



Difficulties Challenged by EFL Students in Utilizing Suprasegmental Features with Reference to Stress

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doi: [10.33329/elt.10.6.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.10.6.1)



ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating difficulties challenged by EFL students in utilizing suprasegmental features with reference to stress. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method. A diagnostic test is used as a primary tool for data collection. The population of the study is four-year students of English- College of Education at SUST. The sample of study drawn from the population consisted of 44 students who were selected randomly. This study used the statistical package for social science (SPSS) program to analyze and verify the hypotheses. The results showed that students get confused in pronouncing stress on word classes: noun, verb, adjective that have same spelling and pronunciation. On the other hand, Mother tongue interference affects students' pronunciation due to absence of such sounds (e.g. p,v). Furthermore, student's mother tongue interference transfers the rules of L1 into L2 when they are learning stress. The study recommended that songs, rhymes, and chants should be wonderful means of teaching stress and intonation patterns of English.

Keywords :Pronunciation, Suprasegmentals, Pitch, Rhythm, Stress, Intonation.

Introduction

Pronunciation is very important in teaching and learning process, EFL learners and teachers should pay it great attention, pronunciation play crucial role in making learners comprehend the spoken language. The students need to improve their proficiency in English language to communicate with native speakers of English who have different cultures, and to speak English language with different accents. In addition a good command of English language sound system can help students enhance performance, personal and social interaction.

Teaching of pronunciation means that making students aware of where words should be stressed all these things give extra information about spoken English and help them to achieve the goal of improved comprehension intelligibility (Harmer, 2001).



Khurma and Hajjaj (1989), states that English and Arabic phonological systems vary extensively, not only in the range of sounds and relative importance of vowels, consonants and syllable structures of each language, but also in their suprasegmental features including the word stress placement. Stress in English and Arabic share some features, but there are also noticeable differences. Therefore, difficulties are likely to arise due to differences in the way native speakers of the two languages use stress to express meaning.

To sum up, background of study as the researcher mentioned above the suprasegmental features is an important area in the study of pronunciation, students should know this area so as to improve their oral communication, on the other hand, teachers should be well –trained to know how to teach suprasegmental features with particularly in the stress so as to facilitate the learning process.

Statement of the problem

This paper investigates the difficulties challenged by EFL students in utilizing suprasegmental features with reference to stress; they have particular difficulties with stress patterns of long polysyllabic words unreduced function.

The researcher has found that 4th year students of English suffer a lot in terms of using stress. He has an experienced through teaching suprasegmental aspects to students of English at Sudan University of Science and technology, College of Education which prompted the researcher to tackle this issue so as to diagnose this problem.

Objective of the Study

This study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

- Explore students of English get confused in using words with stress in spoken form.
- Find out mother tongue interference affects students' pronunciation of words having stress when they are involved in real communication.

Question of the Study

This study sets out to answer the following questions:

- To what extent are students of English get confused when using words with stress in spoken form?
- To what extent does mother tongue interference affect student's pronunciation of words having stress when they are involved in real communication?

Hypothesis of the study

This Study sets out to test the following hypotheses:

- Students of English get confused when using words with stress in spoken form.
- Mother tongue interference affects student's pronunciation of words having stress when they are involved in real communication.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study stems from its attempt to bring up new insight into issue pertaining to the investigation of difficulties facing students in learning suprasegmental phonology with special reference to stress, it examines first time in Sudan University four year students who experienced the difficulties of learning suprasegmental phonology, this study will cover the area of stress. It will help the teachers in Sudanese

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.10.Issue.6. 2022(Nov-Dec)****ISSN:2455-0302**

universities to be aware of difficulties that encounter students when learning lexical stress utterance-level stress, study will help the teachers in diagnosing the point of weakness regarding teaching English stress. Moreover, it will help the students to avoid the difficulties that hinder their learning of English stress.

Definitions of Suprasegmentals

According to Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistic (Richard, Platt, and Weber, 1985, p. 281), Suprasegmentals are units which extend over more than one sound in an utterance such as stress and tone. Similarly, Ladefoged, (2006), defines that Suprasegmentals features are aspects of speech that involve more than single consonants or vowels. The principal Suprasegmentals features are stress, length, tone, and intonation.

Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007) define that Suprasegmentals features can be referred as prosodic or non-segmental features. They are features of spoken language such as pitch, rhythm, and tempo which are not easily identified as discrete segments.

