

UNDERSTANDING SYLLABLES and the RULES of USING STRESS in ENGLISH WORDS

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Abstract

English has become necessary for everyday affairs of modern world. It just happens that the spoken English has assumed a far greater role than it did ever before in the field of tourism, trade and commerce, or education. However, a great number of English learners are often misunderstood while conducting a conversation and it happens simply due to the lack of comprehending word stress. Learners of English obviously need to understand about syllables and sentence stress. Stress is an important feature of English pronunciation and to become a powerful communicator of English one needs proficiency while using different stress patterns in his communication. Word stress is crucial in English pronunciation. It can be called a grammatical device in English. A part of the meanings of a word depends on stress. It serves to mark the function of words in spoken English. Word stress is an imperative part of English language learning, both in terms of comprehending spoken English and increasing oral intelligibility. However, word stress often causes problem for learners of English. It can often be a difficult area for learners of English to master successfully.

Therefore, the main objectives of this article is to enable the learners of English to recognize and be familiar with word stress; to recognize the importance of word stress in English; to identify affixes in English; to identify stress patterns and be able to stress words accurately which will help learners to understand and be understood more easily.

Key words : syllable, stress.

1. Introduction

Many of English learners continue to struggle with speaking and have difficulty being understood by native English speakers. One of the reasons is that they have not taken the time to study word stress seriously. Second languages learners often struggle to stress words appropriately in English. Word stress is something that students should study if they wish to speak English well. It is an essential part of learning English because it is a major component of the English language. Some languages have little or no stress, while most have some stress.

However, English is a heavily stressed based language. Unfortunately, the majority of ESL teachers and students ignore the necessity to practice word stress.

This article presents an overview of what word stress is. It discusses a few rules to follow for word stress which in return will give the learners better capability in conducting good communication.

2. Understanding syllables

A syllable is a unit of sound which includes a vowel sound. All words have at least one syllable. A syllable is a unit of speech. For example, the word "banana" is broken up into three parts, or syllables, for each piece of sound you pronounce before you momentarily pause: *un-[pause]-der-[pause]-stand*. Knowing how to divide words into syllables can greatly help with your spelling and reading skills as well as your ability to pronounce words correctly.

Every word is made from syllables. It is a unit of sound. It can be a vowel, a diphthong, or one or more vowels combined with one or more consonants.

Each word has one, two, three or more syllables. Look at this examples.

word		number of syllables
big	big	1
red	red	1
quite	quite	1
seldom	sel-dom	2
quiet	qui-et	2
water	wa-ter	2
important	im-port-ant	3
understand	un-der-stand	3
interesting	in-ter-est-ing	4
information	in-for-ma-tion	4
unexceptional	un-ex-cep-tio-nal	5

Notice that (with a few rare exceptions) every syllable contains at least one **vowel** (a, e, i, o or u) or **vowel sound**.

"A **syllable** is a peak of prominence in the chain of utterance. If you could measure the acoustic power output of a speaker as it varies with time, you would find that it goes continually up and down, forming little peaks and valleys: the peaks are syllables. The words *lair* and *here* form only one peak each, and so only one syllable, whereas the words *player* and *newer* are usually pronounced with two peaks and so contain two syllables. It is thus desirable to distinguish between a diphthong (which is one syllable) and a sequence of two vowels (which is two syllables)." (Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2000)

3. Syllable and word stress

To understand syllables, it helps to understand word stress. All words of more than one syllable have what is called word stress. Stress is an accent that we make on certain syllables and words when speaking English. This means that at least one of the syllables is longer and louder than the other syllables. English words that have more than one syllable (polysyllabic) always have one syllable that is stressed. In most English dictionaries, the stressed syllable is indicated by a stress mark, a symbol that resembles an apostrophe. The stress mark follows the syllable that is stressed. Putting the stress in the correct position of a syllable when speaking is crucial since by putting it otherwise, may cause the listener to mishear or even misunderstand the word.

"There is a great deal of evidence that native speakers rely very much on the stress pattern of words when they are listening. In fact, experiments have demonstrated that often when a native speaker mishears a word, it is because the foreigner has put the stress in the wrong place, not because he or she mispronounced the sound of the word." (Joanne Kenworthy, *Teaching English Pronunciation*. Longman, 1987)

Studying stress patterns in English is particularly important for speakers of other languages whose stress rules are more regular and/or different (Celce-Murcia et al, 1996) and thus interfere with comprehensibility. Stressing the wrong syllable in a word can make the word very difficult to hear and understand. The meaning or type of the word can change when the words are stressed

wrongly. Even if the speaker can be understood, mistakes with word stress can make the listener feel irritated, or perhaps even amused, and could prevent good communication from taking place.

Mistakes in word stress are a common cause of misunderstanding in English. Therefore the main objective of this writing is to develop understanding on English word stress that will enable learners of English to predict which syllable in most English words will receive the primary word stress. Words that are stressed appropriately will definitely improve vowel quality, or at least prevent it from being distorted, as may result when words are stressed incorrectly.

