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Spelling What You Hear: Investigating The Role of Pronunciation in English Spelling Difficulties

Nurul Anisya Ray¹, Tiara Fadiyah Rambe², Raihani³, Yani Lubis⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan

Email: nurulanisya2222@gmail.com¹, tiarafdyh24@gmail.com²,
raihaniani93@gmail.com³, yanilubis@uinsu.ac.id⁴

ABSTRACT

This research investigates how pronunciation relates to spelling performance among English language learners, focusing on the role of phonological awareness in shaping their spelling behaviors and mistakes. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the study involved six Indonesian university students majoring in English, who responded to a ten-item online questionnaire. The results indicate that learners frequently depend on how words are pronounced when trying to spell them. While this approach may work for regular words, it often causes errors in cases involving silent letters or irregular spellings, such as in knife, receipt, and colonel. Although participants demonstrated some awareness of these inconsistencies, their strong reliance on phonological strategies contributed to typical mistakes, including omitting silent letters or confusing similar-sounding words. These findings imply that pronunciation-based strategies alone are not sufficient for accurate spelling in English. Therefore, English instruction should include focused teaching on spelling conventions, morphological elements, and visual recognition of word patterns. Such an approach is expected to enhance learners' spelling accuracy and minimize confusion resulting from the unpredictable nature of English orthography.

Kata Kunci: Pronunciation, Spelling Errors, Phonological Awareness, EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common challenges in learning English lies in the inconsistent relationship between how words are pronounced and how they are spelled. English, unlike more phonetic languages such as Bahasa Indonesia, often presents unpredictable spelling patterns and silent letters. As a result, learners frequently make spelling errors, especially when they rely solely on how a word sounds.

In the context of English as a foreign language, particularly in Indonesia, phonological awareness has been identified as an important factor in the development of reading and spelling skills. Learners who are able to recognize and manipulate phonemes generally perform better in literacy tasks. However, pronunciation alone is not always a reliable guide to accurate spelling especially in English, where many words deviate from expected sound-letter correspondences.

Beyond phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge or the ability to recognize visual patterns in word forms also plays a crucial role. Learners who depend only on auditory input may struggle with irregular spellings unless they develop familiarity with common spelling conventions. Thus, integrating visual pattern recognition with pronunciation training is essential.

Research also shows that using phonemic transcription can support students' understanding of sound-spelling relationships. This technique allows learners to see how pronunciation is linked to written form, making it easier to handle irregular or complex spellings. Developing both phonological and orthographic skills may help learners avoid spelling errors caused by relying too much on what they hear. This study aims to explore the connection between pronunciation and spelling among English learners. Specifically, it investigates how learners' phonological awareness affects their spelling behavior and whether pronunciation-based strategies lead to errors or support accuracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applied a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at exploring the relationship between learners' pronunciation and their English spelling behavior. This approach was chosen to gain in-depth insight into how learners rely on phonological cues when attempting to spell words. Rather than using numerical or statistical analysis, the qualitative method allowed the researcher to interpret learners' experiences, perceptions, and tendencies in a more detailed and contextual way. The participants of this study consisted of six English major students from a university in Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling based on voluntary participation, and their varying levels of pronunciation ability offered a diverse perspective for analysis.

The primary instrument used in this study was a Google Form-based questionnaire, which consisted of ten questions: six open-ended items and four true/false

statements. The questionnaire was designed to explore students' spelling habits, their use of pronunciation in spelling, and their awareness of irregular English words. The form was distributed digitally, and responses were automatically collected via Google Sheets. The data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach, where open-ended responses were grouped into emerging themes, while true/false responses were summarized in percentages. This approach allowed the researcher to identify common patterns and draw meaningful conclusions about the influence of pronunciation on spelling. To ensure the clarity and trustworthiness of the data, the questions were carefully designed and interpreted consistently throughout the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey reveal that many learners tend to rely on the way words sound when attempting to spell them in English. Several participants, for instance, admitted to spelling enough as enuf or because as cuz. This indicates a natural tendency among learners whose first language, such as Indonesian, follows a transparent orthographic system, where letters and sounds align consistently. When such learners apply this approach to English—where the relationship between phonemes and graphemes is less predictable—it often leads to inaccurate spelling. As noted by Perry, Ziegler, and Goswami (2022), phonological awareness can help predict spelling accuracy in regular words, but it becomes far less reliable when applied to irregular forms or words with silent letters. This highlights the limitations of using pronunciation-based strategies alone in mastering English spelling.

