Problematic English Syllable Structures for ESL Multilingual Students in Pakistan

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Abstract

The current research aims to describe the problematic English syllable structures for ESL multilingual students in Pakistan. The nature of the study is qualitative and quantitative. The study used the questionnaire to collect the data from the participants. The random sampling technique was used to select the participants. The participants were included in the study based on their first language. The questionnaire was designed and a word list with diverse CV structural patterns were given to the participants for collecting the responses. The data shows that pronunciation varies and has exceptions, especially when one takes into account the impact of regional dialects and accents. Furthermore, the data reveals that complex words may display mixtures of syllable patterns, and certain syllables may have several vowels or diphthongs which create problems for the speakers. In addition, data shows that students face problems in the CC clusters or CVC patterns which are absent in their first language. The study recommends a further spectrographic study of these syllable patterns.

Key Words: Problematic, Syllable structures, ESL, Multilingual, English students. Pronunciation.

Introduction

Mir & Afsar (2023) state that English has three major circles spoken in the world. Khan (2012) states that there are different varieties of English used in the world and these varieties vary from socio-economic and socio-linguistic perspectives. Baumgardner (1993, p.50) describes that world Englishes are composed of a unique cluster of Englishes and in the cluster every variety is in the process of standardization. Kachru (1996) & Mir & Afsar (2023) state that there are three circles of world Englishes: inner circle consists of native varieties, outer circle consists of common wealth countries where English is used as an official language. Jenkins (2007) & Khan (2012) state that expanding circle of world Englishes include countries like Pakistan, India and other former British colonies. Jenkins (2009) & Khan (2012) state that expanding varieties of English are not interlanguages but are legitimate varieties of English with their norms like British Standard English and American Standard English. Mesthrie (2006) state that these varieties vary in pronunciation and other phonological and morphological features because of the influence of other existing varieties.

Crystal (2003) states that because of globalization English language is changing and new varieties are emerging.

The studies show that ESL learners face problems in pronunciation because of lack of knowledge of English syllable structure and how to mark the syllable boundary in pronouncing the multi-syllabic words. Previously, research works focused on the description of Pakistani English and different varieties spoken in Pakistan rather phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features of the language. The focus of the current study is to analyze the techniques which can be used to develop the syllable structure of Pakistani English students for improving their pronunciation. The current study aims to analyze the teaching techniques that are effective in developing syllable structure at graduate level in Pakistani English. Therefore, the current research makes a significant contribution in ESL pedagogy in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

Khan (2008) states that the most widely used variety of postcolonial English is Pakistani English in the world. Raza (2008) states that Pakistani English is spreading quickly in the world and gaining high status among other varieties spoken in the world. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that English is used as an official language in Pakistan. Moreover, Fareed et.al (2021) mention that in Pakistan, English is the official language in the constitution of Pakistan, and in academia, Warsi (2004) states that English is taught as compulsory subject till graduate level. Studies show that In Pakistan students are facing problems in learning speaking especially pronunciation in English language. Aftab (2011) states that Pakistani English learners face difficulties in English proficiency because students are unable to incorporate English language in their daily life routine. Kausar et.al (2016) & Fareed et.al (2021) state that students face problems in English language proficiency because they don't read books and text in English language. Fareed et.al (2021) state that language development is the advancement of language skills which include writing, reading, listening and speaking along with their sub-skills. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that the role of syllable is vital in pronunciation of ESL learners as syllable serves as the building block for clear and effective pronunciation. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that syllable is the rhythmic unit that not only organizes the speech, but it also creates clarity in pronunciation. They state that the arrangement and complexity of the syllables within a word can considerably impact pronunciation and speech patterns. Understanding syllable structure helps the learners in proper pronunciation, rhythm and marking the stress patterns for conveying clear meaning and creating a meaningful talk in communication. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that there are different syllabic structures exhibited by different languages of the world and if a learner wants to improve the pronunciation then he/she has to master the syllabic structure of the language. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that English language exhibits the following syllabic structure:

CV (Consonant-Vowel): Examples include words like "cat," "dog," and "big."

CVC (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant): Examples include words like "bat," "pen," and "dog."

