

# Stressing Polysyllabic Words. Un-academic Activities for an Academic Matter

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## Introduction

It has long been argued that incorrect stress placement is a major cause of intelligibility problems for foreign learners (Kingdom, 1958; Kenworthy, 1987; Cruttenden, 2014). To begin with, correct word stress patterns are essential for the learner's perception and production of English since vowel quality is frequently influenced by the presence or absence of stress: both the learner and the native speaker may have difficulty understanding a word if it does not match the setting stored in their mental lexicon. This means the learner may not recognize a spoken word he actually knows if he has fixed the wrong word stress pattern, and the native speaker may not understand the foreigner who applies word stress wrongly. Moreover, incorrect word stress also has an impact on rhythm and nuclear accent (though these are beyond the scope of the present paper).

Secondly, different experiments carried out on accent perception (in Bryla-Cruz, 2016) show that wrong word stress placement is one of the factors that create a foreign accent. Walker (British Council Spain, 2014) distinguishes between intelligibility (being understood) and having a foreign accent. Whereas he claims that words stress does not usually cause intelligibility problems in lingua franca contexts –that is to say, among speakers of different languages other than English–, he says that it *does* create an accent. He also suggests that this issue is very important if the

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Ideas, IV, 4 (2018), pp. 1-11

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learner's goal is comfortable intelligibility (a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the native listener) or a native-like accent.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of dealing with word stress in a systematic way. For that purpose, I first include a brief introduction on polysyllabic word stress patterns, learning implications and the use of fun as a methodological framework. This section is then followed by suggested activities which can be used at different stages of the lesson in order to present, practise or revise the topic in a fun way.

## 1. Word Stress Patterns

Polysyllabic words are simple or complex words of more than one syllable. They can have more than one stress, that is, a primary, a secondary stress and even a tertiary stress. Complex words can be formed by the morphological process of *affixation* whereby an affix is attached to a root or stem. If the affix is attached before the word, it is called a *prefix*; if it is attached at the end of the word, it is called a *suffix*.

In order to decide on stress placement, it is necessary to analyse the word from different aspects: morphologically (simple –root or stem which can stand alone; complex –stem plus affix– and compound words), the grammatical category (noun, verb, adjective, etc.), the number of syllables and the phonological structure of those syllables (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). Numerous authors have written lists of words which are grouped according to the different aspects mentioned above and some of them have also put forward rules or tendencies. For such work, one may refer to Kingdom, 1958; Guierre, 1970; Finch and Ortiz Lira, 1982; Zenobi, 1987; Ortiz Lira, 1998; Roach, 2009; Cruttenden, 2014.

### 1.1. Rules, principles and tendencies

a. **Affixation:** Affixes can affect the stress pattern of the word in different ways: Most prefixes do not alter the stress pattern of the word. Some of those prefixes may receive a secondary stress depending on the meaning they express (for example *re-*). Others tend to attract the main stress if the resulting word is a noun (e.g. *co-*). As regards suffixes, all inflexional and most derivational suffixes are neutral (i.e. they do not alter the stress pattern of the word). However, there are also “self-stressed” suffixes, such as *-ee*, *-eer*, *-ese*, *-esque*, *-ette*, which attract the stress, and “stress-moving” suffixes, e.g. *-ial*, *-ic*, *-ion*, *-ity*, which cause the main stress to move to the syllable before the suffix. Needless to say, there are exceptions in many cases.

b. The **Teutonic rule** of English stress says that “the first two syllables of a word cannot be lexically unstressed. In words with the main stress on the third syllable or later, we need a secondary stress on the first or second syllable” (Wells, 2014, p. 60). For example, words such as *pronunciation* or *characteristic* would not admit three unstressed syllables before the primary stress, thus we get *prɒˈnʌnʃiːəˈʃən* and *ˌʃærəktəˈrɪstɪk*. The principles below can guide the learner as to where to place the secondary stress.

c. **The Rule of Alternation** (or *The Stress Clash Avoidance principle*) states that, in an English word without an internal boundary, major stresses should not fall on adjacent syllables (Carr, 2013). This tendency of alternating stress in order to avoid a succession of a number of weak syllables is also responsible for some alternative pronunciations in contemporary English, which favour, for example *ˌkɒnˈtrɒvɜːrsi* over *ˈkɒntrɒvɜːrsi* (Lyndsey, 2017).

