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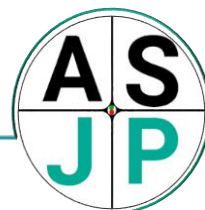
Université Yahia FARÈS Médéa

مخبر تعليمية اللغة والنصوص (م.ت.ل.ن)

Laboratoire de Didactique de la Langue et des Textes

المنصة الجزائرية للمجلات العلمية

Plate-forme Algérienne des Revues Scientifiques



Silent letters and vowel lengthening in teaching english pronunciation

Les lettres muettes et l'allongement des voyelles dans l'enseignement de la prononciation anglaise

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Revue Didactiques

ISSN2253-0436

Dépôt Légal : 2460-2012

EISSN : 2600-7002

Pour citer l'article :

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(2026) «Silent letters and vowel lengthening in teaching english pronunciation»
Didactiques, Vol 15 N° 01 Janvier – Juin 2026, pp 152-182

<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/300>

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Reçu : 16/ 08/ 2024

Accepté : 04/ 11/ 2025

Publié : 30/Juin/ 2026

Abstract:

This research work investigates English pronunciation teaching items laying a particular emphasis on the English silent letters which result from a sequence of distinct double consonant at the end of a monosyllabic word. If the first consonant is either -l, -gh, -r, or -w, it is not pronounced before the last consonant. This non pronunciation of silent letters leads to vowel lengthening. This article drives data from 3^{ème} learners and teachers of English at Amitié junior secondary school. It resorts to classroom observation and questionnaire. The analysis of data demonstrate the non-teaching and learning of English silent letter items during the English pronunciation courses. This fact is justified by the lack of teacher's training regarding the teaching of the different English pronunciation items coupled with the non-organisation of in-service training or teaching workshop by inspectors to reinforce teacher's training capacities. This study suggests a didactic process worthy for the teaching and learning of silent letter items in English pronunciation courses.

Keywords: Teaching, Learning, Silent letter, Vowel lengthening, English Pronunciation.

Résumé :

Cette recherche examine les éléments d'enseignement de la prononciation anglaise, en mettant l'accent sur les lettres muettes résultant d'une séquence de consonnes doubles distinctes en fin de mot monosyllabique. Si la première consonne est -l, -gh, -r ou -w, elle n'est pas prononcée avant la dernière consonne. Cette non-prononciation des lettres muettes entraîne un allongement vocalique. Cet article s'appuie sur des données recueillies auprès d'élèves de troisième et d'enseignants d'anglais du collège Amitié. Il utilise l'observation en classe et un questionnaire. L'analyse des données révèle un

manque d'enseignement et d'apprentissage des lettres muettes anglaises lors des cours de prononciation. Ce constat s'explique par l'absence de formation des enseignants sur l'enseignement des différentes particularités phonétiques, ainsi que par le manque d'organisation de formations continues ou d'ateliers pédagogiques par les inspecteurs pour renforcer leurs compétences pédagogiques. Cette étude propose une démarche didactique adaptée à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage des lettres muettes dans les cours de prononciation anglaise.

Mots-clés : Enseignement, Apprentissage, Lettre muette, Allongement vocalique, Prononciation anglaise.

Introduction :

The aim of this research work is to deal with the teaching and learning of English silent letters at secondary school. This language item is linked to the teaching domain of English pronunciation. In fact, the non-mastery of English silent letters causes trouble in the learners' oral productions. In order to better the learners' oral skills, it is necessary to provide them with lessons on silent letters so that they would be equipped with a communicative competence. Silent letters are letters which appear in writing, but they are not taken into account in pronunciation. It can be a consonant or a vowel letter. This research work tackles the English silent letters which sometimes lead to vowel sound lengthening. It falls in the domain of applied linguistics, didactics and pedagogy. As a matter of fact, applied linguistics helps teachers to identify language learning issues and to resolve these issues in classrooms, didactics studies different methods and techniques used to achieve a teaching process, and pedagogy concerns with the action of facilitating the transmission of knowledge through the teaching process. This research work tends to motivate both teachers and learners cope with English silent letters in order to grasp different inherent aspects centred on silent letters such as: vowel sound lengthening, discriminating functions of homophones, locating stress placement, creating new words and creating voiced consonants. Thus, two questions are asked to achieve this research work. (1)

How to teach English silent letter items? (2) Are secondary school teachers of English trained to teach English silent letters at secondary school? The historical evolution, the previous works, the data collection, the major findings and the didactic strategies of teaching English silent letter items are the different sections of this article.

1. Historical evolution of english silent letters

This section aims at clarifying the historical process of English silent letters from Old, Middle to Modern English. In fact, silent letters are letters which are not sounded when pronouncing English words. They refer to types of *“letters which are not pronounced or minimized in order to perform more acceptable spoken English. Silent letter is present on the spelling but minimized or omitted in the actual speech.”* (Utama: 2018:6). Likewise, Ayumi (2018:7) argues that a silent letter: *“is a term for a letter of the alphabet that is left unpronounced. It means that a certain letter must be present on the writing and spelling of a word but when pronouncing the word, the silent letter is not pronounced.”* In other words, silent letters are considered as letters which are never produced in oral speech but they are solely visible in orthography in order to facilitate the utterance of English words. As a matter of fact, English covers two (2) different types of silent letters: silent vowels and silent consonants as in the following table (1).

