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From Syllable-timed to Stress-timed Patterns: Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English Pronunciation to Hispanophone Learners

Sofia Váscónez¹, Diana Váscónez²

¹*Master in Curriculum and Instruction, Teacher, Universidad de Guayaquil, Ecuador*

²*Master in High Education, Teacher, Universidad ECOTEC, Ecuador*

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Abstract: This action research project aimed at exploring the effectiveness of incorporating word and sentence stress practices in teaching English stress timing to students. Carried out at a public university in Ecuador, the study specifically targeted undergraduate students within a general English program. The intervention comprised four pronunciation tasks that involved students in listening to diverse audio excerpts, reading them aloud, and recording their speech. Throughout these activities, students received guidance and feedback from the instructor. This intervention resulted in students displaying a heightened awareness of English stress patterns, which they then applied to their reading of English texts. The findings underscore the importance of integrating a systematic approach to pronunciation within language lessons to foster a deeper understanding of the role of stress in the target language.

Keywords: Stress, stress timing, content and function words, thought groups, intelligibility.

Introduction

As EFL teachers instructing college students across various degree programs at the elementary or beginner level, we have become increasingly aware of the challenges many students face when pronouncing English words. We have noticed that while the production of individual sounds is often addressed in EFL lessons, the aspect of prosody, which is the musical qualities of speech (Wennerstrom, 2001)—specifically, the practice of stress—is not typically considered a fundamental component of instruction. Therefore, there is a significant need to incorporate explicit teaching on this topic into EFL instruction (Adam et al., 2020; Margareht, 2023; Nurpahmi et al., 2023). We believe that the concepts of stress in English, along with its practical application, merit greater emphasis within the classroom setting. As teachers, we maintain that by equipping students with a comprehensive understanding of stress patterns, they can undertake their tasks with increased confidence and clarity in oral communication. We argue that fostering an awareness of these language subtleties not only facilitates immediate proficiency but also serves as a catalyst for sustained language acquisition endeavors.

“The main problem of English pronunciation is to build a new set of boxes corresponding to the sounds of English, and to break down the arrangement of boxes which the habits of our native language have so strongly built up” (O’Connor, 1967). As EFL teachers, we have come to recognize the struggles that numerous students face at the outset of their English language learning journey, particularly in the domains of reading and speaking. Students often attempt to apply the melodic patterns of their native language, such as Spanish, when speaking English, inadvertently adhering to a syllable-timed rhythm rather than the stress-timed pattern characteristic of English. Additionally, we have noted a deficiency in fluency among students, stemming from their hesitation when encountering words in English that do not conform to the phonetic patterns of their first language. It is for these reasons that we have chosen to undertake action research in this area.

We began by pondering how instruction on stress could facilitate students in adopting the stress pattern of English during reading. This inquiry has prompted the formulation of the following research questions:

1. Which activities can be implemented to encourage students to incorporate stress awareness into their reading practices?
2. How does the practice of identifying stressed syllables through listening and reading English words contribute to enhancing students' stress timing and intelligibility when reading?

The research participants consisted of ten beginner students enrolled in the General English program. Specifically, they were drawn from a class at the second level of the four-tier program. To facilitate the implementation of the action research, adjustments were made to the General English program to accommodate instruction on stress. Specifically, two additional sessions per week were allocated over a duration of four weeks to dedicate sufficient time to teaching stress-related concepts.

Research Results

To address our research questions, we devised targeted classroom activities aimed at addressing the challenges associated with reading aloud in English. The research methodology used was action research whose essential phases are planning, action, observation, and reflection (Burns, 2009). These steps were iteratively pursued until we gleaned insights into our investigation. Beginning with an instructional phase, we concentrated on clarifying the concepts of syllables and stress.

The first task aimed at working on syllable stress. Initially, students were presented with two sets of ten words each. They were instructed to segment the words into their constituent syllables and identify the stressed syllable. According to Rogers (2000), “stress is the perceived prominence of one syllable over another; the prominence is due to an interplay of loudness, pitch, and duration” (p. 279). For the initial

set of words, we modeled clapping and counting the number of syllables. We orally presented the words to the students, prompting them to identify the stressed syllables. Subsequently, students were asked to continue practicing with the remaining set of words. They recorded these words, marking each syllable with dots, using a larger dot to indicate the stressed syllable (Figure 1).