CCV (Consonant-Consonant-Vowel): Examples include words like "fly," "grip," and "drive."

CCCV (Consonant-Consonant-Consonant-Vowel): Examples include words like "trap," "sprint, and "strand."

CVCC (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-Consonant): Examples include words like "jump," "lamp," and "bend."

CCVCC (Consonant-Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-Consonant): Examples include words like "plant," "crisp," and "plunge."

Mir & Afsar (2023) Syllable structure in English

According to Shahid et.al (2022) and Ingman & Crystal (1998) syllable is the phonetic unit that is effective in pronunciation and normally, it is larger than a phoneme and smaller than a lexical item. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that Pakistani learners face difficulties in learning "CC", "CCC" structures at the onset position of the words. Pakistani speakers face problems in acquiring the certain consonant clusters of English and they are unable to pronounce the clusters with clarity. This hinderance in acquisition of English syllable structures create problems in Pronunciation to Pakistani Learners. Johnson (2006) & Shahid et.al (2022) state that for organization of lexical structure in mental dictionary, it is important to have knowledge of a syllable. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that syllabification is the linguistic process of dividing a word into smaller units of syllables and marking the syllable boundaries. Mir & Afsar (2023) state that a syllable can be divided into two smaller units of onset and rhyme. The rhyme is further divided into nucleus and coda.
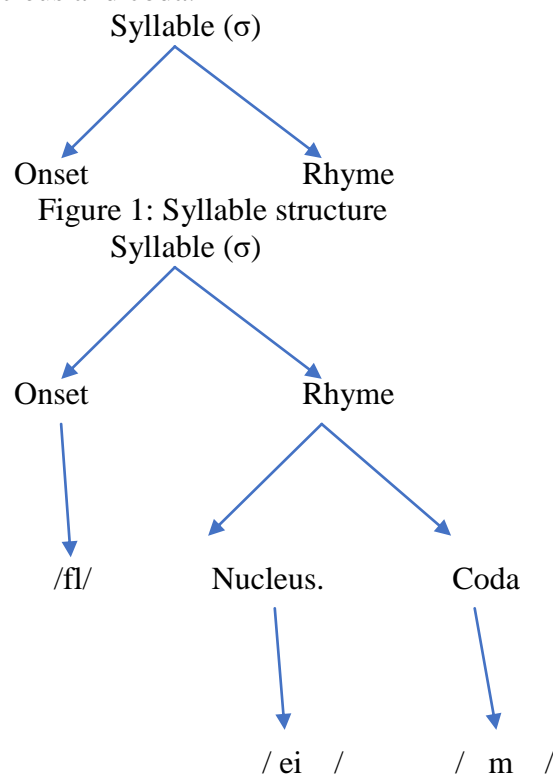

Figure 1: Syllable structure

Figure 2: Syllable structure of the word /flame

Research Methodology

The current research is qualitative in experimental in nature. The study uses the syllable questionnaire technique for the collection of the data. Random sampling technique was used for sampling. A total sample of 18 graduate students were included in the study. All the students were of 18-22 years of age. 9 were male and 9 were female. All the students were learning English as their major. The students were selected randomly from district Kotli AJ&K. The sampling was based on first language. All the students were speaking Pahari, Hindko, Gojri as their first language. The following table shows the details about the sample:

Table 1: Demographic information about the sample

Total sample	Male	Female	Education	Region	Discipline	First Language
6	3	3	Graduation	AJK	English	Pahari
Total sample	**Male**	**Female**	**Education**	**Region**	**Discipline**	**First Language**
6	3	3	Graduation	AJK	English	Gojri
Total sample	**Male**	**Female**	**Education**	**Region**	**Discipline**	**First Language**
6	3	3	Graduation	AJK	English	Hindko

A stimuli list was used for identifying the syllable structure problems in the students. A questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions consisted of the words having diverse phonetic environment of lexical items. The study only used mono-syllabic and bi-syllabic words. The following table shows the syllable patterns representing the syllable structures:

