

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Comprehensive Research

Dealing with the word and sentence stress in English language

Lok Raj Sharma

Associate Professor, Department of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

* Corresponding Author: **Lok Raj Sharma**

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-5289

Volume: 02

Issue: 01

January-February 2023

Received: 16-01-2023;

Accepted: 04-02-2023

Page No: 31-37

Abstract

Stress is a less focused, but more frequently discussed suprasegmental feature used in our communication. Students take it as one of the most difficult aspects of pronunciation, and often ignore its significance owing to their ignorance about it. This article, which attempts to deal with both the word stress and the sentence stress in a normative way, is based on the qualitative explorative research design. It involves the fundamental rules of word and sentence stress as variables. Such rules are maintained after a comprehensive overview on stress by going through related English books and journal articles on pronunciation. The rules of the stress are deductively presented to maintain the brevity of time and expression. This article concludes with the expectation of igniting keen desire in the students to use word and sentence stress properly and spontaneously in their communicative activities.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMCR.2023.2.1.31-37>

Keywords: English, sentence, stress, suprasegmental features, word

1. Introduction

English, as our teachers and students assume, is a crazy language, and its craziness can be frequently noticed and perceived in its pronunciation. There are certain rules along with exceptions to these rules of stress. Such situations create confusions in the proper application of stress. Moreover, English takes its position as a foreign language in Nepal. The Nepalese language, our mother tongue, can't support us to pronounce and apply stress in our communication because of diverse features of these two languages. The stress has existed as a difficult subject matter for us since the time it entered Nepal.

Stress is not a common subject matter for teaching and learning. It is hardly included even in our syllabus of English. Both the teachers and the students are indifferent to teaching and learning the stress just saying that it is not necessary; it is not asked in the examinations, or communication is possible without its proper knowledge, or it is difficult to deal with and so on. This ignoring nature has made us fall behind the other English speaking people in the world. This bitter reality made the writer realize the necessity for presenting some basic rules of stress in this article so that the concerned persons might be benefitted from them. This article aims at presenting some basic rules of stress with examples.

2. Theoretical Literature Review

Theoretical literature review comprises the concept of suprasegmental features, definition of stress, classification and degrees of stress, function of stress and the types and natures of metrical feet.

2.1 Suprasegmental features

Meaning in communication relies on segmental as well as suprasegmental features. Segmental features include consonant and vowel phonemes, whereas supra-segmental comprises several types such as tone, stress, rhythm, pitch and intonation. Ladefoged (2006) [6] defines suprasegmental features as "phonetic features such as stress, length, tone, and intonation, which are not the properties of single consonants or vowels" (p. 295). Learning pronunciation is not only limited to mean to study the sounds only but also the location of stress or other sorts of supra-segmental features (Huwar & Mehawesh, 2015) [12]. Supra-segmental features also indicate attitudinal and emotive meanings.

2.2 Stress

Stress is an extra force used while pronouncing a syllable or word. Stress can be described as a property of a lexeme (Kreidler, 2004) ^[14]. The words having two or more syllables are stressed more on a certain syllable than the other syllables. It means the stressed syllable is to be pronounced more emphatically. It is taken as the gradation of force employed in making a syllable (Crystal, 2008) ^[6]. Stress is one of the suprasegmental features of expressions (Ladefoged, 2006, p. 243) ^[6]. A native speaker spontaneously knows about stress and how it exactly tends to function (Harmer, 1990) ^[10]. It is the importance given to, and observed in, particular syllables in words (Wales, 2001) ^[24]. Stressing wrong syllables spoils the shape of the word and it results in difficulty in identifying the lexeme in communication (O'Connor, 2006) ^[19]. Problem for ESL/EFL learners in producing the stress correctly occurs owing to the lack of fixed stress rule (Chouchane, 2016) ^[15]. Employing incorrect stress causes a misunderstanding in oral message or communication (Ur, 2003).

