

English sentence stress

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Sentence stress is a difficult area to work on for learners and teachers alike. For this reason it's also an area which is often neglected, but this aspect of the language can cause problems for learners in both their speaking and perhaps more importantly listening.

English is a stress timed language

The English language is often referred to as stress-timed. This means that stress in a spoken sentence occurs at regular intervals and the length it takes to say something depends on the number of stressed syllables rather than the number of syllables itself.

Listening

In a recent class I discussed with my students the reasons they found listening difficult in English. Some comments were:

"The words come too fast"

"I panic when I don't understand every word"

"Some words are swallowed"

I think what students are referring to here, amongst other things, is the stress-timed aspect of English.

Listening Activities

Here are some activities I've done in class with students of all levels to raise awareness of stress time in English and help them overcome the difficulties it causes during listening.

- After completing a listening comprehension task in class, give the students the tape script and play a very short extract. Students mark on the tape script the words that are stressed. Discuss the kinds of words that are stressed. They will usually be the words that give meaning: verbs, nouns and adjectives.
- Give the students the tape script to a listening before they hear it and ask them to predict which words they think will be stressed. Play the tape to check the predictions.
- Play a fairly short listening extract, maybe a paragraph in length, students write down the important (stressed) words they hear. You can play the tape several times.
 - Emphasise that this isn't a dictation exercise you don't want students to try to write down every word.
 - In groups ask the students to try and recreate the listening extract using the words they have and their knowledge of the English language. Compare the students' version with the original.
 - Discuss with students the aim of this activity - to show how native speakers listen and understand the language, taking note of the important words, usually stressed ones, and using their knowledge of the language to build meaning.
 - The important conclusion being it is not necessary to understand every word.

Speaking

Stress timing can help speakers communicate meaning. Learners need to be made aware of the fact that the way they say something can affect its meaning. Say the sentence below with the stress on different words. You can hear that the meaning changes.

- I asked you to buy me a bunch of red roses

Not using stress-time can also make students sound laboured when they speak and can cause irritation on the part of the listener. The activities below are designed to practise stress-time and increase students' fluency.

Speaking Activities.

Stress timing is most noticeable in patterned language such as poetry and limericks.

- Here are some limericks I've used with my students:

There was a young lady from Niger,
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.

After the ride
She was inside,
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

There once was a lady named Lynn
Who was so uncommonly thin,
that when she essayed
to drink lemonade,
she slipped through the straw and fell in!

- I read the limericks aloud and checked the students understand them. The students in groups then try writing one. It's fun to use the names of the students in the class to start the limerick. Next we mark the stressed syllables and the students read the limericks out, trying to keep to the rhythm.
- Recently I was working with 2 advanced students who were about to take the speaking part of the Proficiency exam. Their grammar and vocabulary was fine but when they spoke English they didn't sound fluent. They spoke very deliberately and gave words equal stress.
 - I asked them to record themselves speaking and then listen to the recording. They were aware they didn't sound fluent but still didn't know what to do about it.
 - Next we used the cassette from the course book they were using, and chose a two-person dialogue to listen to. The students, using the tape-script, recorded themselves again and again until the dialogue sounded as close as possible to the original.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined the difficulty my students have with listening and speaking in relation to English as a stress-timed language and suggested some ways to help students. It should be noted that stress-time is only one of many factors that influence how we say something. Speech rhythms change according to the meaning the speaker wants to convey, who the speaker is talking to and the context they are speaking in. It's also quite a difficult area for students to work on, so don't expect instant results.