first place followed by /o/ but the sounds are different
Ghost	Roug**h**, thoug**h**	
Ast**h**ma	Aest**h**etic	In 'asthma', /th/is silent while in 'aesthetic', /th/ is articulated/pronounced.

particularly with silent letters governed by the 'l', 'gh', and 's' rules. These findings align with prior research emphasising the importance of understanding learners' linguistic backgrounds and tailoring instruction accordingly (Al-Seghayer 2018; Sahin 2012).

In particular, this study's detailed examination of specific words within each silent letter rule offers practical insights for educators, supporting the development of more effective instructional strategies. While some learners demonstrated proficiency in pronouncing words with certain silent letters, such as 'd' and 'w', others encountered challenges with silent 'n', 'b', 'g', 't', and 'c', echoing the observations made by Binturki (2008) and Ammar and Alhumaid (2009). The most significant difficulties were observed in pronouncing words with silent 'l', 'gh', and 's', consistent with the findings of Ammar (2022) as well.

These findings underscore the importance of targeted instruction and practice to address the diverse pronunciation challenges faced by EFL learners, whether related to silent letters or other aspects of English phonology. By pinpointing specific rules and words that pose challenges for learners, educators can better tailor instruction to meet individual student needs, ultimately enhancing pronunciation skills and overall language proficiency.

Silent letters are associated with the spelling system of the English language. If the students are not aware of the systematic spelling system, they are likely to get confused, and make mistakes in pronunciation as well. In order to cater to the needs of the target learners while learning English pronunciation (especially silent letters) one needs to go beyond, and relate the spelling system of English too. As mentioned earlier, that English spelling-pronunciation system has quite un-phonetic meanings thereby pronouncing words without reading/uttering exactly what is written. This attempt can minimise articulation related issues.

In order to cope with pronunciation related issues, the teachers need to be well equipped both in classroom teaching techniques and digital use to facilitate the learning process. Equipping teachers with strategies for explicit instruction, providing them with resources for targeted practice exercises, and incorporating activities focusing on challenging words would significantly enhance EFL pronunciation instruction. This study acknowledges limitations, such as the focus on consonant phonemes and the absence of in-depth exploration of coarticulation and context dependence. These areas present opportunities for future research. Using phonetic transcriptions in subsequent studies could provide more precise data on the pronunciation errors and allow for a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Additionally, exploring all silent sounds, including vowels, would provide a more comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by EFL learners.

The un-phonetic feature of English becomes crucial especially due to the silent nature of some letters/phonemes. Such problems can be handled by evolving an innovative strategy for teaching pronunciation. In this connection, a teacher can provide a list of popular silent letters, and train them intensively.

The case of silent letters became worse for those who are grown up, and have enough background of L1 (Arabic), which is entirely different from L2 (English). The changing feature of English causes more pronunciation issues as in the case of 'rough' (gh is pronounced as/f/), but in the case of the word 'though' (/gh/ is silent). The students do not know when it is pronounced and when not pronounced. Moreover, sometimes, there might not be any grammatical reason, but the usage factor only. Therefore, learners must be instructed using some strategies as

Table 5: Strategies

Letters/Phonemes	Silent positions	Remarks
/L/	Calf, half	/l/ is silent if followed by /f/
/L/	Walk, talk	l/ is silent if followed by /k/
/gh/	Caught, bought, taught, fought, sought, brought	/gh/ is silent if followed by /t/ in the end
/d/	Edge, ridge, fridge	/d/ is silent if followed by /g/
/k/	Know, knot, knee, knife	/k/ is silent if followed by /n/

to how they can memorise certain words and utilise their knowledge and skills while using a language (Tables 5, 6).

CONCLUSION

This study has delved into the complexities of silent letters and pronunciation issues faced by Saudi students enrolled in the PYP program of English. The findings illuminate specific challenges related to variability in student performance, problematic silent letters ('l', 'gh', 's'), and word-specific pronunciation difficulties. Furthermore, the study suggests a potential gap in existing EFL curriculum, as students struggled despite prior instruction. These insights contribute significantly to the ongoing effort to improve EFL pronunciation instruction. The variability in student performance underscores the need for differentiated instruction, where teachers tailor their approaches to individual student needs. This might involve diagnostic assessments to identify specific silent letter struggles and personalised practice activities.