Types of silent letters	Silent letters	Examples
Silent vowel letters	a	Logically, physically
	e	Mine, clothes
	i	Business, parliament
	o	Colonel, leopard
	u	Guitar, baguette, biscuit
Silent consonant letters	b	Comb, thumb, doubt
	c	Scene, czar, acquire, indict
	d	Fridge, Wednesday,
	g	handkerchief
	h	Light, intaglio, phlegm,

	k	gnaw
	l	Honour, what, choir, ghost
	m	Know, knee, knight
	n	Walk, would, calm, calf
	p	Mnemic, mneme,
	r	mnemonic
	s	Autumn, hymn,
	t	government
	w	Psalm, receipt, corps
		Fort, guard, fever
		Island, aisle, patois
		Listen, ballet, match
		Wrong, answer, two

Tablen° (01) : English Silent Letters

The table above unveils the most common English silent letters in bold. They are composed of five (5) silent vowel letters (a, e, i, o and u) and, fourteen (14) silent consonant letters (b, c, d, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t and w). The selected examples (words) above illustrate the environments silent letters occur and the letters they are usually combined with in words. Elsewhere, silent syllables are contextual; their pronunciation depends on the speaker when Skandera and Burleigh cited by K. Abdullah (2020:79) write that: *“when a syllable is unstressed, the whole syllable can be omitted, especially before or after a stressed syllable, particularly when the silent syllable contains a consonant that is repeated in the syllable.”* This passage shows that a silent syllable occurs in a word when a syllable is unstressed and, when the repetition of a consonant is attested in the selected syllable. The example (1) evidences.

a. ‘February [ˈfeb.ru.ə.ɹi] → [ˈfeb.rə.ri]

b. par’ticularly [pə.ˈtik.ju.lə.li] → [pə.ˈtik.ju.li]

The analysis of the example (1) above shows that these words could be pronounced in two ways. In (1a), the syllable [ru] is unstressed and the consonant [r] is repeated so, the syllable is omitted (not pronounced). Likewise, in (1b), the syllable [lə] is also omitted thanks to the repetition of [l], and it is unstressed. From this illustration, the author shows how silent syllables could facilitate the utterance of some words in a given context.

Additionally, auxiliary, inert and empty letters are features of English silent letters. As a matter of fact, the term “auxiliary letters” designates “*the combination of two letters represented by a single phoneme. They can either be exocentric or endocentric digraphs*” (J. Peters, 2021:3). This passage clarifies that auxiliary letters are made of two letters pronounced as a single sound. They are *exocentric digraphs* when the sound of the digraph is different from that of either its constituent letters whereas, they are *endocentric digraphs* when the sound of the digraph is the same as one of its constituent letters. The example (2) illustrates:

a- **king** [ŋ], **oat** [əʊ]

b- **Laugh**, **phase** [f]

c- Stopped [p], **conceive** [i:]

It appears that the letters “ng” are pronounced [ŋ] and the letters “oa” are sounded [əʊ] as in (2a). Next, in (2b) the letters “gh” and “ph” are uttered [f]. Through this example, the author demonstrates that these phonemes have no standard single-letter representation. That is, these letters are exocentric digraphs. But, in (2c) the letters “pp” are pronounced [p] and the letters “ei” are sounded [i:]. The combination letters are uttered as one of its components. That is, they are endocentric digraphs. Moreover, the expression inert letters “*is a kind of silent letter where the letter is spelled and pronounced in a certain form, but unpronounced in other form*”. This means that inert letters are pictured in words that share the same root, however they might either be uttered or not in different words. The example (3) evidences.

a- **Muscle** → muscularity

b- **Limb** → limber

As a result, the example (3) shows the link between the root and another word keeping the silent letter. In (3a) the letter “c” is silent in the word “**muscle**” different from the letter “c” in “**muscularity**” which is pronounced [k]. And, in (3b) the letter “b” is silent in the word “**limb**”, whereas in the word “**limber**”, “b” is sounded [b]. According to the author, the words “**muscle**” and “**limb**” represent the root and they contain silent letters, respectively “c” and “b”. Then, they undergo inflection (the fact of adding an affix) to become “**muscularity**” and “**limber**” where the silent letters become pronounced. Finally, empty letters “*are letters*

which are unpronounced but they do not have a special function like auxiliary letters or inert letters”. This example (4) illustrates.

a- **Honor**

b- **Answer**

It results from the above illustrations that, in (4a) the letter “h” is silent in “**honor**” because it comes from the French word “honneur”. In this case, the pronunciation of this word has been imitated into the target language. And, in (4b) the pronunciation of the letter “w” in the word “**answer**” has changed from “pronounced” to “unpronounced” over time. As a matter of fact, the selected silent letters in these words do not bear any relation to neighboring letters and no correspondence in pronunciation because of their origin. Emphasizing on “phonotactics constraint” to explain silent letters, Laurel and Donna cited by R. Pratiwi (2019: 9), think that this phonological phenomenon “*is a unique combination of certain sound that occurs in one language but is not permitted in other languages*”. As a matter of fact, each language has its unique phonotactics constraints. That is, a combination of consonants could be pronounced in one language but it is not allowed in another. In fact, phonotactics constraint limits on consonant clusters which are allowed to occur at the beginning or the end of a syllable. For example, the English phonotactics does not allow the combinations of “**gn, kn, pn, ps, mn**” in the same syllable. Phonotactics constraints are related to the position and combination of consonants. The following example (5) evidences.

a- **Psychology**

b- **Knight**

The results of the example (5) show that in (5a) the letter “p” in “**psychology**” is not pronounced in English but in French it is. Likewise, in (5b), the letter ‘k’ in “**knight**” is not pronounced in English, however in German it is. Since the combination of [ps] and [kn] cannot coexist in an English syllable, one of the sounds has to be dropped. This phenomenon is applied in borrowed words that do not follow English phonotactics.

Working on the origin of these letters, Posposilovà cited by T. Tyas Utama (2018:3) writes:

English silent letters were introduced in the Middle English and Early Modern English period which is

marked by major changes in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling. Most of the words which contain silent letters come from Latin and French. The introduction of silent letters at that time was a solution since every letter had to be pronounced. Therefore, silent letters enable people to stop pronouncing long consonants.