Stress comes typically with one syllable in a word, which is more perceptible than others. Stress is pronounced with more significant way, so it can stand out acoustically and perceptually. Roach (2008) ^[21] pinpoints four factors which identify the stressed syllable: loudness, length, pitch and quality. He asserts that a stressed syllable should be louder than other syllables, longer with a greater pitch, and it should have a vowel which is dissimilar in quality with other syllables. The stressed syllable from a perception perspective is more important than unstressed syllable (Roach, 2008) ^[21].

Stress is challenging because it is hard to designate its actual nature. In addition, phonetic correlates such as duration, intensity, and segmental quality impact the shape of utterance in stress (Ou, 2010). Stress occurs with lexical words such as noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Hismanoglu (2012) ^[11] asserts that lexical stress comes with a definite syllable in a word. Speakers can differentiate lexical stress in two ways; the first one is segmentally. Ladefoged (1993) ^[14] proclaims that lexical stress is connected with long or unreduced vowels. The second way is suprasegmentally; lexical stress is related with numerous acoustic aspects such as fundamental frequency, intensity, and duration (Lehiste, 1996) ^[17]. Chomsky and Halle (1968) ^[4] affirm that "the optimal grammar of English is one in which stress is prophesied by rule rather than one in which stress is innate in the phonological matrix of a lexical entry" (p. 31). While the most approved definition of stress was "syllable importance which may stem from several determining phonetic features such as increased loudness, duration, pitch movement, sound quality or an amalgamation of these factors" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Hammond, 1999; Roach, 2000) ^[21, 3]. The number of syllables stressed by the speaker depends largely upon the nature of the words composing the utterance (Gimson, 1990) ^[8].

2.3 Classification and degrees of stress

There are four degrees of stress in English. They are: primary stress (strongest stress), secondary stress (weaker than primary one), tertiary stress (weaker than secondary one) and weak stress (the weakest one). Primary stress and secondary stress are very common; however this article deals only with the primary stress.

Poets can exploit three kinds of stress in their poetry. They are:

1. Normal stress / Grammatical Stress

Normal stress takes place according to general rules of stress. 'Teacher (Rule: A noun takes stress on the first syllable) Ad'vise (Rule: two syllabic verbs take stress on the second syllable of the word.)

Be'side (Rule: The root word is stressed.) etc.

2. Emphatic Stress

Generally, major words are stressed, and minor words remain unstressed. We can use stress on the minor words if we desire to emphasize it.

'I killed a cat. (Not anyone else but "I")

3. Poetical stress

Poets frequently use the poetical stress which is a regular system of accent to establish the basic rhythm in a poem:

'Tyger !'Tyger!'Burning 'bright

'In the 'forests 'of the night.

William Blake: The Tyger

In the above line "in" and "of" are given the poetical stress to make the line regular and rhythmical.

2.4 Functions of stress

Stress works as an important device to deliver a significant meaning, mood and emotion in speech. Pronunciation experts and specialists have placed emphasis on suprasegmental feature in order to boost oral communication for 20 years (Morley, 1991) ^[18]. Speakers employ stress to highlight the information they trust or consider important. On the other hand, if the talkers do not use the stress appropriately, the misunderstanding will take place (Alkhuli, 2002) ^[1]. Stress in English arises only with vowels, so consonants do not carry stress. Stressed vowels in English become stronger, louder, and greater in intensity, less centralized in vowel quality and longer in duration than non-stressed vowels (Betti & Ulaiw, 2018) ^[2]. They also labeled that stress is difficult because it is tough to describe its real nature. In addition, phonetic associates such as duration, intensity, and segmental quality influence the shape of expression in stress (Ou, 2010). Stress takes place with major lexical words such as noun, main verb, adjective, and adverb. Hismanoglu (2012) ^[11] asserts that lexical stress comes with a definite syllable in a word. Speakers can differentiate lexical stress in two ways; the first one is segmentally. Ladefoged (1993) ^[14] declares that lexical stress is linked with long or unreduced vowels. The second way is suprasegmentally; lexical stress is related with various acoustic aspects such as essential frequency, intensity, and duration (Lehiste, 1996) ^[17]. English stress comprises varied functions. English speakers use stress to discriminate between the contextual feature and grammatical functions of words. Stress also influences the sound and form selection of word morphemes. It signposts the reaction of speakers at certain point of speech and the momentous relations established between parts of a word, a phrase, or a sentence. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) ^[3] claim that word stress could fundamentally occur on syllables of the words. Word stress is influenced by the derivation of that word, its etymology, and the grammatical type of that particular word. Stress is used to differentiate between compound nouns which consist of an adjective followed by a

