

Error Analysis of Silent Letters and Its Relevance to The Teaching of English

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes pronunciation errors of English words containing silent letters made by the first-year students of English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The methodology used in this research is qualitative descriptive studies. The sample was selected by using purposive sampling techniques in which one class out of five parallel classes was chosen intentionally for research participants consisting of 37 students. Data were collected through test, in-depth interview, and questionnaire. In this research, the researcher found that the student commonly made pronunciation errors in three types; they are pre-systematic error, systematic error, and post-systematic error. The dominant type of students' pronunciation error is systematic error. It can be proved by seeing the data that 21 students were in the range between 31% -70 % of the percentage of error. It is followed by post-systematic errors in which 9 students made errors in the range between 0%-30%. The last is pre-systematic error in which the students committed errors in the range of 71%-100%. The researcher concludes that the students made an interference error due to the influence of other languages; first language acquisition or mother tongue. Students' first language acquisition with dialect, accent, and culture had influenced their performance while pronouncing English words containing silent letters.

Keywords: *Error Analysis, Pronunciation; Silent Letters.*

1. INTRODUCTION

English is full of inconsistencies which make it become one of the difficult languages to learn. The inconsistency lies in pronouncing words because there is mostly no correspondence between written and spoken word. English words are not always pronounced as they are written. Each sound is represented by more than one written letter or by sequences of letters; and any letter of the word represents more than one sound, or it may not represent any sound at all. Therefore, when we begin to speak English, it is essential to get used to the common sounds of the language.

Pronunciation is a vital aspect of language learning. Manser (1991:330) defines, "Pronunciation is the way in which language or words are spoken." From the definition above, pronunciation can be regarded as the production of significant sounds of the words that we use to communicate with the others to make a meaning; therefore, every speaker requires good pronunciation

when s/he communicates to each other as stressed by Odisho (2003:57), "Pronunciation is the production of speech sound for communication, but to make the communication run well, those sound must be comprehended by another person." It is generally recognized that pronunciation is the first and most important thing a person notice during a conversation. Knowing grammar and vocabulary is important as well but useless if the speaker is unable to pronounce those structures or words correctly. Additionally, the listener is more likely to understand the speaker, even in spite of grammatical errors, if the speaker uses correct pronunciation. If the speaker has poor pronunciation, it will eventually distort the communication process. Therefore, pronunciation is one of the important aspects in English, especially in oral communication. Every sound, stress, pattern, and intonation may convey meaning.

The study of pronunciation has also become an important aspect in teaching English as a foreign

Language. In learning process, student may face difficulty which is crucial to be described and analyzed. One of them is difficulty in pronouncing English words. There are many Indonesian students who find difficulties in comprehending English pronunciation because the words they have heard or spoken are often different from their written forms. Jones (2012) explains that teaching pronunciation for Indonesian students is quite difficult. The difficulties are due to the fact that irregular spelling of the English offers poor guidance to its pronunciation. From the statement, it is clear that the distance existing between pronunciation of words and their spelling creates a special problem. The problem is that English is not a phonetic language which means that we do not say a word the same way it is spelled. It has no relation in spellings and pronunciation of the word. For instance, we do not sound the letter <l> in walk and the letter <w> in wrong. The word walk should be pronounced as /wɑ:k/ not /wɔlk/, and the word wrong should be pronounced as /ˌrɒŋ/ rather than /w.rɒŋ/. These unpronounced but visible letters are known as the phenomenon of silent letters.

Silent letter is a letter which is present in spelling but omitted in the pronunciation. Podhaizer (1998:88) defines, "Silent letters are letters that are not heard making their 'usual' sound in a word as silent." It is clear that silent letters create a disparity between how to spell a word and how to pronounce a word in English. When students have only heard a word and try to write it, they might leave the letter out because they do not hear it spoken. Similarly, the students that have seen a word written down might try to pronounce a silent letter when speaking.

