



The Impact of Mother Tongue on Fourth-Grade Students' English Oral Reading Skills: Evidence from Three Primary Schools in Gofa Zone, Ethiopia

Yishak Abraham Reta¹ and Melese Mengesha Aklilu¹

¹Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia

Corresponding author email: yishak.abraham@amu.edu.et, yishakabr7@gmail.com

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Abstract

The influence of the Gofatho mother tongue on students' EFL learning has not been sufficiently examined; therefore, this study examined its impact on learners' English oral reading skills. The objectives of this study are to identify the most frequently mispronounced English letters and words due to the Gafatho language interference. Fifty fourth-grade students were selected through systematic random sampling from three primary schools in Sawla Town, Gofa Zone, Ethiopia. Data were collected using an oral reading test and analysed using descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and percentage. The findings revealed that many Gofatho-speaking students had difficulty pronouncing English letters and accurately decoding words. Some participants in the study struggled particularly with certain English letters, while most participants were unable to decode or pronounce many English words correctly. Although the two languages share similar orthographic features, differences in letter sounds led to frequent mispronunciations, sometimes resulting in changes in meaning. In the end, the study suggests reducing mother-tongue interference and improving English reading through guided oral reading. Students should be aware of the similarities and differences between the two languages, and EFL teachers should teach them to use phonics when learning to read.

Keywords: Oral reading, interference, Gofatho, Sight words, Upper and Lowercase letters

1. INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue (L1) refers to the language acquired during infancy or early childhood and is commonly known as a native language (Heritage & Montle, 2022; Nishanthi, 2020). It plays a fundamental role in children's cognitive and linguistic development by enabling them to communicate their feelings, emotions, and needs and supporting them in developing the basic language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. In contrast, a second language (L2) is a language that children learn after acquiring the first language (Nordquist, 2020).

Learning a second or foreign language is often a complex and demanding process (Izsak & Gréta, 2023). When learners begin to read or speak an L2, they frequently transfer sounds, patterns, or structures from their L1, which may result in language interference. Such interference can hinder effective L2 acquisition and performance. Several national-level studies conducted in Ethiopia—such as those by Tamiru et al. (2015), Gebeyanesh (2016), and Takele (2022)—have documented the influence of mother tongue interference on English learning. These studies, particularly those examining Afan Oromo interference at various linguistic levels, provide an important foundation for addressing similar challenges in other linguistic contexts.

Tamiru et al. (2015) emphasize that mastering a second or foreign language requires time and the gradual organization of linguistic knowledge into coherent systems. It is widely acknowledged that learners' first language inevitably influences their use of a second language. For example, according to Teklay (2011), students whose first language is Tigrigna have difficulty speaking and writing Amharic correctly at the phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels. The researchers have also observed that their students whose first languages are Gamotho, Wolatato, Sidamu, and Afan Oromo are experiencing difficulty pronouncing certain Amharic sounds, leading to errors in both spoken and written communication and, in some cases, changes in meaning. Similar challenges are evident in English language learning, where learners often struggle to pronounce English letters and decode words accurately.

Supporting this view, Deribe's (2019) study conducted in Yeka, Addis Ababa, revealed that many lower-grade students tend to rely on their mother tongue when processing English rather than

engaging directly with English reading. This dependence reduces learners' exposure to English and limits the development of independent reading skills, particularly at early grade levels.

Language interference generally refers to errors that occur when habits from the first language are transferred to the second language, affecting areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. If such factors are not properly recognized and addressed, they can result in weak language performance. Although out-of-school factors—such as learners' home backgrounds—are often considered influential in explaining student achievement, especially in developed countries (Tesfaye, 2009), mother tongue interference remains a significant source of error in second language production. From a behaviorist perspective, previously established linguistic habits may obstruct the formation of new ones, making interference a central concept within behaviorist learning theory (Tamiru et al., 2015).

