

Word Stress Contribution in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Possessing native-like pronunciation is one of the main goals that non-native speakers of English would like to accomplish. Besides the ability to pronounce English sounds correctly, using the proper English word stress also plays an important role in achieving that goal.

This paper first specifies the nature of word stress in English and its contribution on successful English language learning. Secondly, it addresses the problems that are commonly encountered by the Indonesian learners in using correct word stress in their speech. Finally, it also proposes some ways that English learners can use to learn English word stress better. Hopefully these proposed ways will be able to help the learners to speak in English more fluently with not only accurate pronunciation but also with correct word stress.

Keywords: *English, word stress, Pronunciation, Second Language Acquisition*

Introduction

In most schools in Indonesia, from the elementary levels to the high school levels, teaching English pronunciation is all about teaching the English sounds: vowels and consonants. Many English learners and teachers believe that to have good pronunciation, they just need to master the individual sounds. Indeed, those sounds are very important for the beginner English learners. Nevertheless, mastering them does not guarantee that the learners will have good and comprehensible English pronunciation.

In the English Language Education Study Program, Sanata Dharma University, there is a subject that is specialized in teaching the learners correct pronunciation. This subject is named Pronunciation. It is divided into two levels for the first and the second semester learners: Pronunciation Practice I and Pronunciation Practice II. These courses focus on the pronunciation theory in the first

part, followed by pronunciation practice in the second part.

In those classes, there are still many learners who produce awkward and incomprehensible English although they have good mastery of the individual English sounds. One of the factors causing them to speak unnaturally is the improper placement of English word stress. This indicates that English word stress also affect the learners' second language acquisition, particularly in English language learning.

Therefore, this paper will make an effort to discuss the features of English word stress and its contribution to the learners' second language acquisition. In addition, problems commonly encountered by the learners related to word stress and some ways to help learners to speak in English with accurate stressing will also be proposed.

Word Stress Role on Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition is concerned with the study of the way in which an individual becomes able to use one or more languages which are different from one's first language. This process can take place in a natural setting or through formal classroom instruction, and, although the degree of proficiency that can be attained is a controversial topic, it can start at childhood or during the adult age (Krashen, 1982). The success in second language acquisition depends on many factors. In the case of English language learning in general and English pronunciation in particular, one of the contributing factors is the proper placement of English word stress.

Before discussing English word stress, it is essential to know what the definition of stress is. Stress is the degree of loudness in which we produce a syllable. Stress is important in individual words, in phrases and in sentences. By shifting it around in a word, a phrase or a sentence, the emphasis or the meaning will also be different. It is essential to know, though, that the word stressing in all languages are different to one another. There are two opposite types of languages: stress-timed and syllable-timed. According to Mackay (1985), a stress-timed language is determined by the stressed syllables, which occur at regular intervals of time, with an uneven and changing number of unstressed syllables between them; whereas syllable-timed language is based on the total number of syllables since each syllable takes approximately the same amount of time.

English is obviously a stress-timed language because it has an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. In other words, English is a quantity sensitive language, that is, a language in which syllable weight influences stress placement. In this regard, English differs from languages where no attention is paid to syllable weight and all syllables are treated in the same way by stress rules. Indonesian, on the other hand, is a syllable-timed language because it gives nearly equal weight and time for all syllables.

Therefore, these two languages are very different.

Unfortunately, many Indonesian learners who are learning English seem unaware of this essential difference. Consequently, they tend to apply the Indonesian stress patterns (syllable-timed) when speaking in English (stress-timed). They do not know that this improper word stressing makes their English speech unnatural and hard to comprehend.

English words can be composed of one or more syllables. In all words of two or more syllables, one syllable (stressed syllable) is stronger than the others (unstressed syllables) in the same word. A stressed syllable is louder, longer, clearer, and has higher pitch than unstressed syllables. Thus, the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables helps to create the word rhythm in English, which results in various strength, length, and pitch of syllables.

Gilbert (1994) has explained that syllable stress plays a very important role in English because English speakers appear to store vocabulary with stress patterns. Consequently, a mistake in putting the stress can throw a conversation off track, especially if the speaker's control of English vowel sounds is uncertain. Therefore, the more frequently speakers misuse stress, the more effort listeners have to make to understand what they say.

Common Problems Encountered by Indonesian Learners

Many learners tend to ignore stress patterns of English words because they do not know the importance of syllable stress in English. One common problem would be when they randomly put stress in any one of the syllables in a word, and often such a wrong stress placement mistake can alter the meaning into something that is totally different from the intended meaning. For example, there is a sentence "He is a very important person." The correct word stress placement should be on the second syllable. So, the correct pronunciation should sound like this: "He is a very imPORTant person." In

fact, many learners who are not aware of the correct stress placement would put the stress on the first syllable. Therefore, it becomes “He is a very **IM**portant person.” In the word “important,” they put the stress on the first syllable, rather than on the second one. Therefore, what is heard was not “im**PO**rtant” but “IM**po**tent,” which obviously will cause embarrassment for the speakers once they are aware of their mistakes, and confusion for the listeners, especially the native speakers, because they usually get the meaning of a word based on its stress pattern.