noun (Betti & Ulaiw, 2018) [2]. It is also used to distinguish between similar words function as nouns and verbs such as export and import. The function of stress is to put emphasis on certain word or syllable to highlight the meaning we want to convey. One of the functions of stress is to originate contrast to reduce the haziness in discourse. Stress consists of certain types: emphatic, sentence, pragmatic stress, and grammatical stress. Emphatic stress is utilized to differentiate the sentence from its negation (Betti & Ulaiw, 2018) [2]. Sentence stress usually falls on the final syllable of content words; the exception to that is accredited to the need to specify a certain assumptions, attitude, or illocutionary purpose of the speaker. Pragmatic stress involves drawing the attention of the listener to a certain piece of information with the determination of giving its negation or emphasizing its meaning importance. Grammatical stress is employed to indicate the grammatical classification of a word (verb, noun, or adjective). The placement of word stress in English depends profoundly on the number of syllables of that word, whether it is mono, bi, or polysyllabic words, word affixation,

and the grammatical classification of that particular word. The above-mentioned factors are thought to have a momentous role on the placement of word stress in English. Regarding long words, some syllables are more projecting those other syllables, where some syllables take the primary stress, while others do not.

Stress plays an obligatory role in the formation of metrical feet. English metrical verse depends on feet which are determined by the recurrent pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. A foot is a unit of rhythm consisting of a definite pattern of the stressed and unstressed syllables. It is a metrical unit which consists of a certain number of syllables in a line of verse. A foot is named on the basis of the nature and number of syllables it contains in a verse line. Cuddon (1999) [7] takes foot as a group of syllables making a metrical unit. English verse poets may use disyllabic or trisyllabic foot. A foot composed of two syllables is called a disyllabic foot, and a foot composed of three syllables is termed as a trisyllabic foot.

Table 1: Disyllabic Feet

S.N.	Nature of Foot	Name of Foot (Noun)	Name of Foot (Adjective)	Nature of Melody
1.	— —	Spondee	<i>Spondaic</i>	DUM_DUM
2.	∪ ∪	Pyrrhic	<i>Pyrrhic</i>	da_da
3.	— ∪	Trochee	<i>Trochaic</i>	DUM_da
4.	∪ —	Iamb	<i>Iambic</i>	da_DUM

Table 2: Trisyllabic Feet

S.N.	Nature of Foot	Name of Foot (Noun)	Name of Foot (Adjective)	Nature of Melody
1.	— — —	Molossus	Molossic	DUM-DUM-DUM
2.	∪ ∪ ∪	Tribrach	<i>Tribrachic</i>	da-da-da
3.	— — ∪	Antibacchius	<i>Antibacchaic</i>	DUM-DUM-da
4.	∪ ∪ —	Anapest	<i>Anapestic</i>	da-da-DUM
5.	— ∪ ∪	Dactyl	<i>Dactylic</i>	DUM-da-da
6.	∪ — —	Bacchius	<i>Bacchaic</i>	da- DUM-DUM
7.	— ∪ —	Amphimacer/ Cretic	<i>Cretic</i>	DUM-da-DUM
8.	∪ — ∪	Amphibrach	<i>Amphibrachic</i>	da-DUM-da

Note: ∪ (Unstressed syllable) and — (Stressed syllable)

3. Method and Materials

This article is based on the qualitative explorative design which employs the secondary data taken from the books and journal articles on pronunciation of English. The stress rules function as data that are categorical in nature and they are extracted through making keen observation of stress noticed at the levels of words and sentences. The observation is the method of this study. The stress rules are presented in a deductive way.