Take 3 words: contribute, contributor, contribution. Do they sound the same when spoken? No. Because one syllable in each word is stressed (stronger than the others).

CONtribute

conTRIBUTOR

contriBUTION

The acoustic properties of the stressed syllables in English are different to those of the unstressed syllables. The unstressed syllables have a weaker vowel and often include the schwa. Visually, when we produce word stress our lips and chin move more (*Scarborough, Keating, Mattys, Cho & Alwan, 2009*). Accordingly, the vowel is fuller than in non-stressed syllables where it is weaker and therefore requires less mouth opening. As with all linguistic features, word stress is acquired at different stages by children and, as they mature, so does their ability to use word stress with increased complexity (*Atkinson-King, 1973*).

Here are some examples of Syllable Stress

One Syllable - Stressed

All one syllable words have the stress on the one syllable. The intonation should go down.

GO

TALK

SING

WELL

Two Syllable - First Syllable Stressed

PRETty

PICture

CENter

Two Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed

enJOY

aHEAD

aLLOW

Three Syllable - First Syllable Stressed

ENergy

Operate

ORganize

Three Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed

conSIder

inHerit

inJUStice

Three Syllable - Third Syllable Stressed

personNEL

employEE

voluntEER

Four Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed

cerTIfficate

eVAporate

moDERnity

Four Syllable - Third Syllable Stressed

repuTAtion

distriBUtion

poliTician

4. Stress rules

Like many other languages, English has its own stress pattern. In general a stress will be placed in certain syllable. The stress can be placed on the first syllable, second syllable, third syllable, or on other part of the syllable. It may also happens that one can get the number of stress more than one. In some words, the difference stress of sound may change their meaning.

English word always has a stress in the vowel sound. Stress varies from syllable to syllable. Those syllables that are pronounced more forcibly or strongly than neighboring syllables are generally said to be strongly stressed or pronounced with strong stress. And those syllables that are pronounced without much force are commonly said to be unstressed or pronounced with weak stress. In other words the syllables that are not stressed are "weak" or "small" or "quiet". Native speakers of English listen for the stressed syllables, not the weak syllables. However, learners of English need to comply the correct placement of word stress. The shift of stress in words such as '*object* and *ob'ject* may create confusion if they are not pronounced with proper stress. By using the proper word stress in your speech, you will instantly and automatically improve your pronunciation as well as your comprehension.

In order to avoid mistakes in pronouncing words or to avoid wrong placement of stress, here are some rules, rather complicated, that need to be conveyed by learners of English. However, do not rely on them too much, because there still are many exceptions.

5. Rules of Word Stress in English

1. A word can only have one stress.

In a very long word you can have a secondary stress but it is always a much smaller stress.

2. Only vowels are stressed, not consonants.

The vowels in English are a, e, i, o, and u. The consonants are all the other letters.

3. One syllable - stressed

All one syllable words have the stress on the one syllable. The intonation should go down.

Examples: EAT, DRINK, SIGN, WELL

4. Stress on first syllable

a. Most 2-syllable nouns have stress on first syllable

Examples: TAbble, WATer, PEOPle, FLOWer, TEACHer, STUDent, CARpet, LESson

b. Most 2-syllable adjectives have stress on first syllable

Examples: CLEVer, HAPpy, PRETty, HANDsome, FUNny, LOCAl, USEful, FOOLish, NATive, CAREless

5. Stress on last syllable

Most 2-syllable verbs have stress on last syllable

Examples: deCIDE, beGIN, conDUCT, reSOLVE, relax

6. Stress which determine verb or noun of the same words.

Nouns are on the first syllable

Examples: Insult, MISmatch, Rewrite, TRANSplant, TORment, adDICT, OBject

Verbs are on the second syllable

Examples: inSULT, misMATCH, reWRITE, transPLANT, torMENT, adDICT, obJECT

7. Words ending in consonants and in -y

If there is a word that ends in a consonant or in a -y, then the first syllable gets the stress.

Examples: RARity , OPTimal , GRAdient, CONtainer

8. Words ending in er, -or,-ly

For words ending with the suffixes -er, -or, or -ly, the stress is placed on the first syllable.

Examples: DIRect/DIRector , ORder/ORderly , MANage/MANager

9. Words having dual role

In the case of words which can be used as either a noun or verb, the noun will tend to be stressed on the first syllable and the verb on the last syllable.

Examples: IMport(n), INcrease(n), imPORT(v), inCREASE(v)

10. Word stress for compound words

A. Compound noun

A compound noun is a noun made out of two nouns in order to form one word. In a compound noun, the first word usually takes on the stress.