The above passage enlightens the origins of English silent letters. The author tries to show that these letters appear in the Middle English and Early Modern English periods when many changes happen in several aspects of English such as grammar and usage rules from other languages. Since these rules do not correspond with the English phonological system, the pronunciation of many borrowed words has been adapted in order to facilitate the oral communication of the target language whereas, in writing these words are made of silent letters. As a matter of fact, Cook (1999) cited by Adenike Akinjobi (2015:3) highlights that “*Old English was 90% phonemic (i.e. the words sounded the same as they looked) while modern English is only about 40% phonemic.*” Likewise, Carney (1994) quoted by Adenike Akinjobi (ibid) claims that “*silent letters appear in about 60% of English words.*” The two quotations evidence the historical changes of English pronunciation through the dropping of some letters in loan words. The following example (6) illustrates:

a- **knife**, **debt**, **isle**

b- **coup**, **baignoire**

It appears in the example (6) that in (1a) the word ‘**knife**’ keeps the same spelling but its pronunciation has changed from [knɪf] to [nɔɪf] and, the words “**debt**” and “**isle**” derive from ‘*debitum*’ in Latin and ‘*île*’ in French. Otherwise, the silent letters are due to the new spelling of these words in connection to the pronunciation of the previous language. However, in (1b) the pronunciation of these borrowed words is imitated in English despite the presence of the English silent letters “p” and “g”. As a result, Old English is completely phonemic; all letters are pronounced whereas, from Middle to Modern English, some changes appear and the target language covers its own rules in order to simplify the difficulties encountered by the recent or modern interlocutors. In this perspective, D. Nosirova (2021:714) says: “*The pronunciation of some*

of the words were simplified, while others were completely changed. This is why in modern languages which is being learned you will see many silent letters placed in common words.” This means that words are simplified in order to enable people to pronounce them easily, fluently and intelligibly during the oral communication. As a matter of fact, D. Crystal (2019: 42) mentions that “*several consonants and vowels altered their values, and new contrastive units of sounds emerged*” as in the following example (7):

a- **fine** [fain] - **vine** [vain]

b- **last** [last] - **lost** [lost]

The analysis of the example (7) shows the changing process of contrasting sounds into English. The contrast between the consonant sounds [f] and [v] in (2a) and, between the vowel sounds [a] and [ɔ] in (2b) help modern speakers distinguish the variety of English words. In Old English, the language is highly inflected, the word order and sentence structure are rather free whereas, in Modern English, grammar is simplified and it obeys to the sentence structure: “subject-verb-object”. In addition, the Old English writing system has letters such as “**þ (thorn), ð (eth), ȝ (yogh) and æ (ash)**” which are considered as the current “**th, y, a**”. Therefore, this changing process in pronunciation emerges the integration of silent letters in English words even though the morphology of these words remains unchanged. Finally, M. Yayha (2017:11) enlightens:

The history of this language shows that about 90% of English used to be phonemic (this means that the words sounded the same as they looked). There were hardly any silent letters at all, but this soon began to change around the 15th century. Many words from other languages were introduced into English, to make it look more Latin or French. This caused problems as the new words didn’t follow the same rules of grammar as English. That is why, even though the spelling was already fixed for those words, some letters became silent.

Based on the history of the English language, the author explains that Old English is not sounded like today’s English. In fact, Old English is born from the Germanic tribes that invades Britain in 450 to 1100. At that period, words are pronounced as they are

written. However, linguistic changes occur in Middle English when the Norman invasion makes French the official language of Britain. At the end of this period, new words from other languages are borrowed and progressive changes appear within the target language from the following issues: spelling, grammar and phonological rules. As borrowed words are written with silent letters to retain their original spellings, specific letters have to be kept silent in order to simplify the pronunciation of English words. Thus, when dealing with “phonemic language”, Mohamed Yayha refers to the pronunciation of English words according to their spellings whereas, “phonetic language” is concerned with the pronunciation of English words in connection to sounds

2. Previous research works on english silent letters

The purpose of this chapter is to review some previous research works on English pronunciation items. As a matter of fact, works of Widya Astuti (2020), Mohamed Yayha (2017) and Mortaza Yamini (2022) are selected to enlighten the audience about the teaching and learning of English sounds-letters relation at secondary schools.

Widya Astuti works on learners’ errors when pronouncing English words written with silent letters. In addition to that, the author is concerned with the impacts of pronunciation errors on the learners’ oral and written productions. Since there is no relationship between sounds and letters, W. Astuti (2020:154) considers a silent letter as: *“a letter which is present in spelling but omitted in the pronunciation”*. Obviously, the author raises the relevance of teaching English silent letters in order to equip learners with phonological rules or conditions that could help them identify these letters while reading or writing a text. Otherwise, the teaching of silent letters reinforces the learners’ attention on the difference between the visible part and the invisible one of the language during the English learning process. In this perspective, W. Astuti (2020:153) writes: *“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". This passage enlightens the difference between a sound and a letter. Therefore, a letter is the visible part of a word, whereas a sound is the invisible part of that word. Here, the author clarifies the difference between writing and oral production since a sound may have different spellings as well as a letter may have different ways of pronouncing it. This complexity between a sound and a letter makes pronunciation very difficult during the English learning process in the different pedagogical classes.

Talking about the relevance of teaching English silent letters, W. Astuti (2020: 154) thinks that "*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*". This passage shows how the learners' speaking and writing errors occur when they are not familiarized with the learning of sounds-letters of the target language. For instance, learners often confuse a letter from a sound because the first is always written, whereas the second is always pronounced through different spellings. The author illustrates this misunderstanding through dictation where learners have problems to write down spoken words. W. Astuti (2020:153-154) writes "*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 analysed. One of them is difficulty in pronouncing English words*". In fact, Widya Astuti tries to demonstrate that during the English learning process, the most visible difficulties are attested in pronouncing English syllables, words and sentences. This means that learners are incapable of sounding and stressing a word or group of words accordingly. Since, the language is firstly spoken, it is important for the EFL teachers of English to include lessons of pronunciation items in order to help learners avoid mispronunciation and misunderstanding during the oral communication in classes. Therefore, the author enlightens some difficulties or factors that learners encounter while learning the target language in connection to English silent letters. One of the obstacles is the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation when W. Astuti (2020: 154) explains: "*The difficulties are due to the fact that irregular spelling of the*

English language offers poor guidance to its pronunciation.” This means that there is no correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in English. As a matter of fact, it is possible that learners make several mistakes because letters do not stand directly for their sounds.

