

WORD STRESS AND PROMINENCE.

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Abstract. *Word stress and prominence in sentences are key elements of English phonology, significantly influencing speech clarity, interpretation of meaning, and effective communication. The proper placement of stress determines the rhythm of spoken language, aids in distinguishing word meanings, and directs listeners to the most important information in a discussion. This research explores the roles of stress and prominence in English, utilizing established phonological studies while also presenting an original analysis of ten multisyllabic words and ten sentences, which change meaning based on focal stress. The results highlight the educational significance of clear, systematic teaching and reveal that focused practice enhances learners' pronunciation, understanding of discourse, and confidence in communication.*

Keywords: *word stress, sentence prominence, English phonology, discourse, pronunciation pedagogy*

Introduction

The clarity of spoken English greatly relies on the effective coordination of stress, rhythm, and intonation. Among these components, word stress the relative emphasis given to a syllable and sentence prominence the highlighting of information-rich elements in a clause play a particularly significant role. Misplacement of stress can lead to misunderstandings, even when individual sounds are pronounced correctly. In contrast, correct stress improves clarity, aids in lexical identification, and contributes to the inherent melody of English.

Studies in discourse analysis (McCarthy, 1991) and phonetics (Roach, 2000) highlight that stress operates on various linguistic levels[1]. At the lexical level, it distinguishes homographs and establishes expected pronunciation guidelines. At the sentence level, prominence structures the information by indicating new, contrastive, or crucial content. For language learners, these aspects can be particularly challenging due to the influence of their native language, limited exposure, and a tendency to focus on written form rather than phonological aspects.

This research revisits the teaching significance of stress and prominence and offers a detailed examination of common challenges faced by learners through specific examples. A selection of ten multisyllabic words and ten sentences has been made to demonstrate the implications and nature of stress placement, providing an empirical basis for the subsequent pedagogical recommendations..

Research Questions

1. In what ways does word stress affect intelligibility, lexical retrieval, and communication in English?
2. What significance does sentence prominence hold in the interpretation of discourse and pragmatic meaning?
3. Which teaching methods are the most effective for instructing stress and prominence to English learners?

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive framework was utilized to examine patterns of stress and prominence as demonstrated by intermediate English learners. The study unfolded in three phases:

1. Data Collection: Recordings of learner speech along with classroom observations were obtained from intermediate-level students participating in reading aloud and spontaneous discussion activities.

2. Analytical Procedure: Drawing on the principles outlined by McCarthy (1991) and Roach (2000), the data were scrutinized for patterns in syllable stress, focal prominence, and rhythm. Recurring errors were identified and classified. A selection of ten words and ten sentences was made to represent typical stress-related difficulties[2].

3. Pedagogical Synthesis: In response to the observed needs of learners, a series of instructional strategies including visual aids, auditory examples, minimal-pair practices, and group speaking exercises—were developed to enhance learning outcomes.

Results

Learners often incorrectly place primary stress in multisyllabic words, a trend that can be linked to reliance on orthography and the impact of their native language's stress patterns. Frequent issues included placing stress on the first syllable of words that require later stress or overly stressing several syllables. Below is the analysis of ten word stress.

Numbers	Words	Correct IPA and stress	Common errors	Explanations
1	reliability	/rɪˌlaɪəˈbɪləti/	/'reɪlɪəbɪlɪti/	Primary stress is on the 4th syllable .
2	environment	/ɪnˈvaɪrənmənt/	/enˈvaɪrəment/	Central vowel reduction is essential.
3	architecture	/'ɑːrkɪtektʃər/	/arˈkaitektyur/	Stress on the 1st syllable .
4	opportunity	/.ɑːpərˈtuːnəti/	/'oppɔrtʊnɪti/	Stress on the 3rd syllable .
5	globalization	/.ˌɡləʊbələˈzeɪʃən/	/'ɡləʊbəlɪzəʃən/	Primary stress

				falls near the end .
6	analysis	/ə'næləsis/	/'analysis/	Repeated word avoided before; included again for pattern.
7	creativity	/,kri:ei'tiviti/	/'kreativity/	Stress on the 3rd syllable , not 1st.
8	psychology	/saɪ'kɑ:lədʒi/	/pɪ'skolodʒi/	Silent p and stress on 2nd syllable .
9	negotiation	/ni,ɡoʊʃi'eɪʃən/	/,negotʃi'eɪʃən/	Stress marked toward the end.
10	pronunciation	/prə,nʌnsi'eɪʃən/	/proʊ,nʌnsi'eɪʃən/	Vowel change from pronounce.

These examples demonstrate that stress placement can significantly influence meaning, pragmatic force, and the listener's interpretation of communicative intent.

Here analysis of 10 sentence with variable prominence .

Sentences	Prominent Word	Meaning shift
I can't believe he BOUGHT that expensive phone.	BOUGHT	Focus on buying, not receiving.
We're meeting them TOMORROW .	TOMORROW	The time of meeting is important.
They NEVER told me the truth.	NEVER	They did not tell me at any time.
I said I'd help YOU , not your brother.	YOU	Highlights who is being helped.
She FINALLY passed the exam.	FINALLY	Outcome took a long time.
I really think this idea is BRILLIANT .	BRILLIANT	Strong positive evaluation.
He didn't break the window — the WIND did.	WIND	Focus shifts blame.
You should ALWAYS	ALWAYS	Stresses the importance of

check your answers.		consistency.
I asked him to EXPLAIN the problem.	EXPLAIN	Action of clarifying is emphasized.
She WANTED to call you yesterday.	Wanted	Emphasizes desire, not obligation

The following instructional strategies are suggested, based on the analysis:

1. Explicit instruction on stress patterns should be implemented, including syllable breakdown, the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and visual marking of primary and secondary stress.
2. Sentence-level visualization techniques, such as bolding, arrows, or underlining, should be employed to highlight prominence and demonstrate meaning shifts.
3. Minimal-pair stress drills should be utilized to practice words like "record," "present," and "produce" to emphasize the impact of stress on meaning.
4. Audio modeling and shadowing exercises, where learners imitate authentic speech rhythms from native-speaker audio, are recommended.
5. Collaborative tasks, such as pair or group reading, peer correction, and stress identification activities, should be incorporated.
6. Discourse-based practice, integrating stress work into activities like storytelling, role-plays, debates, and information-gap tasks, is advised.

This research provides a clear analysis of the essential role that word stress and sentence emphasis play in English pronunciation and discourse comprehension. It shows that these suprasegmental features are not simple phonetic details, but core elements that organize information, signal speaker intention, and support effective communication. The study of multisyllabic words highlights common learner difficulties, especially those linked to spelling confusion and first-language influence. Likewise, the analysis of sentences sensitive to prominence demonstrates how focal stress changes rhythm, meaning, and pragmatic effect. Together, the findings confirm that accurate stress use is vital for conveying clear meaning and producing smooth, listener-friendly speech. Pedagogically, the results emphasize the need for systematic stress instruction using explanation, modelling, visual support, and interactive practice. When combined, these techniques help learners develop intuitive and accurate control of English prosody.

In conclusion, the study shows that mastering word stress and sentence emphasis is key to advanced spoken proficiency. It also offers practical guidance for language teachers and suggests that future research explore how digital tools such as speech visualizers and AI-based feedback can further support learners in acquiring native-like stress patterns.

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