Examples: ICEland , TOOTHpaste, SEAfood

B. Compound adjectives

A compound adjective is an adjective composed of at least two words. Often, hyphens are used in compound adjectives. In compound adjectives, the stress is placed within the second word. Examples: ten-Meter, rock-Solid, fifteen-Minute, bad-TEMpered, old-FASHioned

C. Compound verbs

A compound verb is when a subject has two or more verbs. The stress is on the second or on the last part.

Examples: Jonas loves bread but deTESTS butter. Helen baked cookies and ATE them up. Dogs love to eat bones and love DRINKing water.

D. Noun + compound nouns

Noun + compound Nouns are two word compound nouns. In noun + compound noun, the stress is on the first word.

Examples: AIRplane mechanic, PROject manager, BOARDroom member, BLACKbird, GREENhouse

11. Stress on ante-penultimate syllable (ante-penultimate = third from end)

Words ending in -cy, -ty, -phy and -gy

Example: deMOcracy, dependaBILITY, phoTOgraphy, geology

Words ending in -al

Example: CRItical, geoLOGical

12. Prefixes

Usually, prefixes do not take the stress of a word. There are a few exceptions to this rule, however, like: un, in, pre, ex and mis, which are all stressed in their prefix.

Examples: ex: EXample, EXplanation, EXamine ; in: INside, INefficient, INterest ; mis: MISspoke, MIStake, MISspelled ; pre: PREcede, PREarrange, PREliminary

13. Suffixes can be divided into the following

(A). The stress is on the suffix itself

Examples:

- ee: emploYEE refuGEE traiNEE refeREE

- eer: engiNEER caREER volunTEER

- ese: ChiNESE JapaNESE PortuGUESE

-ique: uNIQUE anTIQUE technique

(B). The stress is on the syllable *immediately before* the suffix:

Examples:

- ial: meMOrial fiNANcial artiFicial esSENTial

- ual: ViSual unUsual intelLECTual indiVIDual

- ian: CaNAdian vegeTARian peDEStrian poliTiCian

- sion: exPLOsion ocCAsion conCLUsion perMIssion

- tion: defiNItion proDUction situAtion qualifiCation

- ient :	ANcient	suffIcient	effIcient	deFIcient	proFIcient
- cious:	delicious	conscious	suspicious	judicious	
- tious :	amBIitious	CAUtious	supersTitious	consciENTious	
- ic :	acaDEmic	enerGETic	fanTAStic	terRIfic	reALIStic
- ible:	Edible	FLEXible	inCREdible	imPossible	
- ity:	aBIlity	neCEssity	puBLicity	possIBility	huMIidity
- ify:	CLAssify	TERrify	huMIdify	perSONify	soLIdify
- logy :	biOlogy	sociOlogy	anthroPOlogy	psyCHOlogy	
- graphy :	geOgraphy	autobiOgraphy	phoTOgraphy	porNOgraphy	
- meter:	kiLOmeter	paRAMeter	speeDOMeter	therMOMeter	

(C) The stress is on *the second syllable before the suffix*:

Examples

- ate :	Operate	exAggerate	asSOciate	iNtegrate	cerTificate
- ize:	APOlogize	CRIticize	REcognize	comPUterize	
- ary:	SEcretary	NEcessary	conTEMPorary	voCAbulary	
- ous :	couRAgeous	mysTERious	imPEtuous	sponTaneous	
	simulTaneous				

Word stress is part of the language. It is not an optional extra that you can add to the English language if you want. English speakers use word stress to communicate rapidly and accurately, even in difficult conditions. If, for example, you do not hear a word clearly, you can still understand the word because of the position of the stress. Non-native speakers, who speak English to native speakers without using word stress, encounter two problems: They find it difficult to understand native speakers, especially those speaking fast, and the native speakers may find it difficult to understand them, too.

6. Conclusion

Word stress plays an important role in intelligibility and deserves to be studied in all English classes or by English learners. Every word must have a stress and only vowels that are stressed, not consonants. Generally, common English nouns and adjectives, are more often stressed on the first syllable than on any other syllable. Verbs with two syllables are usually stressed on the

second syllable. Even the same words can be determined whether they are nouns or verbs through the placement of the stress. Having good understanding on prefix and suffix, all the words ending in -y, -er, -or, -ly, will also give great benefit in determining where the stress is placed correctly. In order to become a powerful communicator of English we must learn all the rules of stress mentioned earlier. So learning of stress leads us to better communication.

7. Suggestion

All students, regardless of their general language proficiency levels need to take serious effort in mastering their proficiency in using word stress. On the other hand, teaching word stress can occur as part of any lesson provided that the teacher is empowered with the theoretical knowledge of word stress and have the eagerness to teach it. Less proficient learners should be made aware of word stress whereas more experienced learners can better cope with learning rules associated with word stress. Other researchers may develop further study in the area of word stress rules or find the methods on how students best learn word stress. The methods that will improve students' achievement in using the correct word stress and eventually become excellent communicator of English.

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