In the context of Gofa Zone, Ethiopia, students speak and learn Gofatho as their first language and study English as a foreign language from grade one. Despite early exposure to English, many students continue to struggle to identify English letters and decode words. These difficulties suggest that learners' English oral reading skills are strongly influenced by their L1 speaking habits. Recognizing this issue, the researchers focused specifically on examining the impact of Gofatho on students' English oral reading performance. While language learning involves multiple skills—such as listening, writing, vocabulary, and grammar—the influence of L1 is most visibly reflected in oral reading. These considerations motivated the present study, which sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the most frequently mispronounced English letters resulting from Gofatho language interference with phonological differences.
- To identify the most frequently mispronounced English words due to Gofatho language interference related to limited decoding skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Gofatho

Gofatho is a language of the Omotic language family, part of the North Omotic Cluster. It is spoken by the people of Gofa as well as by residents of the various communities in the Gofa Zone. The

language is used by people residing in Demba Gofa, Geze Gofa, Zala, Gada, and Oyda Woreda, as well as in four town administrations: Sawla, Uba Debre-tsehay, Melo Koza, and Bulki. Gofatho language is in contact with several other languages, including Dawro, Konta, Wolaita, and Gamo. These languages have had a strong impact on the socio-cultural and linguistic character of one another. Anegagregn (2012) suggests that Gofa, Gamo, and Wolaita languages are mutually intelligible.

3.1.1.Previous Studies on Mother Tongue Interference

Numerous studies have examined the impact of students' mother tongue on learning English as a foreign language in other countries and in Ethiopia (Amon, 2019; Gebeyanesh, 2016; Oluwole, 2008; Oyewole, 2017; Tamiru et al., 2015; Tesfaye (2022); Wanna (2021). These studies consistently indicate that mother tongue negatively affects learners' pronunciation, writing, and overall communication skills in English.

Amon (2019) conducted a study to identify the phonological impact of the mother tongue on second- or foreign-language learning. The study sought to assess how the phonological effects of the mother tongue influence second- or foreign-language learning and to explore potential solutions to these effects in secondary schools. Selecting the samples using purposive and random sampling techniques, the researchers collected data through a questionnaire, observation, and interview and analyzed it applying descriptive and thematic analyses. The study found that the mother tongue had a negative effect on English learning. The Mother Tongue negatively affects students' knowledge of the target language. They may lack confidence in their fluency when using the target language, such as English, and fail to speak it smoothly in front of a native speaker. Their Mother Tongue negatively affects students' production of English phonology, such as stress and intonation.

Oluwole (2008) also conducted research to examine the influence of the use of the mother tongue on the performance in Junior School Certificate Examinations. The research also sought to establish whether the use of the mother tongue was the factor or factors responsible for students' performance in English examinations in Western Nigeria. Using simple random sampling, the researchers selected 35 male and 65 female students. The collected data through the self-reported

questionnaire were analyzed using simple percentages. The findings indicate that mother tongue is a factor contributing to students' poor performance in English in JSCE, but other factors, such as poor teaching methods, lack of textbooks, language background, and lack of professional growth and development among teachers, also contribute. The study suggests measures that could be taken to improve students' achievement across all aspects of the English language.

Moreover, Oyewole (2017) examined the impact of the mother tongue on the teaching and learning of English in secondary schools in Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 100 English-language teachers in Ondo State, Nigeria. Data obtained were analyzed using simple frequency counts, percentages, and Chi-square tests. The results of this study indicate that the use of the mother tongue positively impacts respondents' performance in speaking and writing English. However, it negatively impacts students' performance, knowledge of the basics of English grammar, and effective communication and writing in English.

A study was carried out by Gebeyanesh (2016) to examine the effect of Afan Oromo on the English orthography and pronunciation of the nine- and ten-grade students. The research involved 203 students and their 10 teachers, selected through a systematic random sampling technique. Data were obtained through classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data revealed that the interference of the students' mother tongue, Afan Oromo, was a significant issue in learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, the findings reveal that the participants in the study were motivated to learn English and use it fluently and proficiently. However, they struggled to distinguish the linguistic rules of Afan Oromo from those of English orthography and pronunciation, resulting in difficulties with writing and speaking English. Even the teachers mixed up the orthography and pronunciation of Afan Oromo while teaching English to their students.