Further supporting this observation, learners expressed that while pronunciation can sometimes assist in spelling, it often becomes a source of confusion when dealing with irregular words or silent letters. One respondent shared that spelling the word gorgeous is particularly challenging, often depending on autocorrect to correct their attempts. This pattern reflects the findings of Murphy (2021), who emphasized that although phonics instruction supports reading skills, it is insufficient for spelling development without additional emphasis on morphology and visual recognition of spelling patterns. Thus, while phonological strategies may be helpful at the beginner level, they must be complemented by targeted instruction in orthographic rules and non-phonetic word forms to be truly effective.

Additionally, a number of consistent spelling errors emerged among participants, illustrating the impact of relying on sound-based strategies. These errors included omissions of silent letters—such as rite for write and nife for knife—phonetic spellings like gorjous for gorgeous, and confusion between homophones such as here and hear. Perry et al. (2022) explain that such mistakes are common among learners who have not yet developed a strong grasp of English spelling conventions, especially when the phonological structure of a word is misleading. This also suggests that learners are not

fully attending to morphological cues in English. For instance, the use of *gorjous* instead of *gorgeous* indicates a lack of awareness of the typical adjective suffix *-ous*, demonstrating that morphological instruction is essential to avoid such mistakes. Murphy (2021) similarly emphasizes that effective spelling instruction should incorporate morphological training and repeated exposure to irregular forms.

Despite some level of awareness, many learners still struggle to apply knowledge about silent letters and inconsistent spelling patterns. Survey responses to true/false items confirmed this: participants largely agreed that English contains silent letters, and disagreed with the idea that English is always spelled as it sounds. Nonetheless, their actual spelling practices showed continued reliance on phonological logic. These findings echo research by Pusfarani, Mukhrizal, and Puspita (2021), who observed that Indonesian learners often mispronounce words with silent letters such as *gnaw* or *doubt* due to overapplying L1 phonological rules. Kurniawan et al. (2022) similarly found that students frequently made omission and misformation errors in pronunciation of words with silent elements, indicating limited internalization of English orthographic conventions.

Participants also identified certain words as particularly difficult to spell due to their irregular forms. Words such as *psychology*, *receipt*, *colonel*, and *queue* were mentioned frequently. This aligns with the notion that English has a deep orthographic system, where sound–spelling relationships are often inconsistent. Similar challenges were reported by Nurmila, Yasim, and Khatimah (2023), whose study of Indonesian high school students revealed frequent pronunciation errors when dealing with silent-letter words. Their findings show that students were generally unaware of spelling rules related to these word forms and tended to rely on phonological approximations based on L1 expectations.

Given these findings, it is evident that English language instruction should integrate explicit phonics instruction that includes not only phoneme–grapheme correspondences but also irregular word patterns and silent letters. Putra (2023) found that phonics instruction significantly improved Indonesian EFL students' ability to decode vowel digraphs and build stronger connections between sounds and letter combinations. Although his study focused on pronunciation, the pedagogical implications extend to spelling, particularly in encouraging learners to form accurate mental representations of word structure. Structured phonics lessons that incorporate both visual and auditory strategies can help bridge the gap between sound and spelling. As Putra (2023) suggests, incorporating systematic phonics into spelling instruction builds learners' confidence in managing complex and irregular spelling forms in English.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a strong tendency among English learners to depend on pronunciation when spelling words, a behavior likely influenced by their background in more phonetic languages such as Indonesian. Although this approach may work for words with regular spelling patterns, it frequently leads to mistakes in English, a language known for its complex orthographic system and numerous irregularities. The participants commonly made errors involving silent letters, misinterpretation of sounds, and overdependence on how words are pronounced.

Even though the learners showed some understanding of these irregularities – for example, recognizing the existence of silent letters – they still tended to rely heavily on phonological reasoning, which resulted in consistent spelling errors. These findings underline the importance of adopting a more comprehensive teaching strategy that integrates pronunciation skills with the recognition of visual patterns and an understanding of morphological structures. Providing explicit instruction on spelling conventions, irregular word forms, and common affixes can help reduce learners' reliance on auditory cues and enhance their overall spelling performance. In conclusion, the study underscores the value of combining phonological awareness with orthographic knowledge in teaching English spelling effectively.

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