Table 2: CVC syllable structure in the questionnaire

CVC	CCVC	CCCVC	CVCC	CVCCC	CCVCC
Bat	Bright	Strict	Risk	Attempt	Brest
CVCCVC	**CCVCVC**	**CCCVC**	**CVCCVCV**	**VCVC**	**CVCVC**
Lingual	Tribute	Stream	Mystery	About	Volume

5. Results and Discussion

The results of the study present a very interesting pattern of syllable structure problems in syllabification of the lexical items consisted of different syllable structure. The following symmetrical patterns identified in the light of the recorded responses:

Table 3: CVC syllable structure responses by Hindko speakers

CVC	CCVC	CCCVC	CVCC	CVCCC	CCVCC
√	√	∗	√	√	∗
CVCCVC	**CCVCVC**	**CCCVC**	**CVCCVC**	**VCVC**	**CVCVC**
∗	∗	∗	∗	∗	√

The above table shows that speakers of Hindko face problems in the syllabification of the syllable structures CCCVC, CCVCC, CVCCVC,CCVCVC,CCCVC,CVCCVCV,VCVC. The data indicates that the speakers of Hindko syllabified the words having the syllable structures of CVC,CCVC,CVCC,CVCCC and CVCVC. The data indicates that speakers are unable to syllabified the complex structures having 'CCC' structures at the onset position of the word. The data shows that in order to achieve correct pronunciation and build the groundwork for efficient and transparent communication, syllable structure is essential. Furthermore, in any language, syllables are the fundamental units of words, affecting the rhythm, emphasis, and general cadence of spoken language, hence it is important to comprehend and master them.

Table 4: Individual Responses of the syllable patterns

Pattern	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6
CVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVC	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No
CVCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVCC	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
CVCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
CCVCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
CVCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
VCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
CVCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The data indicates that in the words having syllable structures, CCCVC, CCVCC, CVCCVC,CCVCVC,CCCVC,CVCCVCV,VCVC, speakers were unable to comprehend the correct pattern and couldn't syllabified correctly. One reason that may be causing the problem to the speakers of Hindko to correctly predict the syllable pattern of English is, the CCCVC, CCVCC, CVCCVC,CCVCVC,CCCVC,CVCCVCV,VCVC patterns may not be present in Hindko. It is ensured that words are articulated in a way that is both understandable and culturally suitable when syllables are arranged correctly. Mir & Afsar (2023) indicate that language learners and speakers must understand the nuances of syllable structure since the quantity and arrangement of syllables in a language may greatly influence meaning. Furthermore, Mir & Afsar (2023) states that accurate pronunciation of syllables improves speech overall fluency and eloquence, allowing for nuanced and effective expression in any language setting. It also improves communication.
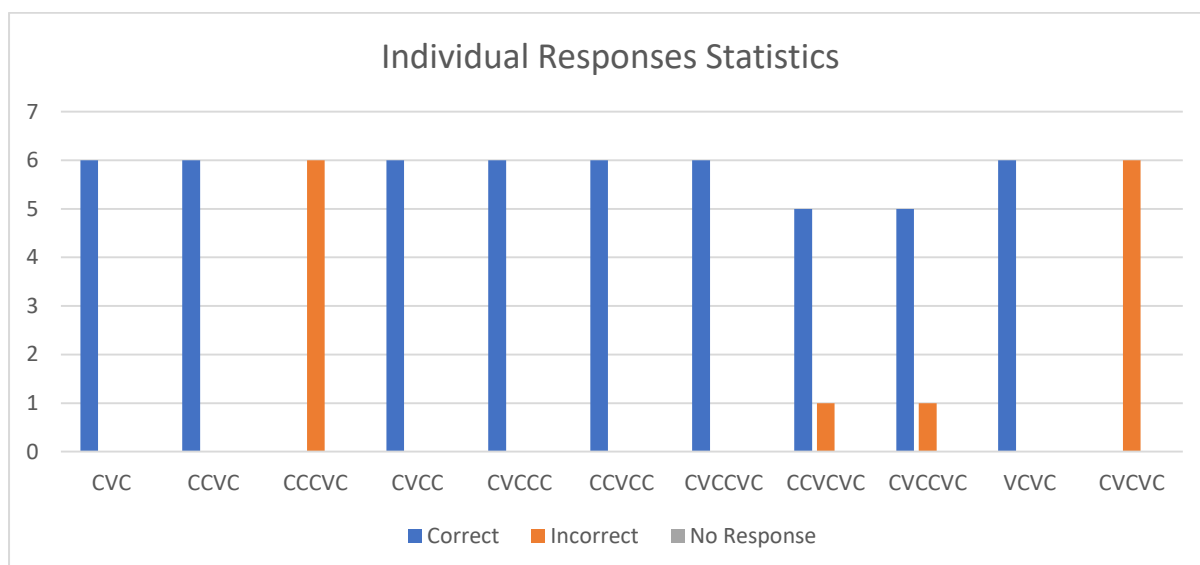
Figure: Individual responses in Hindko language (statistics)