Mengistu (2017) also conducted a study to investigate the influence of Sidaamu Afoo on the writing skills of grade nine students using a descriptive survey design. A total of 176 grade nine students were sampled from three randomly selected Secondary Schools in Arbegona Woreda, Sidama Zone, Ethiopia. Data for the study were gathered by administering a writing skills test. To analyze the collected data, contrastive and error analyses were used. Results indicate that Sidaamu Afoo interfered with students' writing proficiency in several forms of error, namely spelling,

structure, lexical use, grammar, lexical selection, and omission, which were high among the subjects. Sidaamu Afoo's interference seemed to stem from a similar language structure, a lack of awareness of phonetic-graphical correspondences, over-dependence on the mother tongue, poor drills, and a lack of a broad scope for selecting lexes in English.

Tamiru et al. (2015) investigated whether mother-tongue interference affects the written English of ninth-grade students at Derge Senior Secondary School. To meet this objective, the researchers used systematic random sampling and purposive sampling to select 90 grade nine students and three English teachers. They collected data through a questionnaire, descriptive paragraphs, and interviews. The researchers classified errors in the written paragraphs into four categories: spelling, grammar, word order, and coordination of ideas. The findings reveal that mother-tongue interference led to spelling, grammar, and word-order errors in English writing. The study recommends that teachers be aware of the negative transfer of grammar from the mother tongue and employ more effective teaching and learning strategies to mitigate it.

Tesfaye (2009) examined the impact of mother tongue and other related factors on grade nine students' English language learning. To achieve this objective, the researchers used a descriptive survey method by selecting 200 grade nine students, ten English teachers and three school principals from three schools in Arsi zone, Ethiopia, applying a stratified sampling technique, and a comprehensive sampling technique, respectively. The data collected through open- and closed-ended questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings of the study show that English language learners whose first language is Afan Oromo have difficulty clearly identifying certain English letters due to vowel length and consonant germination in their first language.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

The In this study, the findings are built upon a CAH perspective. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) offers a theoretical perspective for explaining problems encountered in second language acquisition (SLA) (Khansir & Pakdel, 2019). It claims that much of L2 difficulties arise from the interference, or "negative transfer", of one's native-language habits. According to Khansir & Pakdel (2019), CAH argues that similar features in L1 and L2 lead to "positive transfer," whereas differences lead to specific, predictable errors in the L2. The CAH proves useful in the

analyses herein, since the decoding failures/mispronunciations of Gofatho learners of English were explained by mapping the regularity of their native-language grapheme-phoneme correspondence (the grapheme-phoneme relationships in Gofatho) onto the irregularity and ambiguity of the phonological organization of the L2. This argument leads us to expect specific errors when Gofatho speakers attempt to decode English words.

3.1.2.Mother Tongue (Gofatho) Interference on English Reading

Applying the CAH to this study, the differences between Gofatho and English clearly explain students' reading difficulties. Gofatho has a consistent phoneme–grapheme correspondence, where each letter represents a single sound and all letters are pronounced. In contrast, English has an irregular orthographic system, in which letters can represent multiple sounds, sounds can be spelled in different ways, and some letters are silent.

Due to these differences, Gofatho-speaking students transfer their native language rules to reading in English. As a result, they:

- Pronounce all letters, including silent ones,
- Confuse consonant sounds such as f/v and p/b,
- Mispronounce vowels (i, e, u), and
- Substitute unfamiliar sounds like /ð/ with /θ/.

These difficulties lead to incorrect or meaningless pronunciations, such as saying "chat" for "cat" or /'fɔbɜr/ for "cover". In some cases, students fail to read words correctly and instead apply Gofatho pronunciation patterns.

From the perspective of CAH, these errors are systematic and predictable because they stem from differences between the two languages. Thus, Gofatho mother tongue interference has a strong negative effect on English reading, resulting in mispronunciation, misunderstanding, and loss of meaning.

Overall, the reviewed studies mainly concentrated on secondary school students and writing skills, with little focus on primary school learners and oral reading. Therefore, this study aims to address

this gap by examining the influence of Gofatho on primary school students' English oral reading skills.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.2. Research Design

The design for this research is a descriptive survey with a quantitative approach. According to Orodho (2004), a descriptive survey research design enables the researchers to collect information about people's opinions, attitudes, and a variety of educational or social issues that affect them. The implementation of a descriptive design is appropriate because it aims to describe and analyze existing practices of mother tongue interference in students' oral reading of English. Thus, it enabled the researchers to obtain quantitative data on the impact of mother tongue interference (i.e., Gofatho) on students' English-language oral reading in selected primary schools within the Sawla town administration, Gofa zone, Ethiopia.

