**Syllable and Stress Patterns**

**Introduction**

Many of English learners continue to struggle with speaking and have difficulty being understood by native English speakers. One of the reasons is that they have not taken the time to study word stress seriously. Second languages learners often struggle to stress words appropriately in English. Word stress is something that students should study if they wish to speak English well. It is an essential part of learning English because it is a major component of the English language. Some languages have little or no stress, while most have some stress. However, English is a heavily stressed based language. There are few rules to follow for word stress which in return will give the learners better capability in conducting good communication.

**Understanding Syllable**

**Definition and Meaning**

A syllable is a unit of sound which includes a vowel sound. All words have at least one syllable. A syllable is a unit of speech. For example, the word "banana" is broken up into three parts, or syllables, for each piece of sound you pronounce before you momentarily pause: un- [pause]-der-[pause]-stand. Knowing how to divide words into syllables can greatly help with your spelling and reading skills as well as your ability to pronounce words correctly.

Sometimes we must break a word at the end of a line. Avoid doing so whenever possible; especially avoid breaking two successive lines. When breaking a word is unavoidable, mark the division with a hyphen (made with one stroke on the type-writer[-]).

It is splitting of words according to the syllables or units of sounds or vowel sounds. For Example;

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| leader | lead-er |
| countrymen | count-ry-men |
| rejoice | re-joice |
| universal | u-ni-ver-sal |
| survival | sur-vi-val |

Every word is made from syllables. It is a unit of sound. It can be a vowel, a diphthong, or one or more vowels combined with one or more consonants.

Each word has one, two, three or more syllables. Look at this examples.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Words** | | **No. of Syllables** | |
| big | big | |  |
| red | red | | 1 |
| quite | quite | | 1 |
| seldom | sel-dom | | 2 |
| quiet | qui-et | | 2 |
| water | wa-ter | | 2 |
| important | im-port-ant | | 3 |
| understand | un-der-stand | | 3 |
| interesting | in-ter-est-ing | | 4 |
| information | in-for-ma-tion | | 4 |
| unexceptional | un-ex-cep-tio-nal | | 5 |
| international | in-ter-na-tion-al | | 5 |

Notice that (with a few rare exceptions) every syllable contains at least one **vowel** (a, e, i, o or u) or **vowel sound**. "A **syllable** is a peak of prominence in the chain of utterance. If you could measure the acoustic power output of a speaker as it varies with time, you would find that it goes continually up and down, forming little peaks and valleys: the peaks are syllables. The words *lair* and *here* form only one peak each, and so only one syllable, whereas the words *player* and *newer* are usually pronounced with two peaks and so contain two syllables. It is thus desirable to distinguish between a diphthong (which is one syllable) and a sequence of two vowels (which is two syllables)." (Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2000)

**Syllabifiaction**

Syllabification has six types, they are :

1. Monosyllabic

2. Disyllabic (or) Bi-syllabic

3 .Tri-syllabic

4. Tetra-syllabic

5. Penta-syllabic

6. Poly-syllabic (or) Multisyllabic

But the basic syllabifications are Mono-syllabic, Di-syllabic and Poly-syllabic

**Monosyllabic Words**

Words having only one syllable. For Example;

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| act | cat | book |
| slew | base | vile |
| oft | cause | crown |
| mourn | worse | fear |
| head | riot | sword |
| tongue | plot | steel |
| wish | one | school |
| break | rhythm | make |
| act | see | all |
| at | ball | bat |
| bet | sweep | life |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| cen-sure | sen-se | va-liant |
| in-terred | grie-vous | cae-sar |
| cap-tives | ran-soms | be-side |
| dec-tate | wo-men | cri-tic |
| in-stead | de-lay | a-gain |
| edu-cate | pro-gramme | van-quish |
| se-nate | de-bate | dor-mant |
| out-break | mo-ral | dir-rect |
| co-ward | en-ding | care-ful |
| de-vil | dia-mond | co-ward |
| sus-pect | deep-est | pur-pose |

