

5 Word and sentence stress

- What is word stress?
- What is unstress?
- Rules of word stress
- Levels of stress
- Sentences: Stress timing and syllable timing
- Sentence stress and tonic syllables
- Sentence stress and weak forms
- Raising awareness of word and sentence stress
- Sample lessons
 - Lesson 1: Find a partner: Stress patterns
 - Lesson 2: Three little words: Contrastive stress
 - Lesson 3: Misunderstanding dialogues: Contrastive stress
 - Lesson 4: Listening and transcribing: Stress placement in a short monologue
 - Lesson 5: Categorisation: Word stress
- Further ideas for activities
- Putting sentence stress into perspective

What is word stress?

Try saying the following words to yourself: *qualify*, *banana*, *understand*. All of them have three identifiable syllables, and one of the syllables in each word will sound louder than the others: so, we get *QUALify*, *baNAna* and *underSTAND*. (The syllables indicated in capitals are the stressed syllables.) Each stressed syllable, in a word in isolation, also has a change in the **pitch**, or the level of the speaker's voice, and the vowel sound in that syllable is lengthened.

Stress can fall on the first, middle or last syllables of words, as is shown here:

Ooo	oOo	ooO
SYLlabus	enGAGEment	usheRETTE
SUBstitute	baNAna	kangaROO
TECHnical	phoNETic	underSTAND

45

The words in the first group (Ooo) are all stressed on the first syllable, the words in the second group are stressed on the second syllable, and those in the third group are stressed on the third syllable.

If you have any difficulty initially in recognising where the stress falls, try making the word in question the last word in a short sentence, and saying it over a few times (for example, *It's in the syllabus; He had a prior engagement; I don't understand*). Listen to the examples on the CD. This should help you to ascertain the pattern for the word you are considering. Another idea is to say the word in question as though you have been completely taken by surprise, or are taken aback by the mere mention of the idea (for example, *SYLLabus? baNAna? kangaROO?*).

46

47

Some find it relatively easy to spot stresses, and others will take time to be able to do so consistently. Whichever group you fall into, you need to be aware of stress, and to deal with it specifically in class. If students are first made aware of stress, and then given practice in identifying stressed syllables, they will be better able to work towards using it appropriately when speaking.

What is unstress?

In order for one syllable to be perceived as stressed, the syllables around it need to be unstressed. For stressed syllables, three features were identified: loudness, pitch change and a longer syllable. Unstress may be described as the absence of these.

Have another look at the groups of words in the previous table. In the word *syllabus*, we said that the first syllable was stressed. This logically implies that the final two are unstressed. Also, in the word *banana*, the first and third syllables are unstressed, and the middle one is stressed. The same applies to the other words in the table.

The idea, as we will see later, is a little simplified here, but the basic contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables is a useful concept to hold on to, and for many classroom situations, this level of detail is enough to help students towards more successful pronunciation.

On the subject of unstressed syllables, however, there are various things to notice. In Chapter 3, we considered the phoneme known as 'schwa' (the phonemic transcription is /ə/). This sound can be heard in the first syllable of *about*, in the second syllable of *paper*, and also in the third syllable of *intricate*. The table below shows the incidences of /ə/ with the corresponding written vowels underlined.

Ooo	oOo	ooO
SYLL <u>l</u> abus	enG <u>A</u> gement	us <u>h</u> er <u>E</u> TTE
SUB <u>S</u> titute	ba <u>N</u> Ana	kang <u>a</u> ROO
TECH <u>H</u> nical	pho <u>N</u> ETic	under <u>S</u> TAND

As mentioned in Chapter 3, /ə/ is the most commonly occurring vowel sound in English. It never appears within a stressed syllable. Schwa is by nature an unstressed sound. If you try to stress any syllable which naturally contains /ə/, you change its properties, and another phoneme is produced.

Schwa is not unique to the English language, but it is its most frequent sound. Difficulties may arise for students if this sound does not occur in their first language, or from the interference of other pronunciation rules and tendencies that they might bring over into spoken English. Perception is also crucial, in that as /ə/ is such a common feature of English, lack of awareness of its role may add to students' difficulties in understanding native speaker speech.

As can be seen from the words in the table below, /ə/ can be represented through spelling in a variety of ways. Here are some spellings, with the incidences of /ə/ underlined. Remember, though, that these may not always tally with the reader's own accent or variety of English.

48

a, as in arise, syllable, abanana
 e, as in phenomenon, excellent and evowel
 i, as in pupil, experiment and commiuncate
 o, as in tomorrow, button or develop
 u as in upport, bogus and diffult

Sometimes whole syllables or word endings may be 'reduced' to /ə/, as in butter, thorough, facilitator and polar. This is common among British English accents, though not so common in US English.