4. Dealing with the stress

This article presents the stress to be used at the four levels:

Stress on the monosyllabic words, polysyllabic words, beyond words and the sentences.

4.1. Regarding stress on the monosyllabic words

There are two classes of words: major word class and minor word class. Nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, demonstratives and interrogatives belong to the major word class. Such words are basically stressed. Pronouns, articles, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs and determiners which belong to the minor word class are not normally stressed. There are various rules, exceptions and conditions in employing the stress in English language

Table 3: Word stress

Words to be stressed	Words to be Unstressed
1. Nouns: Dog, pen, cat, book etc.	1. Pronouns: He, she, I etc.
2. Main verbs: Eat, read, go, play, sleep etc.	2. Auxiliary verbs: Is, can, will etc.
3. Adjectives: Small, cold, red etc.	3. Articles: A, an, the etc.
4. Adverbs: Well, just, quite etc.	4. Prepositions: At, in, on etc.
5. Demonstratives pronouns: This, that, these etc.	5. Relative Pronouns: Who, that, which etc.
6. Wh-words: What, when, What etc.	6. Conjunctions: And, but, or etc.
7. Exclamatory words: Oh! Ha! Ouch! etc.	7. Determiners: Any, some, few, etc.

4.1.1 Regarding stress on the be-verb

Generally, be-verb is unstressed, but it is stressed in the

following situations.

Table 4: Stress on the be-verb

Be- verb	
Stressed	Unstressed
1. Introducing questions	1. Before a main verb
Is he writing a letter?	He is reading a book
Was she playing ball?	She was writing a letter
2. In the final position after a pronoun	2. Be +noun
I know where he is	He is a teacher. It is milk
I don't remember how she was	3. Be+ adjective
	He is good
	She was kind
	4. In the final position after a noun
	I know where Ram is
	I don't remember how Rita was

4.1.2. Regarding stress on the have-verb

The have-verb is unstressed if it works as an auxiliary verb or the verb indicating possession. It is stressed as it works as a main verb.

the action.

Table 5: Stress on the have-verb

Have- verb	
Stressed	Unstressed
1. As a main verb	1. As an auxiliary verb
He has a meal	He has read a book
They have breakfast	They have written letters
	2. To show possession
	He has a car
	We have a house

Table 6: Stress on the do-verb

Do- verb	
Stressed	Unstressed
1. As a main verb	1. As an auxiliary verb
I do it	I do not eat rice
He does this work	She does not play ball
They did it	They did not play ball
2. To show emphasis	
I do love her	
He does play ball	
She did write a letter	

4.1.3. Regarding stress on the do-verb

The do-verb is unstressed if it works as an auxiliary verb. It is stressed as it works as a main verb or comes to emphasize

4.1.4. Regarding stress on the preposition

Normally, prepositions are unstressed, but they are stressed in the following situations.

Table 7: Stress on the preposition

Preposition	
Stressed	Unstressed
1. In a phrasal verb	1. In a general condition
Take off, put on, keep on etc.	I am at home
2. At the end of a sentence	The book is on the table
Who are you looking at?	

4.1.5. Regarding stress on the auxiliary verb

Auxiliary verbs are usually unstressed, but they are stressed

in the following situations.

Table 8: Stress on the auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary Verbs	
Stressed	Unstressed
1. Introducing questions	1. Before a main verb
Is he writing a letter?	He is reading a book
Has she played ball?	She can write a letter
Can you read it?	He has gone out
2. In the final position after a pronoun	4. In the final position after a noun
I know where he is	I know where Ram is.
Yes, he can	I don't remember how Rita could.
Yes, they have	
3. With the contracted form of not	
I don't know her	
He hasn't eaten rice	
She won't come	

4.2. Regarding stress on the polysyllabic words

Learning stress is certainly difficult for average learners, but not impossible. We need to learn these rules in the beginning. The rules are presented here.