3.3. Population, Samples and Sampling Techniques

In the study area, two mediums of instruction (Gofatho and Amharic) are used by primary school (PS) students, even within the same school. The study population consisted of fourth-grade students who used Gofatho as the medium of instruction in three schools: Botre PS (N=80), Kusti PS (N=82), and Birhan PS (N=38). Therefore, the total population included 200 students. For the study, 50 students were selected as a sample using systematic random sampling.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

Data for the current study were gathered using English oral reading tests. The aim of these data collection tools was to investigate how students' mother tongues influenced their ability to read English letters, and words aloud. The test questions were adapted from Tadesse (2012); therefore, all English letters of the alphabet were included, along with words from the students' textbook. The test was evaluated by the EFL teachers with PhD holders, who are experts in the English as a foreign language teaching. Thus, 26 English-language uppercase and lowercase letters and 44 sight words from the students' textbook were provided to the students to read, depending on the objectives of the study. This tool was used as the primary data-gathering instrument for the study,

as it can capture real phenomena from the source and helps the researchers achieve both research objectives.

3.5. Data Collecting Procedure

Using the adapted and evaluated oral reading test, the researchers collected data from the study participants as follows. First, a permission letter from the Arba Minch University School of Postgraduate Studies program office was obtained. With the school's permission, the researchers visited the selected schools to obtain permission from the administrators and to schedule data collection appointments with the respondents. Subsequently, meetings were held with the school principals to address the issues, and appointments were made with the study participants. Thus, the researchers explained to the respondents the purpose of the research, emphasizing that the information they provided would be used only for research purposes and would be treated confidentially, with their identities not being revealed. Then the researchers tested the 50 students selected to participate in the study, one by one. Each student's oral reading of English letters and word decoding was also recorded for effective transcription.

3.6. Data Analysis Method

Data analysis involves data classification, coding, and entry to enable interpretation. It is also concerned with the statistics that are used to analyze data, that is, the organization, interpretation, and presentation of collected data (Oso & Onen, 2005). Therefore, descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze the quantitative data collected through the oral reading test, which were transcribed, coded, tabulated, described, and presented in tables. To analyze the quantitative data, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26 was used to compute frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results

To facilitate a clear and systematic analysis of the data, the researchers categorized the students' reading performance into three groups: *Read Correctly*, *Read Incorrectly*, and *Unable to Read*. This classification was intended to simplify the presentation and discussion of the results while distinguishing between students who misread a letter and those who were unable to read it at all.

4.1.1. The Most Mispronounced Letters due to Gofatho Interference

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the most commonly mispronounced letters P, Y, V, and L

	Correct		Missed					Unable to Read	
Letters	F	P				Total			
			Phonetic Description	F	P	F	P		
P	13	26%	/fi:/ fi	15	30%	37	74%	0	0%
			/ɛf/ef	13	26%				
			/ɛp/ ep	9	18%				
Y	16	32%	/wi:/wi	14	28%	32	64%	2	4%
			/yi:/ yi	9	18%				
			/ri:/ ri	9	18%				
V	21	42%	/bi:/ bi	21	42%	28	56%	1	2%
			/ʊ:/ u	7	14%				
L	25	50%	/li:/ li	22	44%	25	50%	0	0%
			/i:/ l	3	12%				

According to Table 1, many participants experienced difficulty identifying and pronouncing the English consonant letters P, Y, V, and L. Among these letters, P was the most frequently mispronounced. Only 13 students (26%) pronounced the letter P correctly, whereas 37 students (74%) mispronounced it. Among those who mispronounced it, 15 students (30%) pronounced it as /fi:/ ("fi"), 13 students (26%) pronounced it as /ɛf/ ("ef"), and 9 students (18%) pronounced it as /ɛp/ ("ep"). None of the participants were unable to read the letter.