49

At other times /ə/ is a central sound in a syllable, and several written vowels may represent the sound; this is very common in words ending in -ous (like conscious and fictitious). It also occurs frequently in -al endings (like spatial, capital and topical), in -ion words (like session, pronunciation and attention) and -ate endings (like accurate, private and delicate).

You will notice that there is one word in the table on the previous page in which /ə/ does not occur (substitute). It is important to remember that not all unstressed syllables contain /ə/, but it is our most common vowel sound.

Rules of word stress

The list opposite provides a 'rough guide' to stressed syllables. It is more accurate to see these as descriptions of tendencies rather than rules, in that they only tell us what is true most of the time, and it is always possible to find exceptions. It is not suggested that teachers simply pass on this information 'en masse' to their students: it will be of some use, and is certainly worth studying at appropriate times, but it will not always be available for students to recall and use in real-time communication.

It makes sense to use such information to help students to discover patterns which are applicable and relevant to the language they are learning at a particular time, but always bear in mind that they are rules of thumb only.

50

Core vocabulary: Many 'everyday' nouns and adjectives of two-syllable length are stressed on the first syllable. Examples are: *SISter*, *BROther*, *MOther*, *WAter*, *PAper*, *TAble*, *COFfee*, *LOvely* etc.

Prefixes and suffixes: These are not usually stressed in English. Consider: *QUIetly*, *oRIGinally*, *deFEctive*, and so on. (Note the exceptions, though, among prefixes, like *BIcycle* and *DISlocate*.)

Compound words: Words formed from a combination of two words tend to be stressed on the first element. Examples are: *POSTman*, *NEWSpaper*, *TEApot* and *CROSSword*.

Words having a dual role: In the case of words which can be used as either a noun or a verb, the noun will tend to be stressed on the first syllable (in line with the 'core vocabulary' rule above) and the verb on the last syllable (in line with the 'prefix rule'). Examples are *IMport* (n), *imPORT* (v); *REbel* (n), *reBEL* (v) and *INcrease* (n), *inCREASE* (v).

Levels of stress

So far, we have looked at syllables in terms of being either stressed or unstressed. In fact within longer words syllables can have different degrees of stress. To be more theoretically accurate, we should consider all syllables in terms of their level of stress, rather than its presence or absence, particularly when dealing with words in isolation. Different commentators have outlined up to five different levels of stress in a single word: Daniel Jones, in *An Outline of English Phonetics* cites the word *opportunity*, which has five levels of stress as seen below. '1' indicates the greatest level of stress, and '5' the least.

-----2-----4-----1-----5-----3-----
/ɒpə'tju:nɪti:/

Jones qualified this, however, by saying that he thought that this viewpoint needed 'modification', and that here stress was affected by 'subtle degrees of vowel and consonant length, and by intonation' (1960: 247). While Jones' example seems somewhat excessive for our purposes, the existence of different levels of stress is well documented and evidenced.

Many commentators settle on a three-level distinction between primary stress, secondary stress and unstress, as seen in the following examples.

51

o . O . .
opportunity
O . o
telephone
O . o
substitute

However, in practical terms a two-level division (stressed or unstressed) is usually adequate for teaching purposes. Many people (including many teachers) will have difficulty in perceiving more than two levels of stress with any confidence. Two levels of stress are enough to attune learners' ears and attention to how stress acts within words and utterances.

This is not, of course, to discourage teachers from further investigations into the nature of stress at a deeper level. The deeper one's understanding of the subject matter, the better one's teaching of it is likely to be. Teachers need to be as informed as possible in order to be better able to make the decision as to what to include in lessons. If students notice or enquire about more than two levels of stress, then of course this should be acknowledged and discussed in class. The teacher must feel confident in making informed decisions about the method and content of these discussions, backed up by professional knowledge.

**Sentences:
Stress timing
and syllable
timing**

It has been claimed that certain languages (for example English, Arabic and Russian) are **stress-timed**, or **isochronous** /aɪ'sɒkrənəs/. In such languages stresses occur at regular intervals within connected speech, it is claimed, and the duration of an utterance is more dependent upon the number of stresses than the number of syllables. To achieve the regular stress intervals, unstressed syllables are made shorter, and the vowels often lose their 'pure' quality, with many tending towards /ə/, and others towards /ɪ/ and /ʊ/.

Other languages (such as Japanese, French and Spanish) are said to be **syllable-timed**. In these languages there is no strong pattern of stress; syllables maintain their length, and vowels maintain their quality. Certain syllables are still stressed, of course, but not according to a regular pattern.