4.2.2. The stress falls on the syllable just before the following endings in the words

Table 9: Stress on the syllable before the following endings

Endings	Words
-en	'burden, 'garden
-on	'button, 'lesson
-tain	'certain, 'curtain
-ent	'agent, 'patient
-ant	'distant, re'luctant
-ence	'absence, 'patience
-ion	'action, di'vision, 'nation
-ious	'precious, am'bitious
-cial	'social, bene'ficial
-ic	'comic, eco'nomiC, fan'tastic
-ical	'comical, eco'nomical
-ics	'physics, mathe'matics
-ple	'couple, 'people
-age	'passage, 'village
-et	'basket, 'pocket
-ow	'fellow, 'follow, 'mellow
-ward	'backward, 'forward
-meter	ther'mometer, di'ameter
-ed	'wicked, 'needed, 'wanted

4.2.3 The stress falls on the syllable just before the following endings in the words

Table 10: Stress on the first syllable in the following endings

Endings	Words
-able	'bearable, 'syllable
-ible	'edible, 'sensible
-let	'booklet, 'tablet
-ture	'culture, 'literature
-ise	'advertise
-ize	'finalize, 'centralize
-yse	'analyse
-ism	'criticism, 'mechanism

4.2.4 Polysyllabic words ending in "-y" and "-ive" carry the stress on the third syllable from the last:

'gratify, 'simplify de'mocracy con'servative 'talkative

4.2.5 The following suffixes carry the stress in the words

Table 11: Stress on the following endings

Endings	Words
-tine	rou'tine
-teen	can'teen
-toon	car'toon
-gar	ci'gar
-zaar	ba'zaar
-self	my'self, her'self
-ever	what'ever
-after	here'after
-out	through'out

4.2.6. When the words beginning with "a" is pronounced / ə /, they carry the primary stress on the second syllable:

a'bove, a'gain, a'board

4.2.1. The primary stress falls on the root words

'speaker, be'side re'newal, dis'like etc.

4.2.7. Two syllabic verbs carry the stress on the second syllable

a'buse, ab'sorb, be'lieve, se'lect, con'ceal

Note: Two syllabic verbs ending in ow, er, rry, ue and en carry the stress on the first syllable.

'follow 'order 'carry 'worry 'argue 'darken 'open

4.2.8. Two syllabic nouns and adjectives carry the stress on the first syllable

'easy, 'happy, 'milky, 'letter, 'sugar, 'brother

4.2.9. Three syllabic nouns and adjectives carry the stress on the first syllable

'acrobat, 'photograph, 'fortunate

4.2.10. Three syllabic verbs ending in "ate" carry the stress on the first syllable

'decorate 'educate 'dominate 'formulate

4.2.11. The words (more than three syllables) ending in "ate" carry the stress on the second syllable

com'municate, e'radicate, cer'tificate, par'ticipate

4.2.12. Three syllabic verbs carry the stress on the second syllable

con'tinue, de'termine, de'molish

4.2.13. The stress falls on the syllable with the following suffixes

ere :se'vere, sin'cere

eer :car'eer, engi'neer

ier :cash'ier

ee :absen'tee, deg'ree

oon :bal'loon, after'noon

oo: bam'boo, sham'poo, kanga'roo

4.2.14 Th stress falls on the first syllable in the two syllabic words with the pronunciation / æ, e, ɑ:Λ, ɒ / in the first syllable and / ə, ɪ / in the second syllable.

/ æ + ə / ɪ / = 'cancel 'damage

/ e + ə / ɪ / = 'mental 'envy

/ ɑ: + ə / ɪ / = 'pardon 'carpet

/ Λ + ə / ɪ / = 'double 'publish

/ ɒ + ə / ɪ / = 'moral 'office

4.3. Stress beyond the single word

Stress beyond the single word includes phrasal stress and compound stress.

4.3.1. The phrase stress

It is the stress in a syntactic phrase in which the second word is more prominent than the first one; therefore the head word of the phrase is stressed. Example:

Noun phrase: good 'work, heavy 'meal, dark 'night etc.

Verb phrase: can 'go, will 'read, may 'sleep etc.

Adjective Phrase: very 'good, too 'cold, quite 'lovely etc.

Adverb phrase: very 'clearly, quite 'well, too 'slowly etc.