d. **The Downgrading Principle or Stress Shift** is related to the principle in (c) above. It is the act of moving (or shifting) the primary stress to a previous syllable. The option to remove (de-accent, weaken or downgrade) potential stresses is characteristic of English rhythm. This principle is sometimes called the rule of three, since it weakens the middle stress of three successive stresses, even if the middle stress is the main one; for example, *ˌɑːftərˈnuːn* vs *ˈɑːftərnjuːn* *ˈtiː* (Wells, 2006, 2008).

e. **The Derivational principle** states that, in affixation, there is a tendency to place a secondary stress on the syllable which had the primary stress in the deriving word (Carr, 2013). For example: *ˈʃærəktər* → *ˌʃærətəˈrɪstɪk*.

## 1.2. Distinctive word stress patterns

Word stress may “have a distinctive function in that it opposes words of comparable sound structure (and identical spelling) ... [which] may or may not involve phonemic changes of quality” (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 253).

Thus, pairs of nouns and verbs with the same spelling may differ only in the location of the primary stress, which falls on the first syllable in nouns (e.g. *ˈtɔːmənt*) and on the last syllable in verbs (e.g. *tɔːˈmənt*). Others may have a reduced vowel in the unstressed syllable, like the noun *ˈæksənt*, */æˈksənt/* or */æˈksnt/* versus the verb */ækˈsənt/* or */əkˈsənt/*. The same is true of a small group of pairs of adjectives and verbs, such as *ˈæbstrækt* (adjective *ˈæbstrækt*, verb *abˈstrækt*) or *ˈæbsent* (adjective *ˈæbsent*, verb *abˈsent*, with or without reduced vowel in the unaccented syllable).

Students should be aware not to apply the same variation of stress patterns to all equally spelt noun, adjective or verb pairs since some of them have the same pattern in both the verb and noun functions (e.g. *report, delay, reserve, interview*, etc.) or verb and adjective functions (e.g. *compact*).

## 2. Learning implications

Many writers posit that English word stress is so difficult to predict that it is better to treat stress as a property of the individual word to be learnt together with its meaning. Ortiz Lira (1998) recommends trying to memorize rules rather than lists. Celce-Murcia *et al.* (2011), on the other hand, argue that “stress placement in English words is for the most part a rule-governed phenomenon, and explicit teaching of word stress patterns should be a part of the ESL pronunciation curriculum” (p. 143). There are other writers who suggest that there are patterns with exceptions but learners may feel that “the rules are so complex that it would seem easier to go back to the idea of learning the stress for each word individually” (Roach, 2009, p. 76).

Although word stress in English is quite variable, it is not entirely random. More perceptive students may, through exposure, make some generalizations. For other students, the learning process may be facilitated if tasks are organized in a way that leads them to systematize these patterns. Kelly (2000) posits that it makes sense to use principles or tendencies which are relevant to help students discover or predict the stress pattern of a word.

## 3. The fun component

It has long been recognized that different affective factors –such as self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety and empathy– can have a positive or negative impact in the foreign language classroom (Brown, 1987, 1994; Arnold, 2000; Chen 2008). Krashen (1982) emphasised the importance of three affective or attitudinal variables which facilitate the acquisition of a second language: high motivation, self-confidence and low levels of anxiety, and mentioned the need of having a low affective filter to allow for the reception of input. The inclusion of fun in the classroom meets the desirable conditions for second language acquisition mentioned above (Deiter, 2000; Garner, 2006, in Segrist and Hupp, 2015; Lesser *et al.*, 2013).

All in all, the activities presented in this paper seek to appeal to different learning styles, hold student’s interest and help them retain important information. Below, I present a range of sample fun activities which exemplify how long-established techniques used in the SLA

classroom can be introduced into the Phonology lesson in order to develop awareness of polysyllabic word stress patterns and/or put students' assumptions to the test.

#### 4. Suggested activities

##### 4.1. Bingo

**Aim:** Perception and production of main stress in polysyllabic words.

**Procedure:** Students are given "bingo" cards with at least four different polysyllabic words written on them. The syllable bearing the primary stress should be highlighted somehow (it could be bigger, underlined, etc.) in order to make sure that students focus on the actual stress pattern and not on some misconception they may have of its pronunciation.