Isochronicity might be shown as in the following example. We start with a simple sentence; we add syllables to it on each line, but the time it takes to say the utterance remains the same.

they LIVE	in an	OLD	HOUSE
they LIVE	in a NICE	OLD	HOUSE
they LIVE	in a LOVEly	OLD	HOUSE
they've been LIVing	in a deLIGHTful	OLD	HOUSE
they've been LIVing	in a deLIGHTful	OLD	COTTage
they've been LIVing	in a deLIGHTful	vicTORian	COTTage

The occurrence of stresses remains regular, and unstressed syllables are squashed in between the stressed ones, being shorter and losing some purity of the vowel sound. If you simply tap out the rhythm it is easy to be persuaded of the validity of this idea. One can indeed say this sequence of sentences with a regular rhythm, which seems to be preserved as one adds more syllables. There is also a strong contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables.

However, consider also the speed at which you are talking by the time you get to the last utterance in the group. From slowly and deliberately in the first sentence, one moves by stages to far more rapid speech in the last line. The persuasiveness of the idea makes the evidence fit the theory, rather than the theory being supported by the evidence.

It makes more sense to imagine English described in terms of a continuum which has tendencies towards stress-timing at one end and syllable-timing at the other. A language like English has more of a tendency than some other languages to reduce vowel length and quality in unstressed syllables, and so tends towards the stress-timing end of the continuum.

So-called syllable-timed languages also reduce the length of the vowel in an unstressed syllable, though to a lesser extent, but they tend to preserve the quality of the vowel sound.

Stress timing and regular rhythms are most noticeable in highly stylised and patterned language, such as poetry or nursery rhymes. How far the phenomenon is observable in everyday speech is a matter for debate. Regularity of speech rhythm varies widely according to context, as it may bring in factors such as the relationship between the speakers, their confidence, nervousness, etc. and whether their speech is rehearsed or spontaneous, not to mention personal habits of accent, dialect and so on. As we will see in the next section too, the words and syllables which we choose to stress in connected speech are in fact dictated very much by context, and the meanings we wish to communicate when speaking.

Using language which is rhythmic and clearly patterned can, however, be very useful in the classroom, particularly for making students aware of the importance of stress (and intonation) in English, and also for highlighting weak forms and other features of connected speech.

Sentence stress and tonic syllables

The use of stress in speech helps us both deliver and understand meaning in longer utterances and it is closely linked with **intonation**. Although we will inevitably mention intonation, in this chapter we will concentrate on which syllables are stressed and why. In Chapter 6, we will look further at how intonation contributes to the meaning of what we say.

Consider the following sentence:

he **LIVES** in the **HOUSE** on the **CORner**.

(Capitals have not been used where they would usually occur (i.e. on *he*) in order to preserve the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables.) The above example sentence conveys three different ideas: he resides in a

particular dwelling; that dwelling is what the people involved in the conversation would consider to be a house, as opposed to a flat or a bungalow; the precise location of the house is at the junction of two or more streets, this junction being either familiar or obvious to the hearer. This gives us three **content words** (*lives, house* and *corner*), which convey the most important ideas in the sentence. The rest of the utterance consists of **function words**, which we need in order to make our language hold together.

The example is rather stylised, however, and glosses over what actually happens when the sentence is said in context. In order to arrive at an understanding of this, we need initially to go back to word stress.

- 52 The word *corner* has two syllables, the first one being stressed, and the second one unstressed, as follows: *CORner*.

- 53 If I ask you *Where is John's house?*, and it happens to be at a junction of two or more streets, that junction being either known to us both or obvious to us both, you might answer like this: *It's on the CORner*.

The first syllable of *corner* in this sentence is the **tonic syllable**. It is indicated by underlining. *Corner* is the most important word in the sentence as it effectively answers the question *Where?* The tonic syllable is the most stressed syllable in an utterance – it is generally longer, louder, and carries the main pitch movement in an utterance (in this example, the pitch of the voice falls on it).

- 54 If, on the other hand, one friend asks another to confirm where John's house is, the question might be *Where did you say John lives?* In this case, a possible answer is as follows:

he LIVES in the house on the CORner.

Here, *lives* is given some stress, and so it is written in capitals. *Lives* in this sentence is the **onset syllable**, in that it establishes a pitch that stays more or less level right through to *cor-* (which is still our tonic syllable), on which it drops. That the word *house* is not stressed here tells us that this is shared knowledge between the speakers, and it is not necessary to point this out. It is possible to detect a small degree of stress on *house*, but relative to *lives* and *cor-*, it is noticeably less prominent.

The new information that is being shared between speakers determines what is the tonic syllable. Look at this example:

- 55 John lives in the block of flats on the corner, doesn't he?
NO, he LIVES in the HOUSE on the corner.

Here, *lives* is again an onset syllable, but the tonic syllable is now *house*, reflecting the importance of this word within the utterance. *No* is also a tonic syllable, and is followed by a pause. While the first syllable of *corner* is stressed when the word is said on its own, here it is not given any stress, as it is knowledge already shared between the speakers.

The following example shows a similar effect:

- 56 John's buying the house on the corner, isn't he?
 he ALREADY LIVES in the house on the corner.