Widya Astuti uses learners’ error analysis technique in order to identify the learners’ pronunciation problems when she (2020:154) writes: *“In order to study pronunciation problems above, the researcher, thereby, conducted research by using error analysis since it is the study of errors made by the students of English”*. The found results from this technique unveil that: *“the students committed error into three types; they are pre-systematic, systematic, and post-systematic”* (2020:156). Otherwise, pre-systematic, systematic and post-systematic errors are the additional pronunciation problems encountered by learners during the English learning process. In this context, the term *“pre-systematic error”* is a type of error that occurs when learners are unaware and out of control while pronouncing English words. Here they tend to ignore the correct pronunciation of English words or group of words they encounter for the first time. Next, the concept *“systematic error”* refers to errors that occur when learners discover the wrong use of a given phonological rule. In fact, this case happens when the pronunciation of some words does not obey the primary rule because of the environment. The example (8) evidences.

- a- Church, march
- b- Technique
- c- Machine

The analysis of the above example shows that the combination of letters “c+h” is pronounced differently in English. In (8a), it is sounded [tʃ], in (8b) it is pronounced [k] and, in (8c), it is uttered [ʃ]. From these illustrations, the author wants to justify that in systematic error, learners are unable to evaluate and correct those errors. This happens when learners form an inaccurate hypothesis about the target language. Finally, *“post-systematic error”* occurs when learners know the correct pronunciation of the selected words, but they use phonological rules inconsistently when pronouncing them. This means that when pronouncing English words containing silent letters, they find the correct pronunciation by chance.

Therefore, Widya thinks that learners should be in contact with sounds rather than with letters from alphabet. The example (9) illustrates:

- a- **Gold** [g]
- b- **Camouflage** [ʒ]
- c- **Giant** [dʒ]
- d- **Tough** [f]
- e- **Light** and **reign** /Ø/

It appears that the letter “g” in this example is both pronounced and silent. Firstly, in (9a) the letter “g” is pronounced [g], in (9b) it is sounded [ʒ], in (9c) it is pronounced [dʒ] and in (9d) “g” is uttered [f]. Whereas, in (9e) the letter “g” is silent. This explains that the English pronunciation of a given word does not refer to letters but sounds. That is why, most of EFL learners have problems to pronounce individual words or read texts while learning English language because they often refer to what they see. From this illustration, Widya Astuti convinces the relevance of teaching silent letters when referring to the environment they are pronounced. Thus, W. Astuti (2020: 154) states:

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. There is no relation between 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 [wɔ:k] not [wɔlk], and the word wrong should be pronounced as [rɒŋ] rather than [wrɒŋ]. These unpronounced but visible letters are known as the phenomenon of silent letters.

This quotation raises the most important factor that could discourage the English learning process of the non-native speakers because all visible letters in words are not sounded accordingly. In fact, the phenomenon of silent letters affects learners’ oral production when it comes to knowing either a letter is silent or not. In other words, Widya Astuti requests teachers of English to equip the secondary school learners with new strategies that could help them face silent letters and avoid their mispronunciation during the learning process. The author suggests two points that would help to remedy the phenomenon of silent letters when she

(2020:158) states: “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. 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”. In fact, the suggested strategies stand for requesting teachers of English to illustrate and explain some phonological rules that would help to identify silent letters and pronounce words containing these letters. Firstly, Widya Astuti thinks that teachers should always apply rules of pronunciation when teaching the selected item. Secondly, learners should memorize the teacher’s pronunciation of words containing silent letters so as to implement them when practicing English in classes. Once they listen to the teacher’s pronunciation, they repeat then, memorize each word by the teacher.

It is important to underline that Widya’s research work has dealt with the relevance of teaching and learning English silent letters. This is possible thanks to the suggested rules, strategies and activities that are operated from the imitation framework.

Mohamed Yayha aims at showing the importance of studying silent letters in English language. In fact, this study develops learners’ performance on the difference between letters and sounds in words or group of words. Otherwise, Mohamed Yayha demonstrates to what extent silent letters affect learners’ pronunciation as well as spelling when learning the target language. Since, silent letters do not correspond to any sound in the English pronunciation, the author advises teachers of English to focus on the teaching of this language item to enable learners deal with words spelt with silent letters in oral or written activities.

Talking about the impacts of silent letters when pronouncing some English words, M. Yayha (2017:1) argues: “*Silent letters in English are actually diacritic letters. This means that they change the pronunciation of another syllable. Compare the words ‘fin’ and ‘fine’. The ‘e’ isn’t pronounced but it changes the pronunciation of the vowel by lengthening it.*’ Depending on this example we observe that silent letters can influence pronunciation of some words”. Here, Mohamed Yayha tries to enlighten that English silent letters are considered as diacritic letters because they mark the difference between several English words. As a matter of fact, silent letters are distinguishing marks or a mark added to a given

word to indicate a special pronunciation as “fin” and “fine” where the silent letter “e” makes the letter “i” to be pronounced [aɪ] in “fine” different from “i” in “fin” which is sounded [ɪ] because it is the unique vowel letter in a monosyllabic word. Next, the example (10) shows the diacritical process of silent letters in the following words in pairs.

- a- hop [hɒp] - hope [həʊp]
- b- rid [rɪd] – ride [raɪd]
- c- dan [dæn] – darn [da:n]
- d- pot [pɒt] – port [pɔ:t]

The analysis of (5) shows that the silent letter “e” in (10a) and (10b) makes the vowel letters “o” and “i” to be uttered [əʊ] as in “hope” and [aɪ] as in “ride”, different from the letters “o” and “i” in the English words “hop” and “rid” which are not written with the silent letters “e”. In addition, in (10c) and (10d) the vowel letters “a” and “o” are the unique vowel letters sounded [æ] as in “dan” and [ɒ] in “pot” whereas, the combination of these letters with the silent letter “r” changes the sounds [æ] and [ɒ] into [a:] and [ɔ:] as in “darn” and “port”. Then, Mohamed Yayha mentions that silent letters might be studied in context of homophones to make differences between words which have the same pronunciation but different spelling when he (2017:6) writes: “*silent letters can distinguish between homophones, e.g. in/inn; be/bee; lent/leant. This is an aid to readers already familiar with both words.*” As a matter of fact, the author shows that silent letters are important to be learnt especially when it comes to homophones to help learners distinguish the spelling of different words which are pronounced alike but written differently. As a matter of fact, the relevance of learning silent letters is justified when learners grasp the right pronunciation and meaning of words such as: knight/ night, write/ right, plum/ plumb, reign/ rain, knew/ new and hour/ our while reading a text in English. In this perspective, M. Yayha (2017:6) underlines that: “*silent letters may give an insight into the meaning or origin of a word, [...] the final ‘fe’ in giraffe gives a clue to the second-syllable stress, where ‘giraf’ might suggest initial stress.*” The analysis of this quotation unveils that the teaching of English silent letters could enable the EFL learners’ abilities to identify the different linguistic issues that may facilitate the discrimination of English words in pronunciation.