The primary objective of this activity was to assist students in identifying the syllabic structure of words and recognizing the presence of one prominent syllable, pronounced with greater length, volume, and clarity, while the other syllables are uttered more softly. As a result, students emphasized the stressed syllable when reading words, thereby practicing proper stress pronunciation. This foundational activity is crucial for the following phases of the action research, as it lays the groundwork for students to grasp the concept of stress within individual words, later within phrases and sentences.

Figure 1

Answer Key “Stressed syllables”

1.	a-thlete	2.	bas-ket-ball	3.	bi-cycle
	● ●		● ● ●		● ● ●
4.	cham-pion-ship	5.	e-xer-cise	6.	game
	● ● ●		● ● ●		●
7.	play-er	8.	race	9.	sta-dium
	● ●		●		● ●
10.	win				
	●				

Source: Author’s own development.

Overall, students demonstrated the ability to orally articulate English words aloud after having previously identified the syllabic structure and discerned the types of syllables within each word (stressed and unstressed). Through this process, students learned that accentuating a syllable involved elevating its pitch, increasing its volume, and enunciating it clearly, while simultaneously articulating the remaining syllables softly. Essentially, they successfully emphasized stressed syllables, notwithstanding occasional mispronunciation issues.

At the beginning of the second task, the instructor introduced the concepts of content and function words and presented three series of sentences to the students. These sentences progressively increased in length as new function words were added. An illustrative example of one of these series is provided in Figure 2. During this exercise, students were instructed to read the sentences while emphasizing the content words and articulating the function words in a lower tonality. To facilitate this practice, students utilized a metronome¹, which prompted them to pronounce each content word at a specific beat. On the one hand, each content word within the sentence maintained a consistent duration. On the other hand, the function words were pronounced in a contracted manner to ensure that the duration and metronome

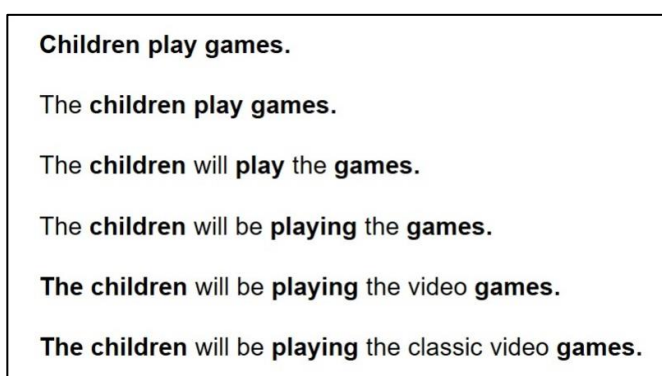
¹ <https://www.metronomeonline.com/>

marking of the content words remained unchanged. Following the in-class practice, students were tasked with recording the series of sentences using the metronome.

This activity served to facilitate students' differentiation between content and function words. Content words, which carry substantial meaning within a sentence, were emphasized during pronunciation practice. In contrast, function words, which serve grammatical purposes and convey less semantic content, were pronounced less clearly and in a contracted way. Through this exercise, students grasped the distinction between these two types of words and recognized that while content words are typically stressed during speech to convey significance, function words are not emphasized in the same manner, as they serve primarily structural roles in English sentences.

Figure 2

Series of sentences to mark the beat



Children play games.

The **children** **play** **games.**

The **children** will **play** the **games.**

The **children** will be **playing** the **games.**

The children will be **playing** the video **games.**

The children will be **playing** the classic video **games.**

Source: Author's own development

In the initial sentence of the series, students adhered to the metronome marks by pronouncing the content words at their designated intervals. As new grammar words were introduced, students compacted their pronunciation to ensure these words fit within the established time frame of each mark. Therefore, even with the addition of new function words, sentences such as those illustrated in Figure 2 maintained alignment with the three original metronome marks of the first sentence. Throughout this exercise, students followed the metronome's guidance to emphasize the content words while minimizing the enunciation of surrounding function words. However, it is important to note that frequent mispronunciations issues resulted in some students deviating from precise adherence to the metronome marks.