Within utterances, therefore, we emphasise tonic syllables in order to highlight the most significant new information. We use onset syllables to initiate a pitch which continues up to the tonic syllable. We will develop these important ideas further in Chapter 6, which takes a closer look at intonation.

With regard to sentence stress we can outline a three-stage process which enables us to say the same thing in different ways:

- 1 When we say words of more than one syllable in isolation we will stress one of the syllables.
- 2 When words are arranged together in a sentence or utterance, certain syllables will be stressed in order to convey the most important new information. This may cancel out normal word stress.
- 3 Intonation is used to give further subtleties of meaning to the syllables we have chosen to stress.

Speakers make certain assumptions with regard to what is old and new information, and express these by means of stress (and intonation) patterns. Hearers confirm or deny these assumptions through their reactions.

Remember also that our spoken language is not tied to sentences. When conversing, we often use incomplete sentences, phrases which would be considered ungrammatical if written down, interrupt each other, backtrack and so on. However, a study of stress within complete sentences provides a 'user-friendly' way of drawing attention to the main aspects of how we use stress in speech.

Sentence stress and weak forms

There are a large number of words in English which can have a 'full' form and a 'weak' form. For example, compare the use of the word *can* and *from* in the following sentences:

57

She *can* /kən/ swim faster than I *can* /kæn/. (The first *can* is the weak form, and the second *can* is the full form.)

She's *from* /frəm/ Scotland. Where are you *from* /frɒm/? (The first *from* is the weak form, and the second *from* is the full form.)

As these words can be pronounced differently, it is important that learners are taught the possible forms of these words when they are introduced. These words are most often the function words, filling in between content words, and making sentences 'work', grammatically.

Receptive exercises can be used to attune students' minds to the idea, and to work towards recognition of the different forms. Productive exercises can also be used to help students towards their target of pronunciation. The most frequently cited examples of these words are as outlined in the following table:

58

Grammatical category	Word	Full form	Weak form	Example of weak form
Verbs	am	æm	m	That's what I'm trying to say.
	are	ɑ:	ə	Where are you from?
	is	ɪz	əz/z/s	Where's he from?/Where is he from?
	was	wɒz	wəz	That's where he was born.
	were	wɜ:	wə	That's where my children were born.
	do	du:	də	Where do you live?
	does	dʌz	dəz	Where does he live?
	have	hæv	əv/v	He will have left by now./They've gone.
	has	hæz	həz/əz/ z/s	The baby has swallowed a stone./He's gone.
	had	hæd	həd/əd/d	He had already gone./He'd already gone.
	can	kæn	kən	I'm not sure if I can lend it to you.
	could	kʊd	kəd	Well, what could I say?
	would	wʊd	wəd/əd	Well, what would you have done?
	should	ʃʊd	ʃəd/ʃd	Well, what should I have said?
Personal pronouns	you	ju:	jə	How do you do?
	your	jɔ:	jə	What does your boss think?
	he	hi:	hi/ɪ	Where does he work?
	him	hɪm	ɪm	I'll give it to him later.
	she	ʃi:	ʃɪ	She's leaving tomorrow.
	her	hɜ:	hə/ə	I'll give it to her later.
	us	ʌs	əs	They'll give it to us later.
	them	ðem	ðəm	I'll give it to them later.
Prepositions	to	tu:	tə	He's already gone to work.
	at	æt	ət	He's at work, I think.
	of	ɒv	əv	That's the last of the wine!
	for	fɔ:	fə	He's away for two weeks.
	from	fɹɒm	fɹəm	She comes from Scotland.
Conjunctions	and	ænd	ən/ənd	She's tall and fair.
	but	bʌt	bət	She's here, but Juan isn't.
	than	ðæn	ðən	She's older than you.
Articles	a	eɪ	ə	He's a doctor.
	an	æn	ən	She's an architect.
	the	ði:	ðə	She's the person I told you about.
Indefinite adjectives	any	eni:	əni:/ni:	Have we got any biscuits?
	some	sʌm	səm	There's some tea in the pot.
	such	sʌtʃ	sətʃ	It's not such a big deal, really.

Keep in mind when teaching weak forms that in certain positions, the full form is necessary. Also, at times, speakers may wish to emphasise function words for particular reasons:

59

no, I was coming FROM the station, not going TO it.

Weak forms are an important feature of ordinary, everyday speech, and students should have the opportunity of becoming attuned to them. Students should be given the opportunity to practise both strong and weak forms and receive feedback on their production from a teacher in order to be able to produce the mix of strong and weak forms correctly, if they should wish.

**Raising
awareness of
word and
sentence stress**

Each time the teacher plans to introduce a new vocabulary item, it is important that he considers what the students actually need to know about the word: meaning, collocation (i.e. which other words commonly go with it), 'currency' (i.e. whether or not the word is restricted to certain situations or can be used widely), spelling and pronunciation.