These issues are related to the meaning, the origin, the spelling and the stress placement.

Therefore, Mohamed Yayha thinks that through silent letters, it is possible to guess the meaning of a word or its origin since many English words are loaned from other languages. In the case of “giraffe”, the author shows that the ending “fe” of that word could help to identify its origin and the stress placement. That is why, Mohamed Yayha shows that the word comes from French. So, the stress mark must be put in the last syllable (as it is suggested in the French pronunciation rules) whereas, when the same word is written with a single “f” as in “giraf”, the stress mark appears on the first syllable (as it is requested in the English pronunciation rules of disyllabic nouns). Besides, the example (11) reinforces details about the stress placement in connection to the syllable where the silent letter is located.

- a- A’cquire
- b- ‘Handsome
- c- ‘Character
- d- ‘Salmon
- e- Re’ceipt
- f- Cam’paign

It results from the example (11) that the selected disyllabic verb, adjective and noun are stressed on the syllable that covers a silent letter. In the same perspective, the presence of silent letters can also show at which moment some consonant sounds can vary from one word to another when the author (2017:6) mentions that: “*silent letters help to show 'hard' consonants e.g., guest/gest.*” In fact, Mohamed tries to enlighten that the location of the silent letter “u” between letters “g” and “e-” creates the contrast between the pronunciation of “g” in “**g**uest and the pronunciation of the same letter in “**g**est”. This means that the letter “g” is sounded [g] when it is followed by the silent letter “u” whereas, it is pronounced [dʒ] when the above morphology is not attested in monosyllabic words. Insisting on the power of silent letters in word pronunciation changing, M. Yayha (2017:11) explains that: “*silent letters can’t be all that important if they’re not pronounced, but as a matter of fact, they make a HUGE difference to the meaning of words, and sometimes, they even have the power to change their pronunciation*”. Obviously, the phrase “HUGE

difference” by Mohamed Yayha evidences the relevance of teaching English silent letters even though they are not sounded in English words. This means that the position of silent letters in these words impacts the learners’ oral and written productions. Thus, the author encourages teachers of English to simplify the learning process of silent letters in order to help learners face dictation exercise where they are requested to write accurate and appropriate words of a given lesson in the target language.

Talking about the hindrances encountered by both native and non-native speakers of English language, M. Yayha (2017: 1-2) highlights: *“English language has a lot of silent letters, and they create problems for both native and non-native speakers of English because they make it more difficult to guess the spelling of many spoken words or the pronunciation of many written words...”* In fact, when Mohamed Yayha mentions this group of words, *“create problems to both native speakers and non-native speakers”*, he wants to enlighten that during the English learning process, both types of learners are victims of mispronunciation and misspelling while practising the target language orally or by writing in classes. With native speakers, these problems are possible when some English words share the same sound but, they are written differently and, when words are not pronounced alike but, they share the identic spelling as in the example (12).

a- See – sea

b- Pre’sent- ‘present

The analysis of this example above shows that in (12a) the words in pairs are written differently however, they are pronounced alike. Additionally, the difference appears at the level of the meaning. And, in (12b) the words in pairs are written alike but pronounced differently because of the location of the stress mark. As a result, when the word “present” is stressed at the second syllable (pre’sent), it is a verb whereas, when it is stressed in the first syllable (‘present), it is a noun or an adjective. That is why, words have to be put in context in order to help learners establish the differences in spelling and pronunciation. With non-native speakers, in addition to the above obstacles, learners are victims of their first language influences in their written or oral productions. Otherwise, the first language impacts are visible through the

utilisation of grammar rules and sound systems when learning the second language. As a matter of fact, these issues give an insight on the contrast between spoken words and written words. In clear, spoken words are related to what is heard whereas, written words refer to what is seen as in the illustration (13).

a- listen [lɪsən]

b- looked [lʊkt]

The results of the example (13) show that, in (13a) the letter “t” is not pronounced but, in writing it is present and, in (13b) the ending “ed” is pronounced [t] instead of [əd] differently from how it is written. Suggesting some guidelines to facilitate the teaching process of English silent letters, Mohamed Yayha (2017:51) provides that *“teachers should work on grouping words having the same Silent letter(s), and teachers should explain to their pupils that Silent letters affect pronunciation and spelling to great extent so they have to expose themselves to words containing silent letters.”* In fact, the suggested strategies by Mohamed Yayha require teachers of English to show the relevance of teaching silent letters in written and spoken words. Thus, Mohamed Yayha advises teachers to deal with group words including identical silent letters and to provide enough information concerning the effect of silent letters in pronunciation and spelling. The example (14) evidences.

a- **K**nock, **k**now, **k**nee.

b- **W**rites, **w**rack, **w**rong.

c- **G**uess, **g**uide, **g**uest.

The above illustration shows that, in (14a) the identical silent letter is “k”, in (14b) it is “w” and in (14c) it is “u”. By observing the different groups of words, teachers are requested to explain the phenomenon of silent letters in connection to their position or environment.