Teacher can mark the stress pattern by clapping hands or producing some kind of beat. For example, for the word *can*<sup>'</sup>*TEEN*, teacher could say something like 'ta-TA', whereas for <sup>'</sup>*CAL**culator*, teacher would say TA-ta-ta-ta. The students tick the word in their card which corresponds to the stress pattern produced. Once all the words in their card have been marked, they call out "Bingo." Have the student read the words out and adjust their pronunciation if necessary.

This activity can also be used for practice or revision if students have dealt with the topic of stress patterns in polysyllabic words before. In this case, there should be no stress marked on the word. Teacher shows a card with a stress pattern on it or writes it on the blackboard. For example, for the word "magazine", the stress pattern to be shown could be **Co'O** whereas for "supermarket" **Oooo**. T could also mark the stress pattern orally in order to reinforce aural perception.

##### 4.2. Song

**Aim:** Perception and production of different degrees of stress and prominence.

**Preparation:** Choose a song that contains many polysyllabic words and in which the stress patterns are clearly heard. Suggestion: *Killer Queen* by Queen. The worksheet can just contain blanks for students to fill in as they listen or, depending on the aim, Teacher could include the list of words in random order, with or without their stress pattern.

**Procedure:** Students listen to the song and fill in the blanks. When correcting, after a student gives an answer, Teacher adjusts the pronunciation and asks for choral repetition: This is the key moment for

working with the different degrees of stress (primary, secondary and no-stress) as well as prominence and vowel reduction. If working with the song suggested above, Teacher could also use this opportunity to discuss how the *Alternating Stress Principle* accounts for an alternative stress pattern in words with an early stress (e.g. 'momentarily vs ,momen'tarily).

#### 4.3. Dice game (Adapted from Hancock, 1995)

**Aim:** Production of different stress patterns in polysyllabic words.

**Procedure:** Students work in groups. Each group is given a sheet with polysyllabic words grouped into the number of syllables they contain. Each student in the group throws the dice and reads out a word according to the number the dice shows; for example, for number 2, they will read a two-syllable word (for #1, they read a seven-syllable word). Students can choose which word they want to read from the corresponding list. Once the word is pronounced correctly, the student's name or initial is written next to it and it cannot be used again. Set a time limit for the activity and go round the class clarifying doubts and checking whether students use the correct stress pattern. At the end of the activity, each student counts the number of words they have read correctly.

#### 4.4. Odd-one-out on Kahoot<sup>1</sup>

**Aim:** To focus on some prefixes which may bear the primary stress.

**Preparation:** This is a simple odd-one-out activity which can be played on paper or on *Kahoot*, to make it more fun. Basically, the teacher has to create the quiz by uploading the questions and answers onto the platform before the class. Once the quiz is created, it is stored on the platform to be used at any time by sharing a given code.

**Procedure:** Students can play by inserting the code into their mobile phones. In order to play, internet connection is needed. For that reason, it is advisable to have an option on paper. Students have to cross out the odd words based on their stress pattern.

#### 4.5. Crossword

**Aim:** To become aware of contrastive word stress patterns.

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1. *Kahoot* is a tool for using technology to administer quizzes, discussions or surveys. It is a game-based classroom response system played by the whole class in real time. Multiple-choice questions are projected on the screen. Students answer the questions with their smartphone, tablet or computer within a time limit. The answer is then shown on the screen. Tutorials on how to create quizzes and how to play can be found at <https://kahoot.com/how-to-play-kahoot/>

**Preparation:** Visit <http://edtools.mankindforward.com> in order to generate a crossword. The clues provided should consist of sentences which can be completed with the same spelt word which belongs to a different grammatical category, for example *What year did the Beatles ... this ...? (record)*.

**Procedure:** Students complete the crossword and then read out the definitions applying the correct stress of the missing words.

#### 4.6. Video extracts from well-known films

**Preparation:** Select an extract from a well-known video where a number of polysyllabic words appear, and prepare the worksheet as suggested below.

**Option A:** Suggestion: *Pride and Prejudice* (2005). Extract: Mr. Darcy's first proposal.

**Aim:** To practise stress patterns of polysyllabic words in context; to raise awareness of the different stress pattern of some identically spelled nouns, adjectives and verbs.