With regard to pronunciation, stressed and unstressed syllables are important features. There are various ways in which the teacher can encourage a continuing awareness of stress. Receptive awareness is important, as it is through this that successful production tends to come. Choral and individual drilling of new words usefully combines receptive awareness and productive skill. While it is important for teachers to appreciate that successful repetition during drilling will not necessarily lead to continued accurate production during other practice activities, or outside the classroom, it is vital to give students this opportunity to practise.

~~Teachers should try drilling words in a natural manner, first.~~ If the students are having difficulty, it is a good idea to try exaggerating the stressed syllable (though as this inevitably changes the characteristics of the phonemes involved you should always come back to the unexaggerated word once your students have got the point). Other techniques commonly employed are beating out the pattern of stress with your hand or finger, or tapping with a pen on the table, speaking or singing the stress pattern (DA da da), and so on.

Listening activities are particularly useful for helping to raise awareness of word stress. Some suggestions for these are outlined in the sample lessons.

As has been suggested throughout the book so far, pronunciation work should be seen as an integral part of what goes on in the classroom, and it is important that teachers treat it as such. With this in mind, it is important to get into the habit of indicating the stress pattern on any new words you have presented, particularly those words which you would like students to note down, remember and use.

There are several ways of indicating stress when it comes to writing a word on the board or in a handout for your students:

Circles can be written above or below the word: *syllabus* ^{o o o}

Some teachers like to use boxes: *engagement* ^{□ □ □}

You can put a mark before the stressed syllable: *ushe'rette*

Note that this is also a convention used in dictionaries, when a phonemic transcription is given alongside the particular entry: /ʌʃə'ret/

You can simply underline the stressed syllable: *technical*

Or write it in capitals: *comPUter*

Inevitably teachers tend to develop particular habits, and find themselves using one convention more than the others. It's a good idea to aim to stick with the one which comes most naturally to you, and, as with many things in teaching, aim to be both clear and consistent, so that students become familiar with your teaching habits. After a certain amount of repeated exposure to your stress-marking habits, students will know what the symbols mean, without having to ask, and students familiar with the habit can pass on their knowledge to new students, and so on.

When dealing with longer utterances and sentences, drilling is again important, and can be very useful for highlighting both stress and weak forms. With longer utterances, front or back chaining can be tried (see page 16), and 'beating' stress can also help. A little caution is advisable, however, as it is important not to 'overdo' sentence stress, in the sense of giving stress to too many elements within an utterance. By way of example, let us look again at the sentence we used earlier: *He lives in the house on the corner.* We should remember that though *lives* and *house* and *corner* may be 'content' words when the sentence is considered out of context, in reality within a conversation the sentence would have a tonic syllable, carrying a change in pitch, and being an important indicator of meaning. Drilling the sentence with an equal emphasis on all three content words, might lead to rather unnatural sounding production. Keep in mind the context in which the sentence appears, and the meaning which the sentence is trying to convey, think about where the pitch movement occurs (i.e. on the tonic syllable) and drill accordingly.

Weak forms can be isolated and drilled on their own, before being put back into the sentence or utterance. For example, in the sentence *If I'd known the answer, I would've told you,* the words *would've* can be isolated and drilled separately, if students are having difficulty with them. The whole sentence might then be drilled once more, to show again how the other language fits around it.

In raising awareness of issues relating to word and sentence stress, teachers should treat these issues as part of the language being studied. They should, for example, show students how to record stresses in their notebooks for later study which will aid students in both comprehension and language production. It is useful to use (and teach your students) questions like 'Which word is stressed?', 'Which syllable is stressed?', or 'Where does the

voice go up/down?', so that you can elicit facts about the stresses in the language item you are teaching, and so that students can ask you about it, if they are not sure.

Sample lessons

In this section are some classroom activities which will help to focus attention on word and sentence stress. Some of these might be used from time to time for general awareness of the issue, and most can be adapted for use with a variety of grammatical and lexical topics.

Lesson 1: Find a partner: Stress patterns (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Sentence and word cards

The teacher gives half of the students a card each with a word on, and the other half a card with a sentence on. Each word card has a sentence card match, the word and sentence both having the same stress pattern. Students mingle, saying their words or sentences out loud, and, through listening, trying to find their partner. When they think they have found a partner, they check with the teacher, and if they are indeed a pair, they can sit down. Once all of the students are paired up, the pairs read out their word and sentence to the other students, who write down the stress pattern, using a small circle to represent unstressed syllables, and a large one to represent a stressed syllable, as in the following example:

Politician ooOo
It's important ooOo

No meaning relationship is implied through the pairs having the same pattern; it is simply an exercise to help students to notice the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables. Sample cards (using some job-related words) might be as follows:

Politician / It's important
Policeman / He's English
Electrician / Can I help you?
Photographer / You idiot!
Interior designer / I want to go to London

Lesson 2: Three little words: Contrastive stress (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

This short activity provides a simple way of demonstrating the effect that a shifting tonic syllable can have on the meaning of an utterance. The teacher writes *I love you* on the board, and asks the students which syllable is stressed, eliciting that it is the word *love*. He draws a stress box over the word to show this or rewrites it in capitals. He then writes the same sentence up twice more. The students then work in pairs to see if they can work out any other possible meanings, through stressing the other words in the sentence. Suggested answers are as follows:

Sentence (meaning)
I <u>love</u> you (...and I want you to know this).
I love <u>you</u> . (I don't love her.)
<u>I</u> love you. (He doesn't!)