Mortaza Yamini’s work aims at researching the different contexts that justify the non-pronunciation of English consonant letters when he (2002:44) writes: *“The assumption is that the spelling pattern can be a good guide to the pronunciation of words. With this point in mind, an attempt is made to find and formulate rules that show the contexts in which certain consonant letters do not represent any sounds”*. This quotation suggests that the spelling pattern can really be a good step to master the pronunciation of English words. In fact, a spelling

pattern is a group of letters that represents a sound. This pattern can be made of one or more letters which represent a single sound. For example, the consonant letters “th” are pronounced [θ] or [ð]. As a matter of fact, the author thinks that some phonological rules should be provided in order to facilitate the pronunciation of consonant letters and enlighten the different contexts that explain the silent consonant letters in English words. Referring to Old English, M. Yamini (2002:45) argues: *“however, if one traces the pronunciation of words back to older times, one sees that the silent consonants of today were once pronounced fully. For example, ‘knight’ used to be pronounced [knixt]”*. Here, the author refers to Old English where words are pronounced the way they are written. Silent letters do not exist because English has been a phonemic language and borrowed words are pronounced alike. The example given by Mortaza Yamini illustrates how the letters “k” and “gh” are pronounced in German. Elsewhere, because of the evolution of the language, some letters are now dropped or omitted while pronouncing English words. In fact, the process of dropping or omitting letters while pronouncing words refers to “historical elision” which is made of “elision of consonants, vowels and syllables”. The example (15) illustrates.

- a- **knee, light**
- b- **temperature**
- c- **because**

The results of the example (15) show that (15a) evidences elision of consonants, (15b) represents elision of vowels and (15c) pictures elision of syllables. In this perspective, Mortaza Yamini highlights that through the identification of spelling pattern, learners of English could easily determine the right pronunciation of words when he (2002:45) mentions: *“Yet, the spelling pattern includes enough information to signal the correct pronunciation of the word. It is this information that should be passed to the learner. To do this, one needs to know exactly at what contexts consonants are not pronounced, and how the spelling pattern and the morphology of the word may help one pronounce the word correctly”*. The analysis of this passage highlights that learners have to be familiar with the spelling pattern in order to produce accurate and appropriate speech. Since, spelling pattern is a group of letters that represents a single sound, Mortaza Yamini thinks

that, when teaching English silent letters, teachers should provide guidance that could help learners grasp the pronunciation of English words made of silent letters. As a matter of fact, the context, the environment or the morphology are clues that could help learners know when a consonant letter is pronounced or omitted in a word. Insisting on the use of spelling pattern, Mortaza Yamini provides a rule that could help learners identify silent letters as he (2002: 51) writes: *“One may encounter examples such as debt, doubt, and subtle and come up with the conclusion that “b” is not pronounced in front of “t”. Later, when a counterexample such as ‘subtitle’ is observed, it may be taken as an exception, which is as confusing as saying that in some words the rule works but in some others it does not”*. In this quotation, Mortaza Yamini provides a list of words written with the consonant letter “b” and, he tries to demonstrate the rule or the condition justifying the non-pronunciation of the selected letter. As a matter of fact, the author enlightens that the letter ‘b’ is not pronounced when it is located before the letter “t” as in the following monosyllabic words (debt, doubt...). However, when this consonant letter is part of a disyllabic word, the author thinks that this case is an “exception”.

Talking about the identification of silent consonant letters, M. Yamini (2002:45) argues that: *“silent letters are mostly the ones that stand for stops [p, b, t, d, k, and g], semi consonants [l, n, r] and the semi vowel [w]. The letter ‘c’ should also include among those representing stop sounds because it can stand for [k] as well”*. This passage deals with the types of consonants which can be silent such as stops, semi consonants and semi vowels. These types of consonants can be silent in different positions within a word. For example, the stops [k, g] can be silent at initial position as in ‘know’, ‘gnaw’. Like stops, the semi vowel [w] is silent at the initial position as in ‘wrong’ or ‘write’. Working on silent letters in connection to the combination of consonant letters, M. Yamini (2002:45) enlightens: *“From among the combination of consonants, “gh” is usually silent. If the syllables structures in English are studied, it becomes apparent that there are certain consonants that can cluster together. (...) but sounds do not combine with other sounds randomly. The combination takes place under certain constraints and in certain contexts the consonant becomes silent”*. This quotation enlightens the contexts when the combined letters in English words can be both

pronounced or not. As a matter of fact, the combination of two consonant letters refers to consonant clusters when they are pronounced whereas, they refer to digraph when one of the combined letters is not sounded in a given word. The example (16) evidences:

a- **Plus, prime, leashed, students**

b- **Pneuma, ptarmigan, lamb, solemn**

The analysis of this example shows that in (16a) the combination [pl, pr] occurs at the beginning of a syllable however, the combination of [ʃ t, dnts] happens at the end of a syllable. In (16b), the pronunciation of these combinations [pn, pt, mb, mn] is impossible in English. As a matter of fact, consonant clusters are concerned with consonant sounds however, digraphs are letters representing a single sound as “eo” in **leopard** [e] or “sh” in **ship** [ʃ].

The above reviewed have dealt with the scientific or linguistic aspects of English silent letters by Widya Astuti, Mohamed Yayha and Mortaza Yamini in order to describe some phonological issues and provide some rules that could facilitate the study of English silent letters in general. However, the above works did not cope with the didactic process of teaching English silent letter items in the different pedagogical classes at secondary school.

3. Data collection instruments

The selected instruments to collect the appropriate data about the teaching of English silent letters at secondary school are focused on the classroom observation and the questionnaire addressed to teachers of English at Amitié Junior secondary school in Brazzaville.

3.1. Observation

Observation is the first stage of the investigation. The word observation comes from the verb to ‘observe’. In fact, observing something or someone means watching carefully in order to understand the positive and negative sides of what is done. (Sinclair: 1990:898). Among the different types of classroom observation, three types are distinguished: Direct, Indirect and Experimental observation. In this case, the direct method has been selected to achieve the investigation. Therefore, F. Volkmar (2013: 980) defines the concept “direct observation” as “*a method of*

collecting information in which the investigator watches the subjects in the classroom without interfering in different activities”. In other words, this passage unveils that direct observation is a process of gathering information while the researcher does not conduct activities in the classroom. As a matter of fact, this research method aims at paying attention to the procedure teachers conduct their English lessons and checking whether the English silent letter items are taught, learnt and assessed through different pronunciation courses. The following table (1) illustrates.

