

Silent Letters in English

Julie Peters

University of Michigan - Dearborn

Abstract

Teachers of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds may find that many words in English will be challenging to their students. A major reason for this is that a large majority of English words have silent letters in them—an estimated “60%”, “according to the Kent Jones, Education Committee, Esperanto Society of Chicago” (British Council 1). Referencing Edward Carney’s *A Survey of English Spelling* in all of its information regarding silent letters in English, Wikipedia puts it simply: silent letters are letters that appear in the spelling of words, but don’t make a sound (Wikipedia 1). This paper seeks to explain 1) the causes for English having silent letters in so many of its words; 2) how having silent letters in English benefits its users; and 3) what the various types of silent letters are in English. The goal of learning about silent letters in English is to be able to identify them and be able to understand their purpose in order to make sense of them for those students attempting to learn the English language.

Silent Letters in English

Teachers of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds may find that many words in English will be challenging to their students. A major reason for this is that a large majority of English words have silent letters in them—an estimated “60%”, “according to the Kent Jones, Education Committee, Esperanto Society of Chicago” (British Council 1). Referencing Edward Carney’s *A Survey of English Spelling* in all of its information regarding silent letters in English, Wikipedia puts it simply: silent letters are letters that appear in the spelling of words, but don’t make a sound (Wikipedia 1). This paper seeks to explain 1) the causes for English having silent letters in so many of its words; 2) how having silent letters in English benefits its users; and 3) what the various types of silent letters are in English. The goal of learning about silent letters in English is to be able to identify them and be able to understand their purpose in order to make sense of them for those students attempting to learn the English language.

What caused English to have so many silent letters? “Old English was 90% phonemic”, meaning the “words sounded the same as they looked” (British Council 1). As we began to “borrow words” from other languages, we sometimes kept their spelling, such as with “champagne, khaki, and myrrh” (Cook 2). Sometimes we “attempted” to “represent” sounds we don’t have letters for by combining the letters we do have (British Council 1). Through time, pronunciation changed, sometimes because the “sound combinations are difficult to say” (like “handkerchief” or “sandwich”) and even though the pronunciation changed, we kept the old spelling (Cook 1-2). Sometimes we even added letters “to make the spelling look more ‘Latin’ or ‘French’”, such as the letter “” in “debt” (Cook 1) and “doubt” (British Council 1).

Silent letters, although problematic in some instances, have proven beneficial in others. For instance, silent letters “distinguish” between “words that sound similar”, such as “whole” and “hole”, “plum” and “plumb”, and “hour” and “our” (www.howtolearnenglish.co.uk 1). Often

we can determine which word is being used by the context, such as with ‘the whole thing’ and ‘the hole in the ground’, but in written form and absent any context, silent letters assist us more than we know. Silent letters show when the “vowel” in a word is “long”, such as with “rid/ride”; as well as when a “consonant” in a word is “hard”, such as with “gest/guest” (Cook 1). They “give insight into the meaning” of a word—an example being “vineyard”, where the letter <e> is silent, but by having it there, we are given “a clue” that it is related to “vines” (Wikipedia 2). Silent letters give clues as to where the “stress” should be in a word; an example would be “giraffe”: the last “<f>” and ending “<e>” are silent letters, but by having them there, we are “given the clue” that the “stress” is on the “second syllable”, not the first (Wikipedia 2).

What are the different types of silent letters? There are “auxiliary letters”, which can either be “exocentric” or “endocentric digraphs”, and there are “dummy letters”, which can either be “inert” or “empty letters” (Wikipedia, 1). “Auxiliary letters” combined “with another letter” “constitute a digraph”: “two letters combined which represent a single phoneme” (Wikipedia 1). The first kind of auxiliary letter, the “exocentric digraph”, is not really “considered silent”, but is worth mentioning (Wikipedia 1). Exocentric digraphs are “where the sound of the digraph is different from that of either of its constituent letters” (Wikipedia 1). Some examples would be where English lacks the letter, so we improvised with letters we do have, such as “<sh> in *show*, engma in *sing*, theta in *thing* or eth in *then*” (Wikipedia 1) or the letter in English is replaced with another letter or combination of letters because of the word’s origin, such as with “psychology” and “mnemonic” (Cook 1).

The second kind of auxiliary letter, the “endocentric digraph” is “where the sound of the digraph is the same as that of one of its constituent letters” (Wikipedia 1). An example would be “doubled consonants” when adding suffixes or “inflection” (Wikipedia 2). It does not include “geminate consonants”, like in the word “*misspell*”, which has two s’s, but neither is really silent

(Wikipedia 2). Another example would be the ‘magic e’ that is often mentioned as something many faintly remember hearing in grade school; it is when an <e> is added to the end of some words to change the vowel to a “long” vowel (www.esl.about.com 1). Words like “rate” are pronounced *rate* instead of “rat” because we add the “magic e”; it tells us that the “vowel” will be “long” (Wikipedia 2). There are others that add a second element too for various reasons. The combination of “<ck>” can be seen as a doubling for “<k>” in some words; or the “<gu>” in words like “*guard*” and “*vogue*” (Wikipedia 2) alert you to sound the “<g>” as it being “hard”, since <g> can sometimes sound like a <j> (“guest/gest”) (Cook 1).