Hindko and English have very different syllable structures, which reflects the differences in linguistic makeup between the two languages. Speaking mostly in the Pakistani regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, Hindko is a Northwestern Indo-Aryan language that frequently has complex syllable patterns with a predominance of consonant clusters. Hindko's unique phonological patterns are partly attributed to its allowance of intricate consonant combinations within syllables. English, on the other hand, usually uses simpler syllable patterns, preferring a cluster of consonants before a vowel or a consonant followed by a vowel. Generally speaking, English syllables are arranged in a simpler manner than Hindko's complex arrangements. For language learners to properly understand the distinctive phonetic traits and syllable patterns of each language, they must be aware of these distinctions while switching between Hindko and English.

Table 4: CVC syllable structure responses by Pahari speakers

CVC	CCVC	CCCVC	CVCC	CVCCC	CCVCC
√	√	√	√	√	√
CVCCVC	**CCVCVC**	**CCCVC**	**CVCCVC**	**VCVC**	**CVCVC**
√	√	√	∗	√	∗

The above table shows that speakers of Pahari face problems in the syllabification of the syllable structures CCVCC,CVCCVCV,VCVC. The data indicates that the speakers of Pahari syllabified the words having the syllable structures of CVC,CCVC,CVCC, CCVCC,CVCCVC, CCVCVC, CCCVC, CVCCVC and CVCVC. The data indicates that Pahari speakers are unable to syllabified the complex structures having 'CVCCVCV' and CVCVC syllable structures of the disyllabic words. The table indicates a phenomena with deep roots in linguistic development is the impact of one's mother tongue (Pahari) on the right syllable structure of a second language (English). The results show that Pahari speakers frequently bring their original language's syllable structures and phonological patterns with them.

Table 4: Individual Responses of the syllable patterns

Pattern	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6
CVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
CVCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No
VCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No

The data show that in Pahari, pronunciation, stress patterns, and general rhythm of the speakers can all be impacted by the syllable patters of first language as speakers are unable to predict the CCVCC,CVCCVCV,VCVC structures. The results indicate that phonological norms in the target language may occasionally be broken by learners' natural inclination to favour syllable forms that they are comfortable with. Depending on the degree of linguistic closeness between the mother tongue and the second language, this influence—known as language transfer—can help or impede the learning process. Understanding these factors is essential for both teachers and language learners because it enables focused interventions.
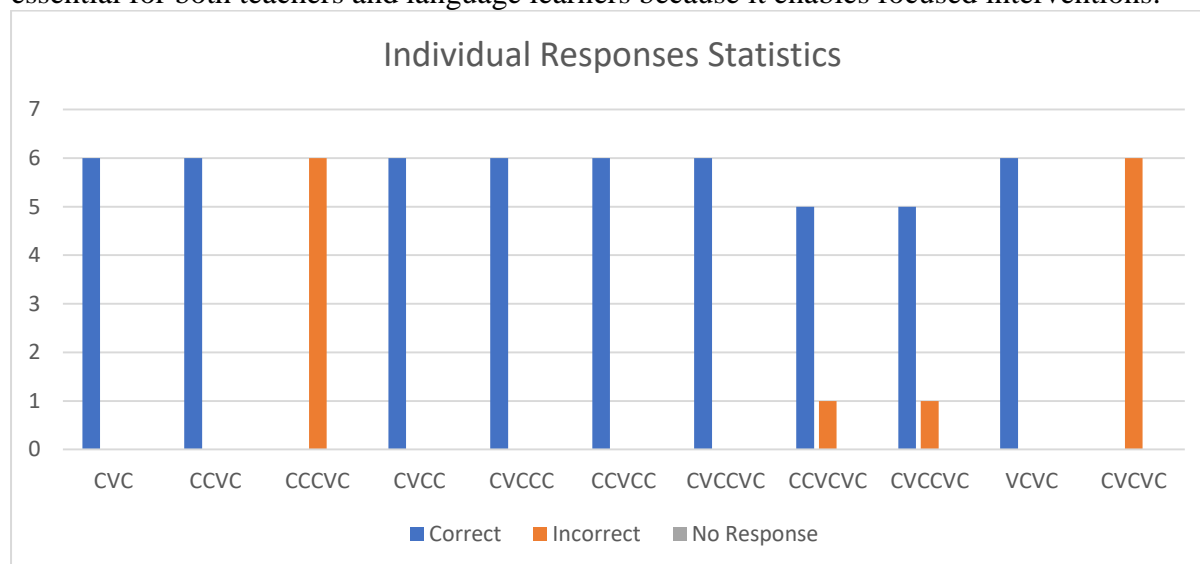