Similarly, only 16 students (32%) correctly pronounced the letter Y, while 32 students (64%) mispronounced it, and 2 students (4%) were unable to read it. Among those who mispronounced the letter, 14 students (28%) pronounced it as /wi:/ ("wi"), 9 students (18%) pronounced it as /yi:/ ("yi"), and another 9 students (18%) pronounced it as /ri:/ ("ri"). A small proportion of students, (4%) did not attempt to pronounce the letter.

The findings further indicate that students performed slightly better with the letters “V” and “L” than with “W” and “Y.” Out of the total participants, 21 students (40%) correctly pronounced the letter “V,” while 28 students (56%) mispronounced it. Among those who mispronounced the letter,

21 students (42%) pronounced it as /bi:/ ("bi"), while 7 students (14%) pronounced it as /u:/ while others pronounced it as the letter ("u").

Regarding the letter “L,” 25 students (50%) pronounced it correctly, while the remaining 25 students (50%) experienced difficulty. Among those who mispronounced it, 22 students (44%) pronounced it as “li” (as in “lit” and “list”), while they were expected to read as the letter sound; a smaller proportion (6%) pronounced it as “i” None of the participants were unable to read the letter.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of the most mispronounced letters W, Q, F, C, G, R, and X

	Correct		Missed					Unable to Read	
Letters	F	P	Total		Attempted			F	P
			F	P	Phonetic Description	F	P		
W	25	50%	24	48%	/wi:/	21	42%	1	2%
					/yi:/	3	6%		
Q	27	54%	22	44%	/qi:/	15	30%	1	2%
					/əu/	7	14%		
F	28	56%	22	44%	/ep/	11	22%	0	0%
					/pi:/	11	22%		
C	30	60%	20	40%	/tʃ/	40	40%	0	0%
G	31	62%	19	38%	/gi:/	12	24%	0	0%
					/dʒei/	5	10%		
					/si:/	2	4%		
R	32	64%	18	36%	/ri:/	18	36%	0	0%
X	32	64%	18	36%	/tsi:/	18	36%	0	0%

The English letters W, Q, F, C, G, R, and X were mispronounced by a substantial proportion of the students (see Table 2). According to the table, 25 students (50%) correctly pronounced the letter W, whereas 24 students (48%) mispronounced it and 1 student (2%) was unable to read it. Among those who mispronounced the letter, 21 students (42%) pronounced it as /wi:/, while 3 students (6%) pronounced it as /yi:/.

Regarding the letter Q, 27 students (54%) pronounced it correctly, whereas 22 students (44%) mispronounced it and 1 student (2%) was unable to read it. Among those who mispronounced the

letter, 15 students (30%) pronounced it as /ki:/, while 7 students (14%) pronounced it as /əʊ/ (the name of the letter O).

For the letter F, 28 students (56%) pronounced it correctly, whereas 22 students (44%) mispronounced it. Among those who mispronounced the letter, 11 students (22%) pronounced it as /ɛp/ ("ep"), while the remaining 11 students (22%) pronounced it as /pi:/ ("pi"). None of the students were unable to read the letter.

Similarly, 30 students (60%) correctly pronounced the letter C, while 20 students (40%) mispronounced it. All of the students who mispronounced the letter pronounced it as /tʃ/. None of the participants were unable to read the letter.

As shown in Table 2, students performed relatively better on the letters G, R, and X. Specifically, 31 students (62%) correctly pronounced the letter G, whereas 19 students (38%) mispronounced it. Among those who mispronounced the letter, 12 students (24%) pronounced it as /gi:/, 5 students (10%) pronounced it as /dʒeɪ/ (the name of the letter J), and 2 students (4%) pronounced it as /si:/ (the name of the letter C). None of the students were unable to read the letter.

For the letter R, 32 students (64%) pronounced it correctly, while 18 students (36%) mispronounced it. All of those who mispronounced the letter pronounced it as /ri:/. Likewise, 32 students (64%) correctly pronounced the letter X, whereas 18 students (36%) mispronounced it by pronouncing it as /tsi:/. None of the students were unable to read either of these letters.