The identification of some sounds and rules related to the sound system are particularly challenging. Integrating a systematic and progressive approach to teaching these specific phonemes within the EFL curriculum is crucial. This could involve explicit instruction on the pronunciation rules, followed by targeted practice exercises focusing on these letters in isolation and within different word contexts. Furthermore, addressing word-specific pronunciation difficulties requires a multifaceted approach. Developing targeted flashcards or spaced repetition apps focusing on high-frequency words with problematic silent letters can significantly improve retention. Additionally, incorporating more read-aloud activities into the curriculum would provide students with increased exposure to these challenging words and allow for immediate corrective feedback from teachers.

In conclusion, this study has provided a valuable contribution to the field of EFL pro-

nunciation instruction by identifying areas for improvement in teaching silent letter pronunciation to Saudi students. By implementing the suggested recommendations, conducting further research, and including qualitative approaches, educators can empower EFL learners to overcome silent letter pronunciation challenges and achieve spoken fluency in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the teacher should develop awareness about silent letters/phonemes. They should also know L1 (Arabic) features to compare with L2 (English) so that an appropriate strategy can be evolved as per the need. Drilling words with silent letters is a must. Therefore, the instructors should develop a plan for such exercises.

LIMITATIONS

This study like many others also has some limitations. The present study has pronunciation problems related to the silent letters/phonemes as faced by EFL learners. The study has focused on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, however advanced statistical techniques were not utilised as the research objectives did not demand. The sample size is also not large.

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Table 6: Different sound training

Phonemes	Words	Remarks
/gh/	Tough, laugh, rough	/f/ sound
/gh/	Drought, brought, bought, sought	/gh/ is silent
/gh/	Baghdad	Arabic speakers write Baghdad using /gh/ for / بغداد

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Appendix A: Sentences that were read aloud

1. Many people are **conscious** of their health, so they do **weight**lifting.
2. To **wrestle**, you need to have flexible **knees**, strong **thighs** and powerful **wrists**.
3. There are four **columns** in the table showing the **debts** and yearly **budget.**
4. There are too many workers from **foreign** countries in KSA.
5. If you want to **climb** and **descend** the mountain **ridge**, it is always better to activate your **diaphragm** in advance.
6. **Autumn** season can be the right time to enjoy yacht **tour** around **islands.**
7. As a good citizen, we should **condemn wrongdoing**.
8. Massage your **calf** by grabbing it with the **palm** and **thumb** after each exercise to **strengthen** your **muscle.**
9. I saw a **chick nestled** comfortably in the nest.
10. During the Word War II, a **bomb** destroyed a**bridge** and **castle**. There was **debris** everywhere.
11. It was painful to see the terrible effect of the **drought** in Ethiopia.
12. If you are health **conscious**, eat **salmon** and **lamb,** but avoid **doughnuts,** and finally **schedule** a workout plan
13. Everyone should **design** a plan for one's future.
14. Leaves in the **autumn** bring a sense of serenity.
15. I had **muscle** soreness after working out for an **hour**.

Appendix B: Error analysis of the words pronounced by 50 participants

Target words/ Silent category	Correct	Partly correct	Incorrect	Possible reasons
Conscious (s)	7	32	11	Not aware
Weightlifting (gh)	29	11	10	Long word
Wrestle (w, t)	12	13	25	Partly aware
Thighs (gh)	9	18	23	Silence of /gh/
Knees (k)	14	7	29	/k/ is silent, not expected at the first place
Wrists (w)	8	13	29	/w/ is not pronounced
Columns (n)	19	7	24	/n/ is silent
Debts (b)	9	14	27	/b/ is silent
Budget (d)	8	19	23	/dg/combination is difficult for them to learn
Foreign (g)	24	8	26	/g/ is silent before /n/
Climb (b)	21	9	20	/b/ is silent as usual followed by /m/ in such cases
Descend (s)	11	18	21	/s/ is silent
Ridge (d)	7	13	30	New word to the students
Diaphragm (g)	3	14	33	ESP word, unknown
Autumn (n)	12	11	27	/n/ is silent as it is extra
Yacht (t)	7	13	30	/t/ is silent
Islands (s)	19	7	24	/s/ is silent
condemn (n)	8	11	31	/n/ is silent as per the rule
Wrongdoing (w)	14	9	27	/w/ is silent, no phonetic role
calf (l)	15	7	28	/l/is silent and they are not used to
Palm (l)	17	11	22	/l/ is silent
Thumb (b)	22	7	21	/b/ is mostly silent in final position followed by /m/
Strengthen	9	12	29	/g/ is additional, and silent
muscle (s)	17	8	25	/s/ silent
Chick (c)	29	4	17	/c/ seems additional
Nestled (t)	12	9	29	/t/ is silent
Bomb (b)	13	11	26	/b/ is silent in such cases
Bridge (d)	17	9	24	/d/ is silent
Castle (t)	8	14	38	/t/ is silent
Debris (s)	5	21	24	/s/ is silent and extra
Drought (gh)	2	9	39	/gh/ is silent here but pronounced in different combination
Salmon (l)	19	7	24	/l/ is silent
Lamb (b)	16	8	26	/b/ is silent
Doughnuts (gh)	23	11	16	/gh/ is silent
Schedule (British) (c)	26	5	19	/c/ seems extra an unpronounced
Design(g)	9	22	19	/g/ is silent preceded by /n/ at final position
Hour (h)	24	5	11	/h/ is silent in some cases but not silent in 'horrible.'