4.3.2. The compound stress

The compound stress refers to the stress in compound words which are made up of two or more single words. In compounding words, the first word is more prominent than the second or the third word. The stress falls on the first word. Example:

'blackbird, 'greenhouse, 'armchair, 'textbook etc.

4.4. Sentences

Native speaker knows the appropriate use of stress (Harmer, 1990) [10]. It is general tendency to stress the word regardless of its word class to put special meaning into the sentences, for example:

I killed a tiger. (Not anyone else but "I")

I **killed** a tiger. (I did nothing but "killed".)

I killed **a** tiger. (Not two, three or other but only "one".)

I killed a **tiger**. (Not a fox, lion or other but "tiger".)

5. Conclusion

Stress, one of the suprasegmental features, is a puzzling aspect for the persons who use English as a foreign language in their speech or conversation. Although there are some rules of stress, such rules are turned to be nebulous because of the exceptions to these rules. We all undergo, willingly or unwillingly, various situations for using stress on monosyllabic words, polysyllable words, compound words, phrasal forms of the words, and on the words at the sentence level for their emphasis. We need to learn these rules at first, and then practise them regularly while speaking with teachers and friends. After persistent practice, spontaneity in the use of stress will be perceived in our speech. Stress is significant in conversation because it tends to determine the speaker's mood, emotion, emphasis and meaning. An appropriate use of stress is essential for better conversation or communication. This writer trusts this article to be fruitful to the teachers and the students who are interested in learning the aspects of suprasegmental features.

6. References

1. Alkhuli M. English Phonetics and Phonology. Jordan: Dar Alfala, 2002.
2. Betti M, Ulaiw W. Stress in English and Arabic: A contrastive study. Canadian Center of Science and Education. 2018; 8(1):83-91. doi:10.5539/ells.v8n1p83.
3. Celce-Murcia M, Brinton DM, Goodwin JM. Teaching pronunciation: A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
4. Chomsky N, Halle M. The sound pattern of English. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
5. Chouchane A. Pronunciation difficulties for Arab learner of English. Global English-Oriented Research Journal. 2016; 2(2):205-215.
6. Crystal D. A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
7. Cuddon J. Literary terms and literary theory. England: Penguin Book. England: Penguin Book, 1999.
8. Gimson A. An introduction to the pronunciation of English (ELBS 4th edition). Revised by Susan Ramsaran. London: English Language Book Society. 1990.
9. Hammond M. The phonology of English: A prosodic optimality theoretic approach. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
10. Harmer J. The practice of English language teaching. Harlow: Longman, 1990.
11. Hismanoglu M. Teaching words Stress to Turkish EFL (English as a foreign language) learners through internet-based video lessons. US-China Education Review. 2012; 1:26-40.
12. Huwar IF, Mehawesh M. Review of the importance of teaching pronunciation in the Arab society. International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature. 2015; 3(6):31-37.
13. Kreidle CW. The pronunciation of English: A course book (2nd ed.). Londn: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
14. Ladefoged P. A course in phonetics. U.S.A.: Harcourt Brace College, 1993.
15. Ladefoged P. A course in phonetics (5 th ed.). Boston: Michael Rosenberg, 2006.
16. Ladefoged P. A course in phonetics. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.
17. Lehiste I. Suprasegmental features of speech. In N. Lass (Ed.), Principles of experimental phonetics. St. Louis, M. O: Mosby, 1996, 226-244.
18. Morley J. The pronunciation component in teaching English to speakers of other languages. doi.org/10.2307/3586981. TESOL Quarterly. 1991; 25:481-520.
19. O'Connor JD. Better English pronunciation. Delhi: CUP. Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
20. Ou S. Taiwanese EFL learners' perception of English word stress. Concentric Studies in Linguistics. 2010; 36(1):1-23.
21. Roach P. English phonetics and phonology (3rd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
22. Roach P. English phonetics and phonology: A practical course. London: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

23. Ur P. A course in language teaching: Practice and theory. London: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
24. Wales K. A dictionary of stylistics. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.