Those 'three little words' which carry such weight, can also carry different, and very much context-related, meanings. Of course you can use other sentences too, to get the same effect, but this provides a quick, easy and (for most) amusing way of introducing the subject of tonic stress.

Lesson 3: Misunderstanding dialogues: Contrastive stress (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Scripted dialogues

In this activity, a dialogue is used which involves a series of misunderstandings. The dialogue itself may seem rather artificial, but the exercise helps underline the idea of contrastive stress, and how moving a tonic syllable can change the emphasis of what the speaker is saying.

The teacher gives student B some lines to say, and student A is given a line which they will need to say in various ways, depending on what the misunderstood point is. The activity works better if there is no preparation, and students are put on the spot; they may not always get the point straight away, but it's worth persevering.

Student A	Student B
I'd like a big, red cotton shirt.	Here you are. A big, red cotton skirt.
No, I said a big, red cotton shirt.	Here you are. A big, red nylon shirt.
No, I said a big, red cotton shirt.	Here you are. A big, blue cotton shirt.
No, I said a big, red cotton shirt.	Sorry, I haven't got one.

To make the task slightly easier, the relevant stresses can be indicated on the students' role cards. A similar exercise is seen below:

Student A	Student B
It's a pity you weren't at the party.	I <u>WAS</u> at the party.
Did you say you were at the barbecue?	I was at the <u>PARTY</u> .
Did you say Enrico was at the party?	<u>I</u> was at the party.

This kind of exercise can also be used to highlight strong and weak forms of function words, as we can see with *was*, in the example above.

Lesson 4: Listening and transcribing: Stress placement in a short monologue (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: A tape recorded monologue (the recording is optional).
Transcript of the monologue.

Listening exercises provide a useful opportunity for sentence stress recognition practice. The teacher plays or reads out the monologue. It is useful for students to hear the whole passage first, to get a feel for the content. The students are then given a transcript of the monologue, and mark stresses on their transcript when it is played or read again. The advantage of using a tape is that this ensures consistency when the monologue is played for a second time. The teacher makes sure that the second reading or playing includes suitable pauses to give students time to mark the stresses. Students then compare their transcripts and discuss them, before the teacher lets them hear the whole passage again. The class then goes through the transcript, with the teacher inviting students to mark the stresses on a 'master' version on the board or overhead projector, discussing where they go and why, and comparing sentences discussed with the version on the tape (if used). A final hearing of the passage gives a chance for students to confirm the results of their discussions.

An interesting variation of the activity is for students to record themselves talking; this can be either natural, unrehearsed and unscripted speech, or a more prepared piece, depending what you and your students have decided to focus on. Students can then mark stresses for each other on transcripts of the tape. Students can do this in pairs or groups (depending on the resources you have available), or the whole class can work on one transcript. It is important, however, not to single one student out as an example of a speaker using inappropriate or inaccurate stress; the activity is best done in the spirit of comparing and contrasting, particularly if the unusual stresses used, while different from those of a native speaker, do not seriously affect intelligibility. A student's tape can also be contrasted with a version recorded by the teacher. Recording does not necessarily need lots of 'out of class' preparation time; it can very usefully be incorporated into a lesson, either as a 'one-off', or as a regular activity.

This idea can of course be used for other aspects of pronunciation (such as spotting weak forms, and incidences of /ə/). Taping can also be particularly useful for working on tonic syllables and aspects of intonation. A transcript could have gaps where all the tonic syllables should be, for students to complete while they listen to the text. Or students (using an agreed and easy to use method of transcription) can mark where the tonic syllables occur on a complete transcript.

This type of activity can be graded according to the students' level of proficiency, and it is possible to successfully use variations of it with students ranging from elementary to advanced levels.

Lesson 5: Categorisation: Word stress (Elementary to Intermediate)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Task sheet

This type of activity requires students to categorise words according to their stress pattern. The words in this example exercise are all names of jobs and professions, and the activity might be used in a lesson working on language connected with this area. Teachers should, of course, try to tailor the activity to suit the needs of their students and the language or subject focus of particular lessons.