English sound items	Contents	Observation
<i>English silent letters items</i> <i>G.O.2</i> <i>S.O.2.11</i>	• Consonants : b, p, t, d, t, g, l, s, ... • Vowels: a, e, i, o, u • Unstressed syllables: because • Vowel sound lengthening, • Functions of homophones, • Stress placement, • New words • Voiced consonants	<i>Not taught, learnt and assessed accordingly</i>

Table n° (02) : Check list observation

The table above illustrates the different English silent letter items, such as: silent consonants, silent vowels and silent syllables which are requested to be taught learnt, and assessed in the official English syllabus. In fact, silent letters are indicators showing the contrast between written and spoken forms of words. This will bring learners to know about the influence of silent letters in pronunciation and also provide a comprehensive explanation of what silent letters are. As a matter of fact, the analysis of the classroom observations from this checklist above unveils that the

English silent letters items mentioned in the English syllabus are not taught, learnt and assessed accordingly in classes of 3^{ème}. It is important to mention that during this period no lesson dealing with English pronunciation in general and silent letter items in particular has been implemented in these classes. However, some English pronunciation items have been tackled implicitly by teachers when teaching other English language items as in the following table (2).

Other English components	Taught lesson items	Pronunciation items
Grammar	Past simple tense	Sound discrimination
Language functions	Telephone manners	Sentence stress
Reading comprehension	Text: Wild animals	Sound identification
Vocabulary	Plural endings	Sound discrimination

Table n°2: Pronunciation items from other English components

The table (2) illustrates Pronunciation items practiced through other English sub-disciplines. In fact, during the implementation of Grammar, Language function, Reading comprehension and Vocabulary lessons, the items of pronunciation observed are related to sound identification, sound discrimination and sentence stress. During the implementation of Reading comprehension lessons, the pronunciation item observed is linked to sound identification. Indeed, by using the repetition method, the teacher aims at helping learners with the pronunciation of some words (wolf, bear, tiger, gorilla, etc.) while reading the selected text. In Grammar the taught lesson has been the Past simple tense and the pronunciation item observed is related to sound discrimination. In fact, by using the repetition method, the teacher guides learners on the utterance of the sound [t] and [d] based on the ending “-ed” and expects them to differ both sounds while pronouncing English words. Similarly, in Vocabulary with the lesson based on

Plural endings, the sound discrimination item is practiced when the teacher emphasises on the pronunciation of words ending with the letter “-s” which are pronounced either [s] or [z] so that learners could make the difference between two sounds based on one spelling by using repetition. Another item of pronunciation observed during the implementation of Language function lessons is linked to sentence stress. As a matter of fact, through the repetition method, the teacher’s objective is to emphasize on the pronunciation of important words and help learners master the correct intonation of English sentences (HELLO! / How ARE you? /can I SPEAK to JOHN?/ would you like to LEAVE a MESSAGE ?).

Otherwise, the pronunciation items observed are not implemented as other English sub-disciplines following the different steps of a teaching card. However, these items appear when teachers get their learners to pronounce English words by using the repetition method. Since, learners encounter difficulties in English pronunciation, the 3P’s method coupled with the Explanatory method will help teachers and learners deal with English pronunciation items as autonomous lessons in classes as proved in this research work.

3.2.Questionnaire addressed to teachers

Talking about the analysis of questionnaire addressed to teachers, it is important to recall that the number of the teacher sample population is made of ten (10) teachers of English. These teachers have been selected thanks to their answers from questions related to the teaching of English silent letters at secondary school.

Question 1: Do you often teach silent letters in pronunciation lessons?The aim of this question is to check whether teachers often teach English silent letters at junior secondary school. The results of this investigation evidence.

Responses	Respondents	Percentages
Yes	06	60
No	04	40
Total	10	100

Table n°4: Teaching silent letters

The table (4) unveils that an important number of teachers (60%) often teach English silent letters in classes but, the minority of them (40%) does not do. Unfortunately, the observation details reveal that teachers do not teach this English language item accordingly in classes. Some teachers of English have mentioned that they deal with the selected item when correcting learners' mistakes while pronouncing a word with a silent letter. Otherwise, learners are asked to repeat the pronunciation of words containing silent letters through another English teaching components such as: grammar, vocabulary or language functions.

Question 2: Which method do you use to teach the pronunciation of silent letters? This question aims to identify the method used by teachers to teach English silent letters in classes.

Responses	Respondents	Percentages
Explanation	00	00
Repetition	06	60
Description	04	40
Transcription	00	00
Total	10	100

Table n°4: Teaching pronunciation methodology.

The table (4) illustrates that most teachers use "Repetition" as the selected method to teach English silent letters whereas, a few of them select "Description." In other words, this table demonstrates that the majority of teachers in junior secondary school prefer teaching English silent letters focusing on "Repetition" since they confess that it is the easiest method to improve learners' abilities in English pronunciation. Additionally, they mention that when working with this teaching method, learners listen and repeat carefully the teachers' pronunciation of English words made of silent letters.

Question 3: Which English silent letter item do you often teach? This question aims at checking the type of English silent letter item the selected teachers of English often train learners of 3^{ème} at Amitié.

Table n°5: English silent letter teaching items.

Responses	Respondents	Percentages
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Vowel sound lengthening	07	70
English homophones	03	30
Stress placement	00	00
New English words	00	00
Voicing of consonants	00	00
Total	10	100

It appears that most teachers (70%) deal with the “creation of vowel sound lengthening” whereas, a few of them (30%) are concerned with “distinction of English homophones”. It is important to highlight that these silent letter items are not autonomously taught with a teaching card and a pedagogical procedure as required at secondary school. According to teachers, silent letters are part of many English words so whenever they meet a group of words with the same silent letter, they ask learners to repeat the different words.

Question 4: Have you been trained to teach English pronunciation items? This question aims at investigating whether teachers have been trained to teach English pronunciation items in classes. The following table shows.

Table n°6: Teachers’ pronunciation training.