4.1.2. The Most Frequently Misread Words due to Gofatho Interference

Table 3 Non-decoded words by most of the students

Words	Corre ct	P	Misread Words					Unable to Read	
	F		F	P	Phonetic Description	F	P	F	P
appear /ə'piər/	0	0%	50	100%	/a'fi:r/	20	40%	0	0%
					/ʌpər/	16	32%		
					/ə'pɑ:r/	14	28%		
Fungus /fʌŋgəs/	0	0%	49	98%	/fʊndʒʊs:/	12	24%	1	0%
					pʊŋgʊs/	18	36%		
					/pʊndʒʊs/	19	38%		
Sure /ʃʊər:/	0	0%	50	100%	/sʊrə/	27	54%	0	0%
					/sʊr/	23	46%		
Perfect /'pɜ:fɪkt/	3	6%	43	86%	/pɜ:rpɛkt/	17	34%	4	8%
					/pɜ:rɛɟˈt/	13	26%		
					/fɜ:rfɛkt/	13	26%		
focus /'fəʊkəs/	4	8%	45	90%	/fəʃfʊs/	26	52%	1	2%
					/fəkjʊs/	16	30%		
					pəʊkəs/	10	18%		
picture /'pɪktʃə/	4	8%	43	86%	/pɪktʃərə/	16	32%	3	6%
					/pɪktor/	16	32%		
					/fɪɟtər/	11	22%		

Table 3 displays the percentage of test takers who were able to decode fewer than five words out of the 44 provided. According to the table, none of the students was able to correctly decode the words “appear,” “fungus,” and “sure.” However, some students attempted to decode these words by modifying one or two sounds.

Among the students who attempted the word “appear,” 20 (40%) changed the consonant sound /p/ to /f/, pronouncing it as “afear” /a'fiər/. Meanwhile, 32% pronounced it as “aper” /ʌpər/ by shifting the vowel sound /ɪə/ to /ə/. Additionally, 28% of the students decoded the word as “apar” /ə'pɑ:r/ by changing the vowel sound /ɪə/ to /ɑ:/.

Similarly, 24% of the students mispronounced the word “fungus” as “funjus” /fʊndʒʊs/ by replacing the consonant sound /g/ with /dʒ/ and the vowel sound /ə/ with /ʊ/. In comparison, 36%

pronounced it as /pongus/ by altering the vowel sounds, while 40% produced /pondʒus/ by changing both the vowel /ə/ to /ʊ/ and the consonant /g/ to /dʒ/.

For the word “sure,” 27 (54%) of the students pronounced it as /sore/ by replacing the consonant /ʃ/ with /s/ and altering the vowel sound. Meanwhile, 23 (46%) pronounced it as /sor/ by changing only the consonant /ʃ/ to /s/.

According to Table 3, only a small number of students correctly decoded the words “perfect,” “focus,” and “picture.” Specifically, 3 students (6%) correctly decoded “perfect,” while 4 students (8%) each correctly decoded “focus” and “picture.” In contrast, 4 students (8%) did not attempt the word “perfect,” 1 student (2%) did not attempt “focus,” and 3 students (6%) did not attempt “picture.”

A large majority of the students (86%) were unable to decode the word “perfect” correctly. Among them, 34% pronounced it as “perpect” /pɜːrpekt/ by replacing /f/ with /p/. Additionally, 26% pronounced it as “perfecht” /pɜːrfɛʃt/ by replacing /k/ with /tʃ/, while others produced “ferfect” /fɜːrfɛkt/ by changing the initial /p/ to /f/.

Less than one-tenth of the students correctly read the words “focus” and “picture.” Many students mispronounced “focus,” with over 50% producing “fochus” by replacing /k/ with /tʃ/ and /ə/ with /ʊ/. Approximately one-third pronounced it as “focuyus” by inserting the semivowel /j/ and changing /ə/ to /ʊ/. A smaller proportion (16%) pronounced it as “pocus” by replacing /f/ with /p/.

Regarding the word “picture,” 86% of the students had difficulty pronouncing it correctly, while only 8% produced the correct pronunciation. Many students pronounced it as “pikchure,” sounding the silent “e.” An equal proportion (32%) pronounced it as “piʃtur” by changing the vowel /ə/ to /ʊ/. Additionally, 22% pronounced it as “fichter” by replacing /p/ with /f/ and “c” with the affricate /tʃ/.