Dummy letters “bear no relation to neighboring letters and no correspondence in pronunciation” (Wikipedia 2). The “inert” type of “dummy letters” is seen “where a letter” from a “cognate word” stays (Wikipedia 2). As previously mentioned, some words show the root word by keeping the silent letter, such as “resign” coming from the root word “resignation”, where the <g> is pronounced (Cook 1). The “empty” type of “dummy letters” are seen in words like “*answer*”, where the “<w>” is silent; “*honest*”, where the “<h>” is silent; “*island*” where the “<s>” is silent; and “*subtle*”, where the “” is silent (Wikipedia 2). It fits the description of silent letters best and is known for creating the most confusion for learners (Wikipedia 2).

Are there rules I can teach students? According to British Council.org, a man named “Axel Wijk” wrote “100 rules for English spelling” back in “1959” and states “it is claimed that by using his rules, you can spell up to 85% of the words in English with 90% accuracy” (British Council 1). The reality of it though is that learning, or even teaching all those rules would be unrealistic. It would probably be more realistic to have students “memorize sight words”, as British Council suggests, with the hope that they learn some patterns and apply the patterns appropriately. To help with that, I have compiled a list of silent letters from various sources (See Appendix A).

To summarize, English Language Learners may find some aspects of the spelling of English words to be challenging, maybe even confusing, particularly silent letters. The fact that silent letters are so prevalent should be reason enough for teachers to learn more about them. A combination of factors has influenced the English language and will most likely continue to do so. The silent letters often have a purpose, even though it might not be evident at first. At a minimum, this information can be beneficial in clearing up some confusion on *why* English words are spelled as they are. Identifying these problematic areas of the English language helps to better teach it to students in a way that makes sense to them.

Works Cited

- Beare, Kenneth. (n.d.). *Pronunciation – Silent Letters*. Retrieved from <http://esl.about.com/od/speakingenglish/a/silent.htm>.
- British Council. (n.d.). *Grammar: Silent Letters*. Retrieved from <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-grammar-silent-letters.htm>.
- Carney, Edward. (1994). *A Survey of English Spelling*. London: Routledge.
- Carney, 1997. *English Spelling*. London: Routledge.
- Cook, Vivian. (n.d.). *Silent Letters in English*. Retrieved from <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/EnglishSpellingSystem/SilentLetters.htm>.
- Cook, Vivian. (1999). *Teaching Spelling*. Retrieved from <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/Writings/Papers/TeachingSpelling..htm>
- HowtoLearnEnglish. (2000-2010). *English Language: Silent Letters*. Retrieved from <http://www.howtolearnenglish.co.uk/english-language-silent-letters.html>
- Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Silent Letter*. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_letter.

Silent Letters in English

A	artistically, dramatically, stoically, musically, romantically, logically
B	climb, numb, plumb, comb, thumb, tomb, Woolacomb, crumb, debt, doubt, subtle, lamb, doubt, bomb, dumb
C	acquit, victual, Jacques, acquire, czar, indict, Connecticut, muscle, scissors, Tucson
D	grandson, handkerchief, sandwich, handsome, landscape, Windsor, Wednesday, badge, edge, hedge
E	rite, fame, serve, enclose, bridge, more, careful, clue, lonely, vogue, hope, corpse, fate, drive, gave, site
F	halfpenny
G	though, light, align, gnash, reign, champagne, diaphragm, high, gnaw, ghost, intaglio, sign, resign, gnarl, design, foreigners, gnome, feign
H	hour, hurrah, Pooh, khaki, Ghandi, heir, Birmingham, exhaust, Thames, exhibition, why, when, which, what, whether, ghost, white, while, honest, where, honor, heir, herb, whistle
I	business
J	(none)
K	know, knead, knot, knife, knickers, knell, knight, Knox, Knowles, blackguard, knock, knitting, knee, knuckle, knowledge
L	salmon, psalm, almond, calf, half, folk, yolk, Colne, Norfolk, chalk, calm, talk, palm, walk, balk, would, should, could
M	mnemonic
N	autumn, solemn, condemn, damn, hymn, monsieur, column, chimney
O	(none) colonel?
P	corps, pneumonia, pseudo, ptomaine, coup, receipt, Thompson, psychology, psychiatrist, psychotic, psychotherapy
Q	(none)
R	myrrh
S	island, isle, viscount, apropos, aisle, debris, bourgeois, Illinois, Basle, fracas
T	ballet, ricochet, Christmas, gourmet, tsunami, thistle, rapport, asthma, listen, castle, soften, match, butcher, whistle, often, fasten
U	guest, questionnaire, guitar, catalogue, guilt, tongue, colleague, guide, dialogue, guess, guard, building, rogue, biscuit
V	(none)
W	sword, greensward, answer, Greenwich, Norwich, write, two, wrist, writ, whore, whole, wreck, wrestling, wrong, wrinkle, who, whom, whose, wrap, write
X	faux pas, Sioux
Y	(none)
Z	rendezvous, laissez-faire, chez
GH	thought, through, daughter, light, might, right, sight, fight, weigh, sleigh

Compiled from these sites:

- <http://esl.about.com/od/speakingenglish/a/silent.htm>
- <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-grammar-silent-letters.htm>
- <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/EnglishSpellingSystem/SilentLetters.htm>
- <http://www.howtolearnenglish.co.uk/english-language-silent-letters.html>