Regarding to the phenomenon above, the researcher had conducted a preliminary research at Tadulako University, especially to the first-year undergraduate students of English education study program. She gave a pronunciation test consisting of English words that contain silent letters to five students of 2019 batch. Then, she found that there were still many of them who were not able to utter the sound correctly. They pronounced the words as the way they were written. This table shows some examples of English words containing silent letters that are often mispronounced by students:

Table 1. Students' Common Errors in Pronouncing English Words with Silent Letters

Words	Incorrect Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
scene	/ski:n/	/si:n/
knife	/knarf/	/narf/
talk	/tɔlk/	/tɔ:k/
psychology	/psi'kɒl.ə.dʒi/	/saɪ'kɒl.ə.dʒi/
fasten	/fɑ:stən/	/fɑ:sən/
saw	/sow/	/sɑ:/

Production of errors like the phenomenon above normally happens in the learning process because it is natural part of learning a language and can work as an

insight into the tools and the process used to learn a language. The study of error is commonly called error analysis. Crystal (1985:112) defines, "Error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics." Based on the definition stated by the expert, it can be concluded that error analysis is a systematic study used to investigate the errors that are made by foreign language students by identifying, classifying, and interpreting the errors itself. Therefore, researcher could get information that can be used to minimize the errors.

There are three types of error which used in this study to identify the error of the participants. Corder (1994) categorizes three types of error depending on their systematization as presented in the table below.

Table 2. Type of Error of the Students (adapted from Corder, 1994)

No	Type	Indicators
1	pre-systematic	The students are not aware of a particular rule
2	systematic	The students applied the incorrect rule
3	post-systematic	The students applied the correct rule but perform it inconsistently

According to Corder (1994), pre-systematic error occurs when the students cannot explain why a particular form is chosen, systematic error occurs when the students cannot correct the error but can explain the rule applied, and post-systematic error occurs when the students can explain the correct rule. The researcher interprets the range of the percentage of error to categorize the data into a particular type of error. The first type is post-systematic error which occurs in the range between 0%-30%. The minimal error shows that the students already know that a particular rule occurs. However, the students did not apply the rule consistently. The next type is systematic error. Systematic error occurs between the range of 31%-70%. The range indicates that the students applied the incorrect rule. Last, the amount of error that occurs between 71%-100% is categorized as pre-systematic error. The percentage reflects that the students are not aware of a particular rule.

In order to study pronunciation problems above, the researcher, thereby, conducted a research by using error analysis since it is the study of errors made by the students of English Education Study Program at Tadulako University in pronouncing silent letters in English words.

2. METHODOLOGY

In line with this study, the researcher employed a descriptive qualitative research since it the collected data

are in the form of utterances which contain pronunciation errors of Silent. The researcher described the data in words, phrases or sentences to obtain general conclusion from the subject of the research.

The subject of this research is the first-year undergraduate students of English Education study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Tadulako University in academic year 2019/2020 which are divided into 6 classes. Therefore the total population is 236 students. The sample was selected by using nonprobability sampling technique (purposive sampling) since this research is qualitative research, as stressed by Sugiono (2009:24), "In qualitative research, the sample may be small, non-representative, and use purposive sampling technique in research sample." In addition, the sample of this research is class B which consists of 40 students.

In order to collect the data, the researcher used test, in-depth interview, and questionnaire. Test is considered as the best to know how well students achieve the materials they have been learning. The interview questions aim to get some information about the students in learning English and method of teaching that is used by teacher during in class. Last, questionnaire is used to take the data from the students in order to know their problems in pronunciation and their perceptions after they were examined by the pronunciation test.

When the data had been collected, the researcher started to analyze the data by data by using analytically descriptive method. In other words, the researcher described the data that she gets systematically. The steps in analyzing the data are identification of errors, describing the errors, explaining the errors, and error evaluation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

Pronunciation test was conducted on March 13th, 2020. There were 37 students who participated in this research. In conducting the test, the researcher asked the students to pronounce 24 English words containing silent letters <c>, <k>, <l>, <p>, <t> and <w>. In pronouncing the silent letters, the researcher finds errors made by the students. She analyzes three positions of the silent letters in the words (initial, medial, and final position); thus, the analysis of the type of error consists of three parts.

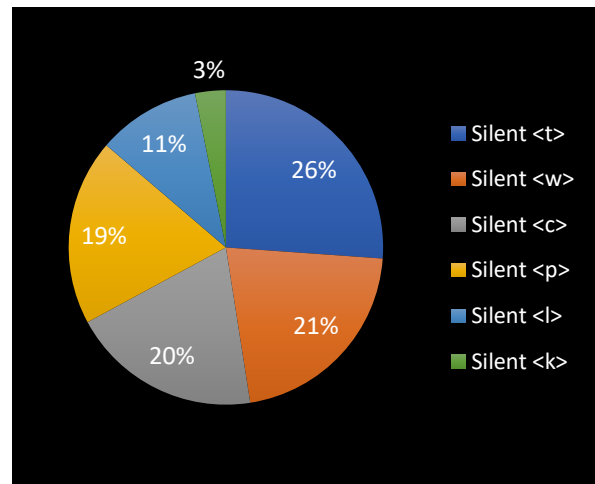


Figure 1. Frequency of Errors Made by the Students in Pronouncing English Words containing Silent Letters

The result of the test shows that the students made 444 errors in pronouncing English words containing silent letters <c>, <k>, <l>, <p>, <t> and <w> from the total of 888 data. They made 87 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <c>, 14 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <k>, 47 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <l>, 85 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <p>, 116 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <t>, and 95 pronunciation errors in the words containing silent letter <w>.