Overall, the findings indicate a strong influence of Gofatho phonology on students' oral reading. The word *appear* was mispronounced by all participants, with the most common error being the substitution of /p/ with /f/, producing /a'fiər/. Similarly, more than half of the students replaced /ʃ/ with /s/ when pronouncing *sure*, suggesting transfer from the Gofatho sound system. The

pronunciation of *fungus* also showed multiple first-language influences, including the substitution of /f/ with /p/, /g/ with /dʒ/, and changes in vowel quality. These pronunciation errors reduced intelligibility and may have affected listeners' understanding of the intended words.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the Most Misread Words

Words	Correct		Misread Words					Unable to Read	
	F	P	F	P	Phonetic Description	F	P	F	P
Kind /kʌnd/	5	10%	44	88%	/kindi:/	23	46%	1	2%
					/kind/	21	42%		
blood /blʌd/	6	12%	42	84%	/bləʊd/	16	32%	2	4%
					/blɒdi:/	14	28%		
					/bɒldi/	12	24%		
Urgent /'æ:dʒ(ə)n t/	8	16%	40	80%	/urgənt/	15	30%	2	4%
					/yourgənt/	13	26%		
					/urdʒənt/	12	12%		
Watch /wɒtʃ/	8	16%	39	78%	/wʌtɪʃ/	24	48%	3	6%
					/wʌɪt/	15	30%		
erb /və:b/	9	18%	39	78%	/bɜrb/	15	30%	2	4%
					/bɜrv/	12	24%		
					/bɪrb/	12	24%		

Of the 50 students who took the oral reading skills test, 5 out of the 44 words were decoded by fewer than 10 but more than 5 students. These words were “kind,” “blood,” “urgent,” “watch,” and “verb.” One in ten students correctly decoded the word “kind,” and only one student did not attempt it. More than 80% of the students attempted the word but failed to decode it correctly. Nearly half of these students pronounced it as “kindi,” while the other half read it as “kind,” similar to “killed,” by changing the /aɪ/ sound to /i/.

Only 12% of the students correctly decoded the word “blood,” and two students did not attempt it. Although more than 80% attempted the word, they were unable to decode it correctly. Among these students, more than 30% pronounced “blood” as /bilood/, adding the vowel /i/ at both the

beginning and the end of the word and replacing the vowel /ʌ/ with /o/. More than half of the students pronounced it as /bilud/, replacing the vowel /ʌ/ with /u/.

Similarly, 16% of the students correctly decoded the word “urgent,” while 2% did not attempt it. About 80% attempted the word but mispronounced it by substituting one or two sounds. More than half of these students replaced one vowel sound, while the remaining 36% altered two vowel sounds.

While 16% of the students correctly read the word “watch,” only a few did not attempt it. However, 78% of the students attempted the word but failed to pronounce it correctly. More than half of these students pronounced it as /wʌtɪʃ/, while the remaining 30% read it as /watkʰ/.

Another word that was correctly read by only a small number of students were “verb,” with about one-fifth pronouncing it correctly and very few not attempting it. Most students attempted the word but mispronounced it by changing both a consonant and a vowel sound, producing forms such as “verv” (/bɜrv/) and “berb” (/bɪrb/).

Overall, the findings indicate substantial mother tongue interference in students' English oral reading. Most errors involved systematic substitution of English consonants and vowels with sounds from Gofatho, reflecting the influence of the learners' first-language phonological system. These substitutions often altered the pronunciation of target words, reducing intelligibility and making some words difficult to recognize. Although a few words remained partially recognizable, many pronunciation errors obscured the intended meaning, demonstrating that Gofatho interference affected both pronunciation accuracy and the communication of meaning during oral reading.

4.2. Discussion

The study aimed to identify the most frequently mispronounced letters, misread words, and word-meaning fallacies caused by Gofatho interference. To achieve these objectives, data were collected from 50 fourth-grade students across three primary schools in the Gofa Zone, Ethiopia, using systematic random sampling. The data obtained through the oral reading test were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage).