Appendix C: Popular silent letters

A	B	C	D
-**ea**, such as *bread*, *dread*, *head*, *thread*, and *spread*	*dumb*, *plumb*, *crumb*, *thumb*, *numb*, *succumb*, *lamb*, *limb*, *climb*, *tomb*, *comb*, *bomb*, and *womb* *debt*, *doubt*, and *subtle*	science, scissors, scent, ascent, crescent, descent, descend, disciple, scene, obscene, fluorescent, abscess, fascinate, and muscle czar, acquire, indict, and yacht	bridge, ridge, edge, ledge, knowledge, and hedge

E	F	G	H
imagine, *plaque*, *brute*, *debate*, *excite*, *make*, *due*, *true*, *crime*, *grace*, *goose*, *axe*, *die*, *dye*, *bike*, *eke*, *pie*, *use*, *toe*, *cage*, *dude*, *mute*, *candle*, and *adore*	No evidence of silence forLetter /f/ except to some extent in *fifth*	*gnaw*, *gnarly*, *gnostic*, *gnat*, *gnash*, *gnome*, *champagne*, *colo gne*, *align*, *assign*, *benign*, *sign*, *feign*, *foreign*, and *reign*. *sigh*, *high*, *sight*, *light*, *bright*, *night*, *fight*, *though*, and *thorough*.	*hour*, *heir*, *honor*, *herb*, *homage*, and *honest* *anchor*, *archive*, *chaos*, *character*, *Christmas*, *charisma*, *chemical*, *choreography*, *chorus*, *choir*, and *echo Ghost*, *rhyme*

I	J	K	L
business, *suit*, and *fruit*	*marijuana*	*knight*, *knob*, *knock*, *knit*, *knuckle*, *knee*, *kneel*, *knick*. *knack*, *knowledge*, *know*, *knot*, and *knoll*.	*Should*, *could*, *would*, *half*, *calf*, *chalk*, *talk*, *walk*, *folk*, and *yolk* The silent *L* in the word *salmon*

M	N	O	P
mnemonic	*autumn*, *column*, *condemn*, *solemn*, and *hymn*.	*People*, *jeopardy*, *leopard*, *rough*, *tough*, *enough*, *trouble*, and *double*	*psalm*, *psyche*, *psychology*, *pseudoscience*, *pseudonym*, and *corps* Pneumonia *raspberry*, *receipt*, and *pterodactyl*

Q	R	S	T
lacquer	No obvious silent case	*island*, *isle*, *aisle*, *apropos*, *debris*, *bourgeois*, and *viscount*.	*ballet*, *gourmet*, *rapport*, *ricochet*, *buffet*, *crochet*, *valet*, *debut*, and *beret* *asthma*, *mortgage*, *tsunami*, *soften*, *listen*, *fasten*, *glisten*, and *moisten*

U	V	W	X
Guard, *guide*, *guilt*, *guitar*, *guess*, *disguise*, *guest*, *guilt*, *guise*, *baguette*, *dialogue*, *monologue*, *league*, *colleague*, *rogue*, *vague*, and *tongue* No evidence	*wrack*, *wrench*, *wreath*, *wrestle*, *wrangle*, *wrist*, *wrong*, *wring*, *wrought*, *write*, *writ*, *wrinkle*, *wraith*, *wrap*, *wrath*, *wretch*, *wreck*, *writhe*, *wry*, *wrapper*, and *playwright build*, *biscuit*, *circuit*, and *laugh*	*faux* , *faux*	*answer*, *sword*, *two*, *who roux* , *doux choux* , *reseaux chou* , *reseau*

Y	Z		
beyond	*Rendezvous*, *laissez-faire*		