The teacher starts by eliciting one or two of the words which appear on the task sheet before handing it out. She also asks students to work with a neighbour to decide which syllables in the two words are stressed, and then elicits the answers. The aim here is just to make sure that students understand the subsequent task. Students, singly or in pairs, are then given a task sheet like the following:

Put these words into the correct columns, according to the stress pattern.				
Oo	Ooo	oOo	Oooo	ooOo
Plumber Electrician Doctor Journalist Musician Shop assistant Teacher Soldier Novelist Architect Carpenter Actor Policeman Fireman Lecturer Florist Businessman Artist Farmer Scientist Researcher Gardener Designer				

Activities like this can also be used for focusing on particular sounds. For example, to work on /ə/ with a class, the above activity might be followed up by asking students to look at the words again, to then try saying them (or listening to them on a tape), and underlining or otherwise marking all the incidences of the sound /ə/.

Categorisation can also help to highlight language tendencies, which students can apply to new words they come across. For example, students can be asked to categorise words which can have two grammatical forms (e.g. noun and verb), which we looked at on page 69. The teacher might simply read out these words, or they can be recorded on a tape. If you wish to use grammatical clues to help students categorise, then the words can be used in sentences, or better still in a continuous passage, as long as it doesn't sound too contrived. An example activity might look like this:

Listen to the tape. You will hear each of these words once. Put it into the correct column, according to the stress pattern you hear.	
import rebel increase export decrease insult content	
Oo	oO

One can, of course, vary categorisation activities in order to provide a different classroom dynamic; students might be given a word on a card, and asked to organise themselves into groups according to the stress patterns of the words they have, or to attach their cards to the board in columns.

Further ideas for activities

Reading aloud

This certainly has its place when it comes to working on any aspect of pronunciation, and is particularly useful for working on stress (and intonation). It can be used in combination with taping, as explained above, and can obviously be used to deal with pronunciation alongside the study of particular lexis and areas of grammar.

Whatever is being read out, students should be encouraged to pay attention to the ways in which stress (and intonation) affect the message overall, and how variations in stress can change, or indeed confuse, the meaning of utterances.

There are two main difficulties with reading aloud, however. Firstly, reading aloud can be stilted and unnatural, particularly if a learner is having problems recognising words within the text. This will have obvious effects upon stresses within the utterances. The second difficulty is slightly more theoretical, but relevant nonetheless: there are important differences between spoken and written language, and this may be a problem in that the teacher might be asking students to speak sentences which were not designed to be read out. Written sentences are often longer than spoken ones and more grammatically complex, giving students unnecessary problems with identifying stress and tonic syllable placement. Conversely, the teacher might mistakenly try to gloss over the differences, leaving students with a false impression of the spoken language.

Clearly the teacher needs to choose the text very carefully, and, if the above factors are allowed for, reading aloud can still be a very useful classroom activity. A text needs to be long enough to make the 'public' reading of it worthwhile, but not so long or complex that the task becomes daunting. Teachers also need to provide enough opportunity for rehearsal, focusing on the relevant pronunciation features. It is important to keep in mind that the task should be achievable, and that the aim is to give students a chance to perform the reading successfully and meaningfully; they should be able to benefit from and enjoy the reading.

If possible, texts should be chosen which can be divided up so that all the students can have a go at reading. One text divided up among (for example) sixteen students might not give each participant a big enough section to read out. Instead, a small selection of similar texts might be used, so that groups of students can rehearse them before the reading. It is clearly useful if students can read texts that they have written themselves and humour is always helpful, though it is important to be aware of the risk of using culturally bound or obscure jokes which students simply won't 'get'.

Examples of the types of text which might be used include:

- short biographies of well-known people
- texts about students' own countries or home towns
- accounts of places that students have visited
- short 'sketches' or dramatic pieces (see below for more ideas on using these)
- poetry

The latter can be particularly useful for dealing with stressed syllables and weak forms; most poetry is written to be read, and writers often have in mind how the piece will sound when read out loud. Well-known poems can be used (bear in mind cultural differences here – things that teachers are familiar with may not be so well-known to their students), and students can of course write their own.

Limericks are often used in class for working on rhyming words, and their comparatively strict structure also lends itself well to the study of stress placement. Inappropriate stress placement will generally be very obvious. Many limericks are designed to be bawdy, or to have double meanings, and teachers clearly need to choose carefully, with a view to what is suitable for their classes. With preparation, and examples to demonstrate how limericks work, students can successfully produce their own. The following was written by a group of Upper Intermediate students:

There was a young man from Spain
Who travelled abroad on a plane
He studied some grammar
And how to say 'hammer'
And then he went home on a train.

My own personal favourites are ones which play with language, or which deliberately 'break the rules' of limerick rhymes and patterns, but can be used to good effect nonetheless:

There was a young teacher called Wood
Whose students just wouldn't use 'could'
But a teacher called Woodward
Discovered they could could
And did so whenever they should.