**Procedure:** Prepare the script of the chosen extract. Remove the polysyllabic words, leave a blank and insert the stress pattern of the removed word, for example, [Oo'Oo] for *advantageous*. Divide the extract into two or three parts, according to the numbers of groups you want to have in your class. Each group will be given one part of the script, prepared as suggested above. Then divide the board into two or three columns (according to the amount of groups formed), and write the missing words each group needs to use in order to complete their sheet. Tell students that they have to fill in the blanks in their sheets by using the words in one of the columns. Students work cooperatively within the group, negotiating the right word to fill in the blank and its correct pronunciation. Then listen and check. Finally, different students in the group should pronounce the words on the board correctly.

The words *suspect*, *torment* and *object* appear in this extract. Teacher can take this opportunity to raise student's awareness of the different stress patterns of these words when used as nouns or verbs.

**Option B:** Suggestion: *V for Vendetta* (2005). Extract: The Speech.

**Aim:** To revise and/or present some stress rules or principles and become aware of some general tendencies in the use of suffixes.

**Procedure:** Divide the class into groups. Each group is given one set of cards with polysyllabic words from the extract. Students see or listen to the extract and put the words in the cards in order of appearance. Students can be given the words in ordinary spelling (more difficult) or transcribed (easier), but without the stress pattern. This should be checked at the moment of correcting the activity. Groups will be awarded points not only for putting as many words as possible in the correct order but also for the correct pronunciation of the word. Since the extract suggested above contains words ending in *-ise*, *-ion* and *-ate* and some inflectional suffixes, the class can then systematize rules in connection with neutral and stress-moving suffixes.

**Option C:** Suggestion: *Meet Joe Black* (1998). Extract: Joe tells Drew who he is.

**Aim:** To categorize suffixes according to whether they alter the stress patterns of the root word.

**Preparation:** Prepare a sheet with the movie script, remove the polysyllabic words from the text and write the root word in brackets. Leave a blank for students to complete.

**Procedure:** Students read the script and discuss what film they think it is from. Then they work cooperatively in pairs in order to fill in the blanks. Students listen to the extracts again and check their answers. Then Teacher says the root word and different students provide the appropriate word for the context. Adjust students' pronunciation if necessary. Students then analyze the suffixes which appear in the text and classify them into "neutral" suffixes, which do not alter the stress pattern of the word, and "stress-moving" suffixes. They can also consider which rule is in operation as regards secondary stress.

#### 4.7. Betting on "novel" words

**Aim:** To apply the stress patterns seen to "novel" words

**Procedure:** Give students words they have never seen before for them to mark the corresponding stresses. The list of words given can consist of technical words, words of very infrequent use or preferably, invented words (such as *ragnaresque*, *tyrionize*, *lannisterism*, *sheldonistic*: all words derived from characters from famous series). Then they have to "bet" 1 to 5 points according to how sure they are of the stress pattern used, 1 being "not sure" and 5 "very sure." Students win the points bet if they are right and lose them if they are wrong.



**Correction:** Ask students to interchange sheets for correction. That is to say, each student will be correcting a classmate's sheet. In the case of invented words, the only clue students have for stress placement is the suffix. The most "juicy" part of the activity is the discussion that follows, where students have to justify the pattern used. Since there is no "correct" answer for invented words, students are awarded points if they can justify the stress pattern chosen correctly.

## Conclusion

Even though authors agree on the importance of word stress, there are different opinions as to whether it is learnable through instruction or what the best way to teach it is. Different materials and resources can be used and transformed into fun activities that facilitate language practice and communication. On the whole, introducing fun into the classroom can reduce tension, increase enjoyment and have a direct impact on the student-teacher rapport. This, in turn, can help to get and hold student's attention, increase retention of the target material and promote a constructive attitude towards the topic or subject being learnt. In this respect, the use of fun is not only restricted to the topic of word stress. Having discussed its general impact on the language classroom, it can be seen how beneficial it would be to apply humour to other areas of study. By this, I do not mean to say that this is the only effective strategy which can be applied in the classroom, but if it is one that instructors would like to try, hopefully they can find a good start in the suggested activities in the present paper.

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