The in-depth interview and questionnaire distribution were conducted on March 16th, 2020. The result indicated that the students have no self-confidence if they are questioned with English language. Most of them cannot speak fluently because they usually pronounce the words incorrectly. They have difficulty because lack of the ability to pronounce the words. Firstly, the problem concerns with identification of the foreign sounds. The learners have to remember their acoustic qualities so that they will be able to directly identify them in an utterance. Secondly, the problem is concerned with the production of sounds by their speech organs. They should be able to hear and identify the acoustic quality of the foreign sounds in order to be able to produce them. The last problem concerns with the existence of silent letters in English words. Silent letters make it more difficult to guess the spelling of many spoken words or the pronunciation of many written words. Therefore, many students commit the error when pronouncing English words containing silent letters. For example, the word island which should be pronounced as /'aɪ.lənd/, but the students pronounced it as /'aɪslənd/. This error will certainly make misunderstanding between the speaker and the listener. The listener will assume that the word island that has been pronounced means the name of a country in North Atlantic. Therefore, it is important to learn about silent letters in pronunciation.

3.2. Discussion

After conducting the analysis, the researcher found that the students committed error into three types; they are pre-systematic, systematic, and post-systematic.

Pre-systematic error occurred when the students were unaware and out of control while pronouncing English words. They tended to ignore the way how to pronounce the English words well. In this error type, the researcher found 9 words that were pronounced incorrectly by the students; they are scenario, cupboard, receipt, castle, fasten, soften, ballet, answer, and law. These words are involved in silent <c>, silent <p>, silent <t>, and silent <w>. When the researcher clarified the students' errors by interviewing them, the fact was that they did not realize the errors at all. In addition, they were not fully aware to evaluate and correct the pronunciation by themselves. In conclusion, in pre-systematic error, the students are at the stage of random guessing in which they vaguely aware of the rules. They do not realize the existence of some rules because they have not mastered them. The students themselves cannot explain how the errors take place. They cannot correct them even if the lecturers point them out.

Furthermore, systematic errors occurred when the students had discovered a rule but it was the wrong one. They fully aware the rule of phonological symbols in pronunciations, but they could be errors in pronouncing the words. They were also unable to evaluate and correct the errors. This might happen when the learner had formed an inaccurate hypothesis about the target language. The example words that have systematic errors made by the students are descend, muscle, scene, scenario, talk, walk, yolk, pneumonia, fasten, soften, write, and wrong. These words are involved in silent <c>, silent <l>, silent <p>, silent <t>, and silent <w>. Let us take the examples; those are the words scene and scenario. The proper phonological of the word scene should be /si:n/ and /sɪ'nɑ:ri.əʊ/ for the word scenario. The fact was that students still committed the errors in silent <c> although they have known the rule. It can be proved when the researcher clarified the students' errors by interviewing them. They said that their lecturer has ever taught them how to pronounce the word scene, but for the word scenario, they were never taught. Therefore, when the researcher tested them in pronunciation test, there were 26 students (70.2%) pronouncing the word scenario incorrectly. The error forms were pronounced as [skɛnɑ:riə], [skɛnɑ:riə], and [skɪnɑ:riə]. When the lecture asked them to correct the pronunciation, they had difficulties to pronounce the word well. It took a few rehearsals to produce the correct pronunciation.

The other words were descend and muscle. These words were pronounced incorrectly by some of the students. In the word descend, the students tend to ignore the silent letter <c>; they pronounced it as [di'skɛn] or

[deskɛn] instead of the correct pronunciation /di'sɛnd/. Meanwhile, in the word muscle, they pronounced it as ['mʌskəl], ['mju:skəl], or ['mʌskli].

The data above described that students faced difficulties to pronounce the certain word with the correct pronunciation and proper phonological words. Actually, they had known to pronounce the words well. However, because of the neighboring sound, they were affected and pronounced the words incorrectly. Some efforts had done by lecturer, the practice to pronounce the words repeatedly and let the students to correct the error directly. The result showed that students got the comprehension for the rule of language function in proper phonological rule but they still committed the errors in pronouncing the words.

