

Gemination: A Pronunciation Challenge for Malayali Learners of English

Sunilkumar E S¹, Dr. Madan Prasad Singh²

Research Scholar, Department of English, Capital University, Jharkhand.

²Research Supervisor, Department of English, Capital University, Jharkhand.

Co-supervisor- Dr. Nandita Nath

Abstract

This study investigates the issue of gemination, or consonant lengthening, among Malayali learners of English. Gemination, a common phonological feature in Malayalam, involves the doubling or prolongation of consonant sounds. However, English lacks phonemic gemination, which leads to pronunciation challenges when Malayalam speakers transfer native phonological rules into English speech. The study reflects the causes of this phonological interference, establishes common pronunciation errors, and suggests pedagogical interventions to improve learners' pronunciation accuracy. Through focused pronunciation drills, listening exercises, and awareness-raising activities, the study recommends practical strategies for English teachers working with Malayali learners to enhance their intelligibility and confidence in spoken English.

Keywords: *Phonological Interference, Intelligibility, Orthography, Qualitative Coding, Communicative Competence, Pedagogical Strategy*

I. Introduction

Gemination refers to the phonological phenomenon where a consonant is articulated for a longer duration, effectively “doubling” the consonant sound. In languages such as Malayalam, gemination plays a phonemic role. It can distinguish the meaning between words. However, in English, gemination is not phonemic; that is, doubled consonant letters (e.g., in *butter* or *happy*) do not indicate an actual doubling in pronunciation. Malayali learners of English, whose first language (L1) is Malayalam, often face difficulties with mastering this distinction. When they encounter words with double consonant letters in English, they tend to produce them with excessive length or emphasis, transferring their L1 phonological patterns into English speech. This article examines how this transfer impacts pronunciation and intelligibility, highlighting the need for targeted pedagogical instruction to correct these errors.

II. Literature Review

Phonological transfer is a well-documented phenomenon in second language acquisition. According to Flege (1995), learners' L1 sound systems significantly influence their perception and production of L2 sounds. Malayalam, a Dravidian language, features extensive use of gemination as a contrastive feature (Asher & Kumari, 1997). This linguistic feature explains why Malayali learners often unintentionally carry gemination into their English pronunciation (e.g., pronouncing *butter* as *but-ter* with a longer /t/). In contrast, English employs doubled letters for orthographic rather than phonological purposes. For instance, in *better*, *supper*, or *runner*, the doubled consonants are pronounced as single sounds.

However, Malayali learners often misinterpret English orthography and produce these consonants with unnecessary length. It leads to over-articulation and reduced naturalness in speech. Previous studies (Rajendran, 2002; Devi, 2014) have shown that Indian learners display systematic interference from native phonological patterns when learning English pronunciation. Despite exposure to English education, these learners continue to exhibit L1-influenced features, including germination and vowel substitution. This study adds to the existing literature by focusing specifically on the phenomenon of gemination among Malayali learners and offering pedagogical solutions.

III. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach to analyze the pronunciation patterns related to gemination among Malayali learners. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the phonological interference caused by the influence of Malayalam on English pronunciation. The research focused on how learners articulate doubled consonants in English words and the extent to which their first language (L1) phonology affects their second language (L2) speech production.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 30 undergraduate students from various colleges in Kerala, all of whom were native speakers of Malayalam and learners of English as a second language. The participants were aged between 18 and 22 years and represented a range of academic disciplines. Most of them had received formal instruction in English since primary school, but had limited exposure to native English accents or explicit pronunciation training. All participants volunteered for the study and were informed about its purpose and procedures.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through three main instruments: reading tasks, listening and repetition drills, and semi-structured interviews. Each instrument was designed to capture different aspects of the learners' pronunciation patterns and awareness of gemination in English.

1. **Reading Tasks:**
Participants were provided with a carefully selected list of English words containing doubled consonant letters (e.g., *better, supper, puppet, bullet, yellow, pulling, summer, runner, occur*). They were asked to read the words aloud individually in a controlled setting. The reading task aimed to elicit natural pronunciations and identify any over-lengthening of consonants. Each participant's reading session was recorded using high-quality audio equipment to ensure clear phonetic analysis.

2. **Listening and Repetition Drills:**
To assess the learners' ability to perceive and reproduce correct pronunciation, participants listened to audio recordings of native English speakers pronouncing the same set of words, both in isolation and in meaningful sentences. After listening, they were asked to repeat each word and sentence. This activity was designed to reveal whether learners could adjust their articulation when presented with accurate pronunciation models and to examine the persistence of gemination even after auditory exposure to correct forms.

