

Word stress

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A major benefit of focusing students on how words are stressed is the extra mental engagement with the word that it gives. A language learner needs to engage with a word many times, preferably in different ways, in order to really learn it - identifying and practising word stress can provide one or two of those engagements.

Why word stress is important

Mistakes in word stress are a common cause of misunderstanding in English. Here are the reasons why:

* Stressing the wrong syllable in a word can make the word very difficult to hear and understand; for example, try saying the following words:

o O	O o
b'tell	hottle

And now in a sentence:

"I carried the b'tell to the hottle."

Now reverse the stress patterns for the two words and you should be able to make sense of the sentence!

"I carried the bottle to the hotel."

* Stressing a word differently can change the meaning or type of the word:

"They will desert* the desert** by tomorrow."

o O	O o
desert*	desert**

Think about the grammatical difference between desert* and desert**.

* 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.

These three reasons tell me that word stress is an important part of the English language, and it is something I should help my students with.

What word stress is

When we stress syllables in words, we use a combination of different features. Experiment now with the word computer. Say it out loud. Listen to yourself. The second syllable of the three is stressed. What are you doing so that the listener can hear that stress?

* A stressed syllable combines five features:

- o It is l-o-n-g-e-r - com p-u-ter
- o It is LOUDER - comPUTer
- o It has a change in pitch from the syllables coming before and afterwards. The pitch of a stressed syllable is usually higher.
- o It is said more clearly -The vowel sound is purer. Compare the first and last vowel sounds with the stressed sound.
- o It uses larger facial movements - Look in the mirror when you say the word. Look at your jaw and lips in particular.

It is equally important to remember that the unstressed syllables of a word have the opposite features of a stressed syllable!

Some 'rules' of word stress

There are patterns in word stress in English but, as a rule (!), it is dangerous to say there are fixed rules. Exceptions can usually be found.

* Here are some general tendencies for word stress in English:

Word	Type of word	Tendency	Exceptions
apple table happy	two-syllable nouns and adjectives	stress on the first syllable O o apple	hotel lagoon
suspect import insult	words which can be used as both nouns and verbs	the noun has stress on the first syllable O o "You are the suspect!" the verb has stress on the second syllable o O "I suspect you."	respect witness
hairbrush football	compound nouns	fairly equally balanced but with stronger stress on the first part O o hairbrush	

How I help my students

Students can be alarmed when they meet words which are similar but have different stress patterns:

O o	o O oo	O o o	o o o O o
Equal	equality	equalise	equalisation

A useful thing you can do is to help students see connections with other word families.

Patterns can usually be found, for example:

O o	o O oo	O o o	o o o O o
Final	finality	finalise	finalisation
Neutral	neutrality	neutralise	neutralisation

There are some recognised differences in word stress which depend on the variety of English being used, for example:

o o O o	o O o o
Caribbean aluminium (British English)	Caribbean aluminium (American English)

These differences are noted in good learner dictionaries. If words like these come up in class, point them out to students. Ask if there are similar cases of differences in word stress in their own language - this will heighten awareness and interest.

In the classroom

** Raise awareness & build confidence*

You can use the same questions with your students that I have used in this article. These will help to raise the students' awareness of word stress and its importance. Some learners love to learn about the 'technical' side of language, while others like to 'feel' or 'see' the language more, hearing the music of word stress or seeing the shapes of the words. Try to use a variety of approaches: helping students to engage with English in different ways will help them in their goal to become more proficient users of the language. Build students' confidence by drawing their attention to the tendencies and patterns in word stress that do exist.

** Mark the stress*

Use a clear easy-to-see way of marking stress on the board and on handouts for students. I use the big circle - small circle (O o) method. It is very easy to see and has the added advantage of identifying the number of syllables in the word, as well as the stressed syllable.

Students also need to be aware of the way dictionaries usually mark stress - with a mark before the stressed syllable, e.g. 'apple. By knowing this, students will be able to check word stress independently.

** Cuisenaire rods*

These different sized, small coloured blocks are great for helping students to 'see' the word stress. The students build the words using different blocks to represent stressed and unstressed syllables. (Children's small building blocks are a good substitute!)

** Integrate word stress into your lessons*

You don't need to teach separate lessons on word stress. Instead, you can integrate it into your normal lessons. The ideal time to focus students' attention on it is when introducing vocabulary. Meaning and spelling are usually clarified for students but the sound and stress of the word can all too often be forgotten.

Quickly and simply elicit the stress pattern of the word from the students (as you would the meaning) and mark it on the board. Drill it too!

Students can use stress patterns as another way to organise and sort their vocabulary. For example, in their vocabulary books they can have a section for nouns with the pattern O o, and then a section for the pattern o O. Three syllable words can be sorted into O o o (Saturday, hospital) and o O o (computer, unhappy).

Remember what I noted before: The more times students mentally engage with new vocabulary, the more they are likely to actually learn it. Engaging students through word stress helps to reinforce the learning of the words.

** Troubleshooting*

Initially, many students (and teachers!) find it difficult to hear word stress. A useful strategy is to focus on one word putting the stress on its different syllables in turn. For example:

o o O	O o o	o O o
computer	computer	computer

Say the word in the different ways for the students, really exaggerating the stressed syllable and compressing the unstressed ones. Ask the students which version of the word sounds 'the best' or 'the most natural'.

By hearing the word stressed incorrectly, students can more easily pick out the correct version.

A personalised and effective way of getting students to hear the importance of correct word stress is by using people's names as examples. I introduce word stress with my name:

* "How many parts/syllables are there in my name?"

* "Which is the strongest - the first or second?"

* "Is it Emma or Emma?"

Then you can question students about their own names - this will give them a personalised connection to the issue of words stress, with a word they will never forget!

Conclusion

Any work on aspects of pronunciation can take a long time to show improvements and be challenging for both the students and the teacher, but working on word stress can be fun and over time will help your students to be better understood and more confident speakers.