Figure: Individual responses in Pahari language

The phonological differences between Pahari and English are reflected in the different features of their syllable structures. Spoken in the Himalayan area, Pahari is a set of related Indo-Aryan languages that frequently have complicated syllable structures with consonant clusters and a preponderance of vowel sounds. It supports a range of vowel combinations inside syllables, which adds to the spoken form's melodic and rhythmically rich quality. English, on the other hand, often has simpler syllable patterns, usually consisting of a cluster of consonants before a vowel or a consonant followed by a vowel. Syllables in English are

usually arranged in a simpler manner than those in Pahari, which have more complex patterns. To grasp the unique phonetic subtleties and syllable patterns, language learners must acknowledge and adjust to these distinctions. The data indicate that Pahari speakers are unable to identify the correct patterns like CCVCC,CVCCVCV,VCVC. These patterns indicate that Pahari speakers are not using these pattern in their mother language or their mother language doesn't allow these structures.

Table 5: CVC syllable structure responses by Gojri speakers

CVC	CCVC	CCCVC	CVCC	CVCCC	CCVCC
√	√	∗	√	√	√
CVCCVC	CCVCVC	CCCVC	CVCCVC	VCVC	CVCVC
√	√	√	∗	√	∗

The above table shows that speakers of Gojri speakers face problems in the syllabification of the syllable structures CCCVC, CVCCVCV and CVCVC. The data indicates that the speakers of Gojri correctly syllabified the words having the syllable structures of CVC,CCVC,CVCC, CVCCVC,CCVCVC, CVCCVC, CCCVC, and CVCVC. The data indicates that Pahari speakers are unable to syllabified the complex structures having CCCVC, 'CVCCVC' and CVCVC syllable structures of the disyllabic words.

Table 4: Individual Responses of the syllable patterns

Pattern	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6
CVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No
CVCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCVCVC	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
CVCCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No
VCVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CVCVC	No	No	No	No	No	No