**Disyllabic (or) Bisyllabic Word :**

Words having only two syllables. For example;

**Trisyllabic Word:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| beau-ti-ful | to-mor-row | po-pu-lar |
| in-ten-tion | lu-per-vcal |  |
| lu-per-cal | mu-ti-ny | le-ga-cy |
| tes-ta-ment | be-lo-ved | me-mo-ry |
| un-kind-ly | tes-ta-ment |  |
| be-lo-ved | tri-um-virs | for-tu-nate |
| vic-to-ries | o-ra-tion | coun-try-men |
| be-ne-fit | as-sem-bly | con-si-der |
| e-le-ment | tra-di-tion | im-pli-cit |
| per-mi-ssion | ex-peri-ment | in-jus-tice |

Words having three syllables. For example;

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| in-tel-li-gent | in-i-ti-at-ve | per-so-ni-fi-ca-tion |
| fun-da-men-tal-ly | in-fe-ri-o-ri-ty | syl-la-bi-fi-ca-tion |

**Polysyllabic Word:**

Words having four or more syllables. For Example;

**Syllable and Word Stress**

To understand syllables, it helps to understand word stress. All words of more than one syllable have what is called word stress. Stress is an accent that we make on certain syllables and words when speaking English. This means that at least one of the syllables is louder than the other syllables. English words that have more than one syllable (polysyllabic) always have one syllable that is stressed. In most English dictionaries, the stressed syllable is indicated by a stress mark, a symbol that resembles an apostrophe. The stress mark follows the syllable that is stressed. Putting the stress in the correct position of a syllable when speaking is crucial since by putting it otherwise, may cause the listener to mishear or even misunderstand the word.

"There is a great deal of evidence that native speakers rely very much on the stress pattern of words when they are listening. In fact, experiments have demonstrated that often when a native speaker mishears a word, it is because the foreigner has put the stress in the wrong place, not because he or she mispronounced the sound of the word." *(Joanne Kenworthy, Teaching English Pronunciation. Longman, 1987)*

Studying stress patterns in English is particularly important for speakers of other languages whose stress rules are more regular and/or different *(Celce-Murcia et al, 1996)* and thus interfere with comprehensibility. Stressing the wrong syllable in a word can make the word very difficult to hear and understand. The meaning or type of the word can change when the words are stressed wrongly. 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.

Mistakes in word stress are a common cause of misunderstanding in English. Therefore the main objective of this writing is to develop understanding on English word stress that will enable learners of English to predict which syllable in most English words will receive the primary word stress. Words that are stressed appropriately will definitely improve vowel quality, or at least prevents it from being distorted, as may result when words are stressed incorrectly.

Take 3 words: contribute, contributor, contribution. Do they sound the same when spoken? No.

Because one syllable in each word is stressed (stronger than the others).

CONtribute

conTRIbutor

contriBUtion

The acoustic properties of the stressed syllables in English are different to those of the unstressed syllables. The unstressed syllables have a weaker vowel and often include the schwa. Visually, when we produce word stress our lips and chins move more *(Scarborough, Keating,* *Mattys, Cho & Alwan, 2009).* Accordingly, the vowel is fuller than in non-stressed syllables where it is weaker and therefore requires less mouth opening. As with all linguistic features, word stress is acquired at different stages by children and, as they mature, so does their ability to use word stress with increased complexity *(Atkinson-King, 1973).*

**Here are some examples of Syllable Stress**

**One Syllable - Stressed**

All one syllable words have the stress on the one syllable. The intonation should go down.