Responses	Respondents	Percentages
Yes	03	30
No	07	70
Total	10	100

The table (3) reveals that (30%) of the English teachers confess that they have been trained to teach pronunciation, whereas (50%) of them mention that they have not been trained to teach this item. As a matter fact, the trained teachers on English pronunciation unveil the importance of teaching this English component in classes. It develops the secondary school learners’ oral skills through the mastery of sounds and the intelligible pronunciation in English words and sentences. However, the none-trained teachers justify that pronunciation is useless in teaching and learning English since it is not requested during the formative and summative evaluations.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS

This section concerns the discussion about the major findings related to the teaching of English silent letter items at secondary school. As a matter of fact, the first obstacle unveils that many English teachers ignore the teaching of silent letters in classes since they have not been trained on this English component during their training period. That is why Morley cited by Michael Wei (2006:3) writes: *“The question is not whether pronunciation should be taught, but instead what should be taught in a pronunciation class and how it should be taught.”* This quotation highlights that teachers should focus on aspects that influence learners’ pronunciation and find ways to teach and assess them. However, some teachers have been trained at the Teachers Training College (ENS) on the different techniques, strategies and activities that enable the teaching and learning of English pronunciation items. Unfortunately, no lessons on English pronunciation items have not been mentioned in the teachers’ teaching cards and the learners’ copybooks. The second trouble deals with the lack of workshops or seminars by inspectors on the teaching and learning of English silent letters. In fact, it is important to recall that English silent letters are aspects of teaching English sounds which are requested to be taught, learnt and assessed in the English syllabus. Unfortunately, this latter is not implemented accordingly in classes.

Finally, teachers are unable to provide activities related to English silent letters because they encourage their learners to improve their writing skills as Dalton cited by Michael Wei (2006:3) says: *“We are comfortable teaching reading, writing, listening and to a degree, general oral skills, but when it comes to pronunciation, we often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics to offer our students anything more than rudimentary advice”*. This passage shows that teachers feel at ease when teaching reading, writing and listening skills focusing on Repetition method. Otherwise, the secondary school teachers are unable to provide conditions justifying the non-pronunciation of some letters in monosyllabic words, the stress placement in polysyllabic words and the occurrence of new sounds when uttering the target language in connected speech. This explains why the oral performance is often weak by the secondary learners in the Republic of Congo.

5. Didactic strategies of teaching english silent letters

The purpose of this section is to provide the teaching and learning strategies that could help both teachers and learners deal with English silent letters items. As a matter of fact, these strategies are focused on the Explanatory method coupled with the 3P's method. In the following lines, the dissertation is based on the analysis of pre-requisites checking, presentation, practice, production and testing activities stages.

Pre-requisites checking: The pre – requisites checking is the first stage where the teacher is requested to check whether learners are familiar with the different types of English silent letters (silent consonant and vowel letters), the different teaching items of English silent letters (Creating vowel sound lengthening, discriminating functions of homophones, creating new words, locating stress placement of words, creating voiced consonant sounds) and the selection of the day's lesson. Finally, the teacher selects lesson items to teach, learn and asses in the class of 3^{ème} at C.E.G Amitié.

Presentation: This stage aims at providing illustrations and conditions justifying the creation of vowel sound lengthening through English silent letters. In fact, the teacher of English is required to pronounce, write and explain the selected monosyllabic words made of silent letters in order to help learners of 3^{ème} grasp the pronunciation of the words and identify conditions related to the selected item. Therefore, the teacher is requested to list: Curt, barn, fight, fawn, calm.

Then, the teacher explains that in a monosyllabic word with the structure **cvC₂c** such as “Barn, fight, fawn, calm”, there are two consonants **at the end**. If the **C₂** refers to one of the following consonants **/r, gh, l, w /**, learners are requested to **not pronounce** these consonants **at the end** of a word because they represent a sample of silent letters in English. This non pronunciation impacts the quality of the vowels preceding the silent letters. These vowels were initially short, but the silent letters will make them longer than before. This explanation will raise junior secondary school learners' awareness on that item to cope with silent letters and better their English pronunciation.

Practice: This stage is devoted to the reinforcement of the learners' speaking abilities on the learning of the selected item of the English silent letters. In this stage, the teachers of English are requested to enable learners to pronounce the selected monosyllabic words and their own examples orally based on the conditions by the teacher in the presentation stage.

Production: This stage involves learners' ability to read monosyllabic words made of silent letters in the target language. In fact, the teacher of English should allow the selected learners to write their oral words on the board and pronounce them accordingly. The following monosyllabic words illustrate and justify the creation of vowel sound lengthening in English language (part, pearl, sight, awl, palm and calm) by the learners themselves. Finally, they are authorized to copy down the lesson in their copy books.

Conclusion

This research work investigated the teaching of English pronunciation items notably silent letters by intending to discover the different problems that hinder its teaching and learning process at secondary school. As a matter of fact, the following two questions have been asked to enlighten the guidance of this study: (1) How to teach English silent letter items? (2) Are secondary school teachers of English trained to teach English silent letters at secondary school? Prior to the scrutiny of this research work, the classroom observation and the questionnaire addressed to teachers have been used to collect data. The analysis of data showed that the reasons preventing teachers to deal with English silent letters are related to the teachers' training curricula at the Teachers' Training College (ENS). This proves that teachers lack didactic strategies and techniques to cope with the teaching of English pronunciation items in general and silent letters in particular. Additionally, there is no in-service training by inspectors to increase the teachers' teaching capacities in the selected topic. This justifies the incapacity of teachers to motivate learners implement the teaching of English silent letter items in classes. Owing to the fact that teachers lack strategies and learners lack interests in learning English pronunciation items, the last section has been

wholly devoted to the elaboration of the practical suggestions to enable both teachers and learners deal with the selected item in classes. These teaching strategies have been inspired from the 3P's method and Explanatory method. These approaches enhance role-play change between learners and teachers in a constructive way. The teacher presents the input, the learners develop, practise and apply. On top of this, there is a full detailed lesson plan providing a step-by-step teaching process which combine examples and explanations that could help learners to assess their mastery through the taught lessons.

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