Meanwhile, post-systematic error occurred when the students comprehended the correct pronunciation or proper phonological of target language, but they used the rules inconsistently when pronouncing the words. It means that they pronounced the English words containing silent letters correctly for some chances. The data showed that students, who were corrected by lecturer for more than three times, were aware automatically by themselves to correct their error in pronouncing the words.

Further, the types of post-systematic errors were committed by some students. The example words that were systematic errors made by the students are knife, knight, knock, unknown, could, and psychology. These words are involved in silent <k>, silent <l>, and silent <p>. Let us take the examples; those are the words knife and unknown. By looking at the examples, we know that the letter <k> is silent when it is before the letter <n> in a word. However, the fact was that the students still committed the error in pronouncing such words. It is probably due to the position of the words itself (the silent <k> of the word knife is in the initial position while the word unknown is in the medial position), so they get affected.

In this case, the students who did the errors would automatically correct it by themselves without any correction from lecturer/researcher. However, in some situation, the lecturer should give signals to students in correcting the errors. Then, the students will quickly respond to read the signals given by the lecturer. The post-systematic errors could occur when the students got the explanation of language rule in pronunciation with the proper phonological. Yet, they needed a process by stopping for a while to correct the errors.

The researcher continued analyzing the causes of students' pronunciation errors of English words containing silent letters. It was found that students of class B in English Department of Tadulako University made an interference error due to the influence of other languages; first language acquisition or mother tongue.

Students' first language acquisition with dialect, accent, and culture had influenced their performance while pronouncing English words containing silent letters.

Mother language (L1) really affects second language acquisition (L2). Transfers often occur in language learning and can have an effect, whether positive or negative, on second language acquisition. There is strong evidence that language transfer is a major and real phenomenon that must be highly considered in the process of second language acquisition. Let us take a look at the example; English and Bahasa Indonesia (BI) phonological systems are different in certain aspects. In English, we have words containing silent letters such as silent <k> in the word knife, knock, knee, etc. The letter is silent due to the letter combination of <kn>. However, it is not the same as Bahasa Indonesia in which we can pronounce the letter combination of <kn> such as the word knalpot. In this case, Indonesian speakers have a problem in pronouncing English words regarding to the limitation of Indonesian phonological rule. This phenomenon, of course, can cause pronunciation error for Indonesian students who perform English spoken language.

In the L1 transfer, the setting 'unmarked' (very abstract nature of grammar that is not too different from one language to another) will be transferred before setting marked. Therefore linguistic items will not be easily transferred when L1 has settings marked. In the case of mistakes made by students relating to interference L1, most of all is due to some systems in L2 (English) classified as more marked compared to what is in L1 (Bahasa Indonesia)

This study provides insights and indications about the types of languages produced by second language learners on the assignments of pronunciation practice in class. The results of the study provide the evidence that there is L1 interference on L2 acquisition as shown in the respondents' pronunciation analysis. It is clear that respondents use the L1 sound system to help them say the words in L2, which indicate direct one-to-one interference from L1 to L2 (most respondents clearly pronounced certain silent letters in English).

The respondents in this study have received the input of mother tongue (BI) from each environment and positive rectification in the form of correct imitation and repetition. Therefore, habits have been formed which have influenced the L2 learning process. As a result, the respondents started studying L2 with their linguistic habits related to L1.

These habits interfere with the L2 learning process, and new habits are then formed. The mistakes are made in L2 acquisition can thus be seen as L1 interfering in L2 acquisition. This theory also emphasizes the ideawhere there are similarities between L1 and L2, students will easily use the L2 sound system; while when there are

differences, learners experience trouble as that indicated in the findings of this study. Thirty-seven respondents have built their own L2 interim rules by using their L1 knowledge to help them pronounce the words in English, so that it results in various error of L2 pronunciation.

Dechert (2011) said that the further L1 and L2 are structurally separated, the higher of the errors are committed in L2. Identifying students' mistakes does not mean assessing or labeling their competencies. Instead, these errors can help a lecturer find the right way to improve student learning. Certain errors require well-designed problem solving methods. Therefore, the errors must be anticipated by the lecturer in teaching pronunciation for beginner level students.