A mathematician called Hyde
Proclaiming his knowledge with pride
Said 'The answer, my friend,

As you'll find in the end
 Is that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to
 the sum of the squares on the other two sides.'

Haiku also provide opportunities for working on stress placement, with their rigid structure of three lines, the first and last having five syllables, and the middle one seven. In response to this haiku, prepared for a class to introduce the idea:

Words briskly flowing
 Down the rivers of the mind
 Gathering in pools.

an Intermediate group produced the following:

Students are talking
 At the entrance of the school
 Gathering in groups.

The examples produced are unlikely to win any literary prizes (though creative tasks can often reveal a wealth of hidden talent). But they usefully focus students' attention on the structure of a genre (a type of text), and how stress placement can affect the overall success of a piece. Useful work on weak forms can also be done, focusing on how successfully they fit around the stressed syllables, and how they contribute to the overall 'feel' of the text.

Drama, and acting out rehearsed scenes

Drama provides a perfect opportunity for working on language generally, and pronunciation in particular. Careful study of the script (if one is used) is necessary before performance of it, and in particular, the ways in which stress placement contributes to the meaning of the lines. Clearly it makes sense to combine this with the study of particular grammatical structures and lexical areas. Short scenes can be devised to work on recent areas of study. I have used 'waiter' jokes to good effect in this way, with Elementary level students taking on the roles of waiter, customers and restaurant chefs. An example script was as follows:

Customer: Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?
 Waiter: It's doing the breaststroke, madam.

This was used to provide a reminder of a particular use of the present continuous, as well as the pronunciation of *doing*, and the placing of tonic syllables. The next example was used to practise the pronunciation of *Would you like ...?* (Both of these scenes were used in the same lesson, along with a few others at the end of a short course, as a way of revising some of the language points covered.)

Customer: Waiter, I'd like to see the manager.
 Waiter: Certainly, sir. Would you like to borrow my glasses?

Scenes from well-known plays or films, scenes written by your students, scenes provided by yourself: all of these can be used to great effect, with

enough time for practice and confidence-building before public 'performance'. I know one enterprising teacher who successfully coached a group of willing students through a pantomime performance of *Cinderella* as a pre-Christmas entertainment for the other students in the school.

Improvisation can be equally rewarding as a classroom activity, though obviously the lack of rehearsal is likely to show in the quality of the language during performance. If you have access to facilities for videotaping, or at least recording sound, reviewing improvisations can be an entertaining and revealing way of providing correction and discovering areas of language to work on in class.

Some teachers resist using drama in the classroom, and the best advice would be to use it if you feel confident in doing so. If the answer is affirmative, also bear in mind that many students balk at the idea of performing publicly (whether for personal or for cultural reasons) and the teacher should consider these factors carefully. You should also not expect your students to do anything in class that you yourself would not be prepared to do, so be ready to set an example and participate enthusiastically.

**Putting
sentence stress
into
perspective**

Sentence stress is an integral feature of language which provides listeners with vital clues as to the salient points of the speaker's message. Other features are the grammar of the utterance, the lexical content, the particular phonemes which make up the utterance, and the intonation contour used to deliver the message. Although identifying stressed syllables is not something that is uppermost in our minds when speaking or listening, it is something which we are extremely sensitive to at an unconscious level. We are aware of how variations in stress affect the message being put across, but we seldom need to declare what we mean, or elucidate and elaborate on how our stresses have contributed to communication.

When it comes to deciding how to deal with particular utterances or particular types of utterance in the classroom, then planning is essential. If you have fully planned your lesson, then you will have accounted for all the different elements. If you have 'delivered' your lesson fully, then students will have been, in some way, exposed to all of the elements of the particular language item you are dealing with. Or, if you are concentrating on the phenomenon of stress itself, then you should ensure that you have chosen appropriate examples of the aspect of stress which you are hoping to practise with your students, and that your examples are suitably contextualised.

Whether you are dealing with stress as an aspect of particular language structures, or dealing with stress for its own sake, you should aim to ensure that your students have the opportunity to both distinguish it through receptive exercises, and to practise it productively.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have:

- considered the nature of stress and unstress, and thought about different levels of stress.
- considered both word stress and sentence stress, and thought about rules or descriptions of these aspects of language.

- considered the role that stress plays in highlighting significant information within sentences and utterances.
- discussed stress timing and syllable timing. It was concluded that English is neither exclusively stress-timed nor syllable-timed, but has a tendency towards the former.
- introduced tonic syllables and onset syllables.
- thought about how to integrate stress into teaching, and how to raise students' awareness of the role it plays.
- looked at some activities for focusing on both word and sentence stress.

Looking ahead

- In Chapters 6 and 7 we will look more closely at intonation and other features of connected speech, and see how we can integrate stress with these aspects.