In the third task, three extensive sentences, featuring both content and grammatical elements, were presented on slides. During class sessions, students listened attentively as the teacher demonstrated the activity, reading the sentences aloud with emphasis on content words while unstressing function words and pausing briefly after each chunk or thought group. Kochem et al. (2020) state that "though groups, in general, refer to any discrete stretch of speech that forms a coherent message." After the demonstration, students engaged in group practice, echoing and refining their skills. Autonomously, students recorded themselves reciting the sentences, based on pausing and stressing.

This activity aimed to enhance students' ability to apply stress timing. We remarked on the importance of sentence stress. Additionally, emphasizing content words assisted students in clearly contrasting them with function words. Furthermore, breaking down sentences into manageable chunks enabled students to pause appropriately before reading the next segment, ensuring the conveyed meaning.

In certain instances, students neglected to minimize the pronunciation of function words, resulting in grammar words being allotted the same duration as content words. During their reading, students tended

to follow the syllable-based stress pattern, wherein each word received equal time duration. We observed some students reading word by word without connection. Although pronunciation remained clear in these cases, the proper segmentation into chunks and the appropriate stress on keywords were not maintained, thereby hindering the message and the perception of the language's natural melody. Conversely, some students demonstrated clearer reading with minimal pronunciation errors, indicating an understanding of thought groups through the incorporation of pauses and emphasis on content words.

In the last task, students engaged in imitating a fluent speaker using a formal speech excerpt². We started the lesson by introducing the concept of 'focus words'. We explained to students that there might be more than one content word in a chunk so it is necessary to identify the most important one to stress it which is called focus word. After this introduction, students were provided with the audio and text of the excerpt to analyze and listen to it repeatedly. They identified thought groups, content and grammar words, and finally the focus words. Later, they practiced reading the text aloud before recording themselves. The professor reviewed each student's submission, offered constructive feedback to facilitate improvement opportunities, and encouraged them to resubmit their work for further refinement. Finally, they revisited the practice, recorded themselves once more and submitted it again.

The goal of this task was to equip students with the skills necessary for effective paragraph reading. This task could help students receive feedback from their classmates, as well as, the teacher. Through this approach, we aimed to enable students to capture the time-stressed melody inherent in the language.

In brief, some students contrasted ideas in the excerpt based on function and content words. Although they emphasized content words, some of them encountered challenges while pronouncing certain words that might hinder communication. After feedback and practice in class, reading improved especially students were more confident at the moment of reading as well as sounding more natural. Finally, there was a little group of students who read more spontaneously and clearer than in previous activities.

The efficacy of the intervention was evaluated with this last task by assessing the students performance related to stress placement, pausing after each thought group, stretching content words, and weakening grammar words [Table 1]. Each student's recording was carefully reviewed to evaluate their proficiency, categorized into three levels: consistently achieved, partially achieved, and not achieved. Our analysis revealed two distinct groups among students: those who demonstrated a clear understanding of stress patterns and successfully applied them in their recordings, and those who maintained a syllable-timed pattern akin to their native language, lacking variations in stress.

Table 1

Checklist for Evaluating Stress Use in EFL Students

Criteria	Consistently Achieved	Partially Achieved	Not achieved
Placing stress	60%	-	40%
Pausing after each thought group	70%	10%	20%
Stretching content words	50%	-	50%
Weakening grammar words	20%	30%	50%

Source: author's own development.

² Koffi Annan speech, retrieve from <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Pronunciation%20%20-%20Word%20Stress.pdf>

Conclusions

Our study found that pronunciation training centered on stress contributed to students understanding and application of word and sentence stress. Additionally, it demonstrated the tendency among Spanish-speaking students to apply a syllable-timed stress pattern when reading in English and the need to accompany them with constant practice as the one shown in this study. These insights imply that employing a variety of activities geared toward recognizing and replicating stress patterns could serve as effective strategies to enhance pronunciation, resulting in clearer and more natural speech. Moreover, such interventions are likely to improve students' confidence in using the target language.

In essence, the tasks implemented in our action research contributed to improving students' intelligibility by fostering consistent practice of stress patterns, facilitated by engaging activities and resources. Thus, our research effectively addressed our research questions regarding activities conducive to enhancing students' clarity in reading. Future research could explore pronunciation practice focused on students' individual readiness levels including scaffolding activities to refine sound articulation abilities. Overall, our findings underscore the efficacy of stress-focused word and sentence practice as a potent intervention for enhancing students' intelligibility and confidence in English.

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