GO

TALK

SING

WELL

**Two Syllable - First Syllable Stressed**

PRETty

PICture

CENter

**Two Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed**

enJOY

aHEAD

aLLOW

**Three Syllable - First Syllable Stressed**

ENergy

Operate

ORganize

**Three Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed**

conSIder

inHerit

inJUStice

**Three Syllable - Third Syllable Stressed**

personNEL

employEE

voluntEER

**Four Syllable - Second Syllable Stressed**

cerTIficate

eVAporate

moDERnity

**Four Syllable - Third Syllable Stressed**

repuTAtion

distriBUtion

poliTIcian

**Stress rules**

Like many other languages, English has its own stress pattern. In general a stress will be placed in certain syllable. The stress can be placed on the first syllable, second syllable, third syllable, or on other part of the syllable. It may also happens that one can get the number of stress more than one. In some words, the difference stress of sound may change their meaning.

English word always has a stress in the vowel sound. Stress varies from syllable to syllable. Those syllables that are pronounced more forcibly or strongly than neighboring syllables are generally said to be strongly stressed or pronounced with strong stress. And those syllables that are pronounced without much force are commonly said to be unstressed or pronounced with weak stress. In other words the syllables that are not stressed are "weak" or "small" or "quiet". Native speakers of English listen for the stressed syllables, not the weak syllables. However, learners of English need to comply the correct placement of word stress. The shift of stress in words such as ‘*object* and *ob’ject* may create confusion if they are not pronounced with proper stress. By using the proper word stress in your speech, you will instantly and automatically improve your pronunciation as well as your comprehension.

In order to avoid mistakes in pronouncing words or to avoid wrong placement of stress, here are some rules, rather complicated, that need to be conveyed by learners of English. However, do not rely on them too much, because there still are many exceptions.

**Rules of Word Stress in English**

**1. A word can only have one stress.**

In a very long word you can have a secondary stress but it is always a much smaller stress.

**2. Only vowels are stressed, not consonants.**

The vowels in English are a, e, i, o, and u. The consonants are all the other letters.

**3. One syllable - stressed**

All one syllable words have the stress on the one syllable. The intonation should go down.

Examples: EAT, DRINK, SIGN, WELL

**4. Stress on first syllable**

a. Most 2 –syllable nouns have stress on first syllable

Examples: TAble, WAter, PEOple, FLOwer, TEACHer, STUDent, CARpet, LESson

b. Most 2-syllable adjectives have stress on first syllable

Examples: CLEVer, HAPpy, PRETty, HANDsome, FUNny, LOCal, USEful, FOOLish,

NATive, CAREless

**5. Stress on last syllable**

Most 2-syllable verbs have stress on last syllable

Examples: deCIDE, beGIN, conDUCT, reSOLVE, relax

**6. Stress which determine verb or noun of the same words.**

Nouns are on the first syllable

Examples: Insult, MISmatch, Rewrite, TRANSplant, TORment, adDICT, OBject

Verbs are on the second syllable

Examples: inSULT, misMATCH, reWRITE, transPLANT, torMENT, adDICT, object

**7. Words ending in consonants and in -y**

If there is a word that ends in a consonant or in a -y, then the first syllable gets the

stress.

Examples: RARity , OPtimal , GRAdient, CONtainer

**8. Words ending in er, -or,-ly**

For words ending with the suffixes -er, -or, or -ly, the stress is placed on the first

syllable.

Examples: DIRect/DIRector , ORder/ORderly , MANage/MANager

**9. Words having dual role**

In the case of words which can be used as either a noun or verb, the noun will tend to be

stressed on the first syllable and the verb on the last syllable.

Examples: IMport(n), INcrease(n), imPORT(v), inCREASE(v)

**10. Word stress for compound words**

* **Compound noun**

A compound noun is a noun made out of two nouns in order to form one word. In a

compound noun, the first word usually takes on the stress.

Examples: ICEland , TOOTHpaste, SEAfood

* **B. Compound adjectives**

A compound adjective is an adjective composed of at least two words. Often, hyphens

are used in compound adjectives. In compound adjectives, the stress is placed within the

second word. Examples: ten-Meter, rock-Solid, fifteen-Minute, bad-TEMpered, old-

FASHioned

* **C. Compound verbs**

A compound verb is when a subject has two or more verbs. The stress is on the second

Or on the last part.