Another common problem is that they tend to give each syllable almost the same strength, length, and pitch. It is probably because the stress placement in each Indonesian syllable is equally strong, so they treat English words in the same way. They are not aware on how to weaken and reduce unstressed syllables. A very good example is the word “**CHO**colate.” Many learners pronounce it as “**CHO CO LATE**,” which is apparently influenced by the stress patterns of Indonesian. In English, a very important characteristic that the learners often miss is that vowels in unstressed syllables are mostly reduced to a short central vowel / I /, as the vowels reduced in the second and third syllable of “**CHO**colate.” It is the vowel reduction that makes the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables very clear in English. Gilbert (1987: 36) has pointed out that “clarity of the vowel is a particularly difficult concept for many learners since in their languages all vowels are spoken in a full, clear way”.

Ways to Learn Word Stress

Listening to and repeating after the model is one way to learn word stress, but definitely is not enough. Other ways to learn word stress are by doing word stress pattern building and activities on stress production in terms of syllable strength, length, and pitch.

For word stress pattern building, visual effects on the blackboard can be used. When learning a new word, the learners need to figure out its stress pattern as well. Learners

should try to emphasize stressed syllables by using various visual effects. There are several possibilities and it does not really matter which the learners choose as long as they are consistent.

The most common way is to put an accent (') with a different color pen over the syllable that is stressed. For example is the word electric. Learners can write it as e'lectric. Next is predicting stress in words. Many pronunciation textbooks provide word stress pattern rules. However, it is better for the learners to discover and generate the rules instead of memorizing the rules. Learners can generate word stress pattern rules from the words that they have learned and apply the rules to the words that they do not know. In this way, learners are not memorizing the rules but internalizing them. For example, they are given the correct stress placement of these words: terrific, italic and academic; which will be presented like this: ter 'ri fic, i 'ta lic, a ca 'de mic. They are then asked to generate the rule. The answer will be: in words ending in -ic, the main stress comes before -ic. Practising varying stress to alter meaning will provide learners the experience of using different stress patterns to get different meanings. It helps learners to be more aware of the effects of stress patterns on meaning. For example, in the words “pervert” and “per 'vert”, it is the different stress patterns, not sounds, that result in the difference in meaning. Other words that can be used are subject, record, import, export, etc.

As for the stress production, it will be beneficial to learn the characteristics of stressed and unstressed syllables in English using a chart. This chart will help learners to understand how stressed syllables differ from unstressed ones in four features: loudness, length, clarity and pitch. Learners need to know these characteristics to be able to produce stress correctly. Besides, learners can use this chart to examine which characteristic(s) they do not produce in saying English words with more than one syllable. It makes learners aware of these characteristics as well as identifying their problems in the production of word stress.

Table 1. Characteristics of stressed and unstressed syllables in English (Gilbert, 1993: 72)

	Loudness	Vowel Length	Vowel Clarity	Pitch
Stressed	Loud	Long	Full	High
Unstressed	Quiet	Short	Reduced	Low

Another way to learn is to clap hands or tap on the desk to emphasize loudness of a stressed syllable. These auditory techniques are useful to produce a strong beat in a stressed syllable and a weak beat in an unstressed syllable. They are very effective in helping learners recognize the beat strength in syllables, especially when they are not able to distinguish which syllable is louder than others by hearing words. When learning an English word, the learners can say a word and, at the same time, clap or tap on the desk to emphasize the feature of loudness.

Learners can also use rubber bands as a visual image for length variation in syllables. Learners pull a wide rubber band between the two thumbs while saying a word. Stretch it out during the stressed syllable but leave it short during other unstressed syllables. It provides a visual image of the variable length of the syllables as well as a kinesthetic tool that mimics the actual effort involved in lengthening a stressed syllable (Gilbert, 1994).

Hand gestures are also useful to indicate pitch change. The learners can imagine themselves as concert conductors, holding their hands up when the pitch is high and down when the pitch is low. The up-and-down waving gestures provide a visual effect showing learners how pitch changes among syllables.

Another way is to use backchaining. Learners repeat the word by starting with the last syllable and extending backwards to the beginning, which is especially helpful in dealing with a long word with more than three syllables. This technique can help learners say a word with natural rhythm, avoiding the tendency to say a word so slowly as to make each syllable equally clear by attempting to chain it forwards. For example, the backchaining of the word “economics” will be: mics → no mics → co no mics → e co no mics

Conclusion

Word stress is an imperative part of second language acquisition and English language learning in particular, both in terms of comprehending spoken English and increasing oral intelligibility. In summary, this paper has discussed the nature of English word stress, its contribution to successful English language learning, the common problems Indonesian learners experience when they learn word stress in pronunciation, and some suggestions on ways to learn word stress. Hopefully these proposed ways will be able to help the learners to speak in English more fluently with not only accurate pronunciation but also with correct word stress.

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