3. **Interviews:**
Following the pronunciation tasks, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative insights into learners' awareness and perceptions of consonant length in English. Participants were asked questions such as:

- Are you aware of the difference between doubled consonant letters and pronunciation length in English?
- Do you think doubled consonants should be pronounced longer?
- How do you usually learn pronunciation in English?

The interviews helped uncover learners' metalinguistic awareness and attitudes toward English pronunciation and gemination.

3.3 Data Analysis

The recordings from the reading and repetition tasks were subjected to auditory phonetic analysis to identify instances of over-gemination. Each occurrence of a doubled consonant was analyzed in terms of duration, intensity, and articulation. The researcher categorized the errors based on:

- Frequency of gemination: How often each consonant type (/p/, /t/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /k/) was over-lengthened.
- Type of error: Whether the gemination occurred due to orthographic influence (spelling-based) or phonological transfer (L1 influence).
- Context of occurrence: Whether errors were more frequent in isolated words or in connected speech.

Additionally, interview responses were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of phonological awareness, perceptual difficulty, and attitudinal factors influencing pronunciation. Qualitative coding was used to group responses into recurring themes such as "orthographic confusion," "L1 transfer," and "lack of exposure."

3.4 Findings

Analysis revealed a high frequency of gemination errors among participants. Most learners pronounced words such as *puppet, butter*, and *runner* with excessive length on the doubled consonant, similar to Malayalam geminates. This suggests a strong negative transfer from their L1 phonological system.

Common patterns observed:

- Over-lengthening of consonants: Learners prolonged sounds like /p/, /t/, /n/, and /l/ when they appeared as doubled letters in English words.
- Orthographic influence: Learners relied on spelling cues rather than phonetic realization, assuming that doubled letters represent longer sounds.
- Lack of phonological awareness: Few learners were aware that English does not distinguish meaning through consonant length.

These findings confirm that the problem stems from both phonological transfer and limited exposure to an accurate English pronunciation model. Learners who had regular interaction with native or proficient English speakers exhibited fewer gemination errors.

IV. Pedagogical Instructions

To effectively address gemination-related pronunciation issues among Malayali learners of English, structured and systematic instructional strategies are essential. Teachers should begin with explicit instruction on gemination, offering a clear theoretical explanation of how gemination functions in Malayalam and contrasting it with English pronunciation. It should be emphasized that in English, doubled consonant letters are not pronounced with a longer duration. Pronunciation drills can then be introduced using minimal pairs and targeted word lists such as *butter*, *better*, *summer*, *runner*, *pulling*, *yellow*, and *occur*, focusing on maintaining a single, natural articulation for doubled consonants. Rhythmic repetition and visual cues can be used to reinforce proper timing and fluency. Listening practice should form an integral part of training, incorporating audio recordings of native English speakers pronouncing words and sentences with double consonants. Learners should be encouraged to mimic, compare, and self-correct their pronunciation. Providing individualized feedback is also crucial. Instructors can employ phonetic transcription or visual analysis tools to highlight instances of over-gemination and demonstrate the correct articulation. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to integrate their improved pronunciation into real-life communication contexts such as classroom discussions, presentations, and conversations, ensuring that accurate pronunciation becomes habitual. Finally, the use of online pronunciation platforms can supplement classroom instruction by offering authentic listening models and practice opportunities. Through consistent application of these strategies, learners can significantly improve their pronunciation accuracy and confidence in English.

V. Conclusion

Gemination poses a significant pronunciation challenge for Malayali learners of English due to phonological transfer from Malayalam, where consonant length is a meaningful feature. The overemphasis of doubled consonants in English words often results in unnatural and less intelligible speech. However, through explicit instruction, focused drills, and continuous feedback, learners can overcome these difficulties. Teachers should emphasize phonological contrasts between Malayalam and English and create pronunciation exercises that promote awareness and accuracy. This approach not only enhances intelligibility but also contributes to overall communicative competence in English.

VI. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could focus on using acoustic analysis tools to measure the exact duration of consonant articulation among Malayali learners to provide quantitative evidence of gemination. Longitudinal studies can examine how pronunciation improves after focused instruction, while comparative studies across different regions or language backgrounds could reveal broader patterns of L1 influence. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of technology-based pronunciation training or classroom interventions would help develop more targeted pedagogical strategies to address gemination in English learning contexts.

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