Examples: Jonas loves bread but deTESTS butter. Helen baked cookies and ATE them up. Dogs love to eat bones and love DRINking water.

* **D. Noun + compound nouns**

Noun + compound Nouns are two word compound nouns. In noun + compound noun,

the stress is on the first word.

Examples: AIRplane mechanic, PROject manager, BOARDroom member,

BLACKbird, GREENhouse

**11. Stress on ante-penultimate syllable** (ante-penultimate = third from end)

Words ending in -cy, -ty, -phyand –gy

Example: deMOcracy, dependaBIlity, phoTOgraphy, geology

Words ending in –al

Example: CRItical, geological

**12. Prefixes**

Usually, prefixes do not take the stress of a word. There are a few exceptions to this

rule, however, like: un, in, pre, ex and mis, which are all stressed in their prefix.

Examples: ex: EXample, EXplanation, EXamine ; in: INside, INefficient, INterest ; mis:

MISspoke, MIStake, MISspelled ; pre: PREcede, PREarrange, PREliminary

**13. Suffixes can be divided into the following**

**(A). The stress in on the suffix itself**

Examples:

- ee: emploYEE refuGEE traiNEE refeREE

- eer: engiNEER caREER volunTEER

- ese: ChiNESE JapaNESE PortuGUESE

-ique: uNIQUE anTIQUE technique

**(B). The stress is on the syllable *immediately before* the suffix:**

Examples:

- ial: meMOrial fiNANcial artiFIcial esSENtial

- ual: VIsual unUsual intelLECtual indiVIdual

- ian: CaNAdian vegeTARian peDEStrian poliTIcian

- sion: exPLOsion ocCAsion conCLUsion perMIssion

- tion: defiNItion proDUction situAtion qualification

- ient : ANcient sufFIcient efFIcient deFIcient proFIcient

- cious: delicious conscious suspicious judicious

- tious : amBItious CAUtious supersTItious consciENtious

- ic : acaDEmic enerGEtic fanTAStic terRIfic reALIStic

- ible: Edible FLExible inCREdible imPossible

- ity: aBIlity neCEssity puBLIcity possIBIlity huMIdity

- ify: CLAssify TERrify huMIdify perSOnify soLIdify

- logy : biOlogy sociOlogy anthroPOlogy psyCHOlogy

- graphy : geOgraphy autobiOgraphy phoTOgraphy porNOgraphy

- meter: kiLOmeter paRAmeter speeDOmeter thermometer

**(C) The stress is on *the second syllable before* the suffix:**

Examples

- ate : Operate exAggerate asSOciate iNtegrate cerTIficate

- ize: APOlogize CRIticize REcognize comPUterize

- ary: SEcretary NEcessary conTEMporary voCAbulary

- ous :couRAgeous mysTERious imPEtuous sponTAneous

simulTAneous

Word stress is is part of the language. It is not an optional extra that you can add to the English language if you want. English speakers use word stress to communicate rapidly and accurately, even in difficult conditions. If, for example, you do not hear a word clearly, you can still understand the word because of the position of the stress. Non-native speakers, who speak English to native speakers without using word stress, encounter two problems: They find it difficult to understand native speakers, especially those speaking fast, and the native speakers may find it difficult to understand them, too.

Word stress plays an important role in intelligibility and deserves to be studied in all English classes or by English learners. Every word must have a stress and only vowels that are stressed not consonants. Generally, common English nouns and adjectives, are more often stressed on the first syllable than on any other syllable. Verbs with two syllables are usually stressed on the second syllable. Even the same words can be determined wether they are nouns or verbs through the placement of the stress. Having good understanding on prefix and suffix, all the words ending in –y,-er, -or, -ly, will also give great benefit in determining where the stress is placed correctly. In order to become a powerful communicator of English we must learn all the rules of stress mentioned earlier. So learning of stress leads us to better communication.