The results show that Gojri and English have quite different syllable structures, which are indicative of the phonological peculiarities of each language. When compared to English, the syllable structure of Gojri, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in portions of India and Pakistan, is usually more complicated. Gojri allows for more complex combinations of consonants within a syllable and frequently places consonant clusters at the start of syllables. The syllable structures of English, on the other hand, are often simpler and favor single consonants or small consonant clusters. Furthermore, Gojri is renowned for having a high vowel count, frequently using diphthongs and intricate vowel combinations within syllables, while English syllables typically have simpler vowel-consonant relationships.
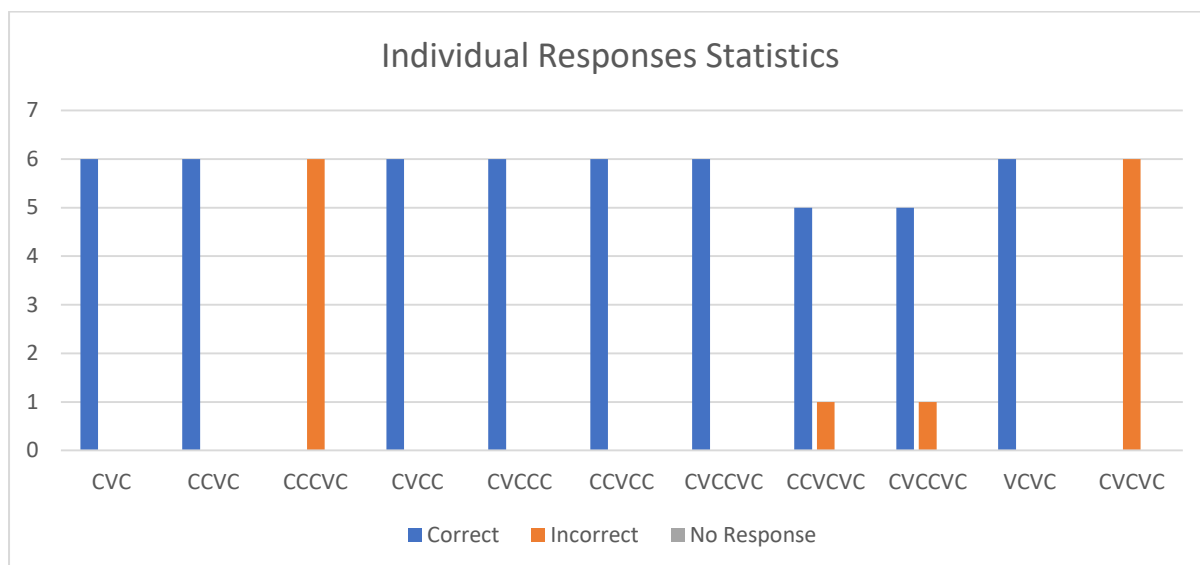
Figure: Individual responses in Gojri language

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that since Hindko and English have notably different syllable structures, Hindko speakers have difficulty understanding English. The syllabic pattern of Hindko, a Northwestern Indo-Aryan language predominantly spoken in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area, differs from that of English's more intricate and diverse syllables. Hindko's comparatively simple syllable patterns, which are frequently consonant-vowel combinations, make it challenging for speakers to understand the complex vowel combinations and consonant clusters that are common in English. Because of this structural difference, Hindko speakers may find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly. Furthermore, the language disparities could affect speech patterns and tempo, making it more difficult to communicate effectively in situations where others use English. Addressing these issues necessitates focused language training and an understanding of the distinct linguistic traits that impede smooth language learning for Hindko speakers transferring to English.

Furthermore, Pahari speakers face difficulties in understanding the English language, owing to the unique syllable structure inherent in Pahari vs English. Pahari, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in South Asia's hilly areas, has a simple syllabic structure with clear consonant-vowel pairings. This is in sharp contrast to the complex syllable patterns and consonant clusters found in English. The structural difference is a problem for Pahari speakers as they deal with the subtle phonetics and complex vowel sounds found in English words. This structural difference might cause pronunciation issues as well as a challenge with the rhythm of English speaking. To bridge this gap, focused language instruction must address the particular syllabic issues experienced by Pahari speakers, promoting a smoother transition. Bridging this gap requires focused language instruction that tackles the particular syllabic issues that Pahari speakers confront, allowing for a smoother transition and improving their English communication skills.

The study found that for Gojri speakers, navigating the English language is a significant problem due to fundamental disparities in syllable structure between Gojri and English. Gojri, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in several parts of South Asia, has a syllabic simplicity characterized by the use of open syllables and simple consonant-vowel pairings. The English language, on the other hand, uses a more complicated syllable structure that includes a wide range of consonant clusters and vowel pairings. This structural mismatch might make it difficult for Gojri speakers to effectively pronounce English words, resulting in pronunciation difficulty and even interruptions in speech flow. To overcome these hurdles, Gojri requires focused language teaching and an understanding of the specific phonetic properties of English.

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