The main concern of this research is the forms of L1 sound system interference on the acquisition of L2 pronunciation. As indicated in the findings section of this study, respondents used several L1 sound system structures to produce pronunciation responses in L2, which resulted pronunciation errors in L2. By using the L1 structure, respondents have taken several risks including guessing the sound of silent letters in L2.

When respondent faced a gap (difficulty) in sounding certain letters in L2, they adjusted the L2 speech response form by using the sound system that is part of their L1. Analysis of the pronunciation of English words containing silent letters in L2 by respondents showed the extent to which their L2 response was influenced by their L1. Thus it can be concluded that there is direct interference from the L1 sound system against the pronunciation of English words containing silent letters in the L2.

The important result of this study is that the differences between the L1 and L2 sound systems result in pronunciation errors in L2, and it is very relevant in teaching and learning of English pronunciation. An understanding of the structure of the L1 sound system and the mistakes made in the pronunciation of L2 silent letters, as well as an understanding of the level of learners' knowledge about the structure of the L1 and L2 sound system, will help the teaching and learning process. The lecturer will be able to predict the possibility of the same errors in the target language and formulate the right way to deal with it. The teacher can also build a picture of the frequency of certain types of errors; so it will be possible to know whether, for example, L1 disorders, or teaching techniques, or problems inherent in L2, which are the main cause of the mistakes made by their students.

Knowing that the knowledge of linguistics in Bahasa Indonesia (BI), in certain aspects, can interfere with the learning process of English, contrastive analysis between Bahasa Indonesia (BI) and English can be incorporated into the teaching process of English pronunciation. To begin, the teacher must first observe whether the L1

interference really happen with the acquisition of L2 pronunciation for their students. For example, "Do they always follow their L1 (BI) in producing L2 (English)? If so, they must be taught with more English sound system structure, which is more or less different from the Indonesian sound system. Imitation and repetition (modeling) after giving an oral sample is one way to overcome L1 disorders.

Besides, in the behavioristic view, more drill on L2 pronunciation can function as a stimulus to produce the response of correct pronunciation. Therefore, do activities such as pronouncing English words that contain still letters repeatedly is important to increase student awareness about the differences between the Indonesian and English sound system.

From the cognitive point of view, transfer in language learning can be considered as a process in which students use their L1 knowledge to master hypotheses about L2 language rules. Errors that arise from these hypotheses and their correction can be seen as evidence of the learning process. The students thus will make a constant test of their hypotheses and then change, complete and make the perfect rules. Therefore, the process of analyzing and correcting the errors that arise can be taken as a strategy to build the correct pronunciation of L2.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the result analysis, the researcher found that the students committed errors into three types; they are pre-systematic, systematic, and post-systematic. The dominant type of students' pronunciation error is systematic error. It can be proved by seeing the data that 12 words involved in silent <c>, silent <l>, silent <p>, silent <t>, and silent <w> were pronounced incorrectly by the students. It is followed by pre-systematic errors in which 9 words involved in silent <c>, silent <p>, silent <t>, and silent <k> were also pronounced incorrectly by the students. The last is post-systematic error in which the students committed errors in 6 English words involved in silent <k>, silent <l>, and silent <p>.

Based on the result of the test, interview with the lecturer, and questionnaire distributed to the students, the researcher concludes that the students made an interference error due to the influence of other languages; first language acquisition or mother tongue. Students' first language acquisition with dialect, accent, and culture had influenced their performance while pronouncing English words containing silent letters.

On the basis of the conclusion of this study, some suggestions are proposed as follow. First, teachers/lecturers of English as the role model in pronunciation aspect might start applying the rule pattern when they mention or utter English words containing silent letters. This is as one of the solutions to overcome students' errors in pronouncing the words. The nature of

the students is imitating their teachers, thus, as the model, the teachers should show the correct way of pronouncing the words.

Second, the students might be asked to try pronouncing English words containing silent letters in order to make them get aware of the correct pronunciation of words. The reason to ask the students to pronounce English words is that most of them ignore pronunciation when they start learning English – instead, they focus on grammar and vocabulary. As the consequence, the longer they speak English without proper pronunciation knowledge, the more errors they will make and the more bad habits they will store in their minds. Paying attention to pronunciation actually will help them enrich spoken input because when they already get familiar with the word, they become accustomed to the correct way of pronunciation, minimize the error in pronouncing the words, and their speaking ability will be automatically in excellent level.

The last, for other people who want to study further on this field of research, this is the thing they can pursue. They might do the research to analyze another silent letters by using the same research design approach, especially error analysis, or they can develop novice theory about the findings on this research.

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