The results of the English oral reading test reveal that Gofatho-speaking students consistently mispronounced the letters “P,” “Y,” “V,” “L,” “W,” “Q,” “F,” “C,” “G,” “R,” and “X,” with 36% to 74% of students failing to pronounce them correctly. This may be attributed to orthographic similarities between Gofatho and English, where identical letters represent different sounds. For instance, students pronounced the English letter **P** as /fi/ and /ɛf/ due to interference from Gofatho. Since Gofatho lacks words beginning with the /f/ sound, learners have limited exposure to its production in English.

Similarly, students used “P” and “F” interchangeably. The letter **W** was pronounced as /wi/ instead of “double-u,” reflecting Gofatho pronunciation patterns. The letter **Y** was also pronounced as /yi/, /wi/, or /ri/ due to sound similarity and visual association with other letters. These findings are consistent with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), which explains that differences between L1 and L2 lead to learning difficulties, while similarities facilitate positive transfer.

The findings of Gebeyanesh (2016) also support this result, indicating that English consonant sounds are challenging for Ethiopian learners due to interference from their first language. Similarly, Tamiru et al. (2015) and Tesfaye (2022) found that mother tongue interference affects students’ pronunciation and decoding ability, leading to systematic errors in English reading and writing.

Students also mispronounced many English letters due to influence from Gofatho phonological patterns. For example, “F” was pronounced as /ɛp/ or /pi/, “W” as /wi/ or /yi/, and “L” as /li/ or /i/. In some cases, “C” was pronounced as /dʒi:/, suggesting confusion between letter names rather than direct phonological transfer. According to Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967), such errors reflect learners’ internal linguistic systems rather than random mistakes.

Furthermore, students had difficulty producing sounds such as /ð/, replacing them with /θ/, due to the absence of voiced dental fricatives in Gofatho. This finding is supported by Flege’s Speech Learning Model (1995), which states that learners substitute unfamiliar L2 sounds with the closest L1 equivalents.

The results also show that pronunciation errors often affected meaning or resulted in non-words. For example, “cat” was misread as “chat,” and “cover” was pronounced as a non-word form

“chober.” These errors indicate that mother tongue interference not only affects pronunciation accuracy but also reduces intelligibility and may distort meaning.

The findings further reveal that students experience considerable difficulty in reading English words due to orthographic similarities among letters with different phonological values. These discrepancies often lead to mispronunciations that reduce intelligibility and may obscure meaning. Overall, this highlights the complex interaction between orthography and phonology in second language acquisition and confirms the strong influence of Gofatho on students’ English oral reading performance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The data obtained from English oral reading tests administered to students indicate that mother tongue interference constitutes a significant challenge in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in the context of reading aloud at Botre, Kusti, and Birhan Primary Schools. The results further confirm that the majority of students’ reading difficulties can be attributed to first-language interference. While the use of the mother tongue may facilitate the initial stages of target language acquisition, especially for beginners, it should be employed judiciously. In practice, mother tongue interference is an inevitable aspect of English language teaching and learning; however, appropriate pedagogical strategies are necessary to mitigate its effects.

The findings also reveal that students experience considerable difficulty in reading words due to orthographic similarities among letters whose corresponding sounds differ. These discrepancies often lead to mispronunciations that either change the intended meaning or render the words meaningless. Overall, these challenges highlight the complex relationship between orthography and phonology in second language acquisition.

Overall, the test results demonstrate multiple challenges faced by students in learning English. Many students struggled to read English letters and words; when prompted to read aloud, they either remained silent or substituted English pronunciations with Gofatho equivalents. Difficulties were also observed in handling silent letters, as well as in producing appropriate stress and intonation patterns. Additionally, students tended to lengthen vowel sounds, particularly at the

ends of words. These pronunciation issues frequently led to semantic distortions or, in some cases, meaningless utterances.

Based on these findings, the study recommends several measures to reduce the influence of the mother tongue and improve students' English reading proficiency through guided oral reading. Learners should be encouraged to develop awareness of the similarities and differences between their first language and English. Furthermore, systematic phonological training should be provided by teachers and, where possible, supported by parents to enhance students' pronunciation and overall oral reading skills.

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