The Importance of Suprasegmentals

The sound system of English is studied under two main headings: segmental and suprasegmental. Seferoglu (2005) claims that "Segmental aspects of the sound system include individual vowels and consonants, and the suprasegmental aspect comprises words, phrases, and sentence stress, pitch contour or intonation, and rhythm" (p. 304).

Coniam (2002) confirms that the issue of teaching Suprasegmentals in preference to segmental is debatable. Because segmental phonology is relatively more easily explained and taught than the suprasegmental features, some studies focus on studying segmental phonology in preference to suprasegmental features. However, approaches to pronunciation have shifted in focus away from segmental to suprasegmental aspects of a sound system. Recent approaches to teaching pronunciation in computer-based contexts follow the communicative approach in teaching pronunciation.

In sum, scholars and educationists mentioned that suprasegmental aspect is more significant than segmental ones. Therefore, the approaches of teaching pronunciation have relocated in concentrating away on segmental to suprasegmental features (phonology). On the other hand, new invented approaches for teaching pronunciation are focusing on computer-based contexts which are subordinate the communicative approach in teaching supra-segmental features, moreover, from the researcher point of view suprasegmental phonology should be taught through audiovisual aids. For this reason, teachers of English should be well- trained in teaching the area of phonology with special reference to suprasegmental aspects.

Stress

According to Trask (1996) mentions that stress as: A certain type of prominence which, in some languages. is present upon certain syllables. Native speakers and phoneticians find it easy to determine which syllables bear stress, and even to distinguish varying degrees of stress, but the phonetic characterization of stress is exceedingly difficult. Stress is variously associated with greater loudness, higher pitch and greater duration.

On contrary, Catford (1988) confirms that it is unwise to talk of stress in terms of loudness, since it is a part of inherent sonority of sounds. He thought it is much more reliable to think of stress entirely in term of degrees of initiator power - the amount of energy expended in pumping air out of the lungs. For this, Catford defined stress as initiator power. He mentioned " initiator power is infinitely variable, from zero (when the initiator is inactive, and consequently, there is no airflow and no sound to an indefinite maximum-depending on the size and muscular strength of the speaker- when the initiator is operating at full power, forcing the air out



of the highest possible velocity against the resistance imposed upon the airflow by phonatory and articulatory strictures "Catford (1988: 175). However, to the researcher best knowledge, it seems that both previously mentioned definitions about English stress are correct. It is apparent that each author talked about it from different angles. Task for example, portrayed the status of the syllable when producing stress. While Catford (1988) explains the process of stress production itself, he embodies what is involved when producing stress.

It is observed that Daniel Jones (1956:245) precisely states stress combining the former two notions about stress together. He says:

" Stress maybe described as the degree of force with which a sound or syllable is uttered. It is essentially a subjective action. A strong force of utterance means energetic action of all the articulating organs; it is usually accompanied by a gesture with the hand or head or other parts of the body; it involves a strong "push" from chest wall and consequently strong force of exhalation; this generally gives the objective impression of loudness. Weak force of utterance involves weak action of the chest wall resulting in weak force of exhalations, and giving the objective acoustic impression of softness".

Therefore, stress is the perceived prominence of one more syllable elements over others in a word. And, this prominence derives from several phonetic factors such as increased length, loudness, pitch movement or a combination of these aspects.

Kenworthy (2000: 51) supports the readers with an explanation for four features involved in the perception of prominence:

- a) Loudness: stressed syllables are louder than unstressed ones.
- b) The length of syllable has an important part to play in its prominence. For example, if the vowel in a syllable is held longer before it is "cut off" by a following consonant sound, then that syllable will be heard as prominent.
- c) Pitch the vocal cords can vibrate at different speeds. If there is a change of speed on a particular syllable, either faster (resulting in a higher pitch) or slower (resulting in a lower pitch) or some fluctuation in speed, then this syllable will stand out from the others sounds around it if they do not have any or as much variation pitch.
- d) Vowel quality: a syllable will be heard as stressed if it has a vowel that differs in quality from the others around it. For example, if you repeat the syllable /Di/ several times and then suddenly you insert another vowel for example / a: / instead of that / ɪ / in the repeated syllable. Then, you will feel that the syllable with different vowel will be pronounced stronger than those of the same vowel.

Method of the Study

Researchers used a descriptive analytical method to conduct the study. A diagnostic test is used as the primary tool for collecting the information relevant to the study. The data will be analyzed statistically by using the SPSS programme. The population of this study is the four year students at College of Education- SUST. The sample is drawn from four year students at College of Education who were selected randomly.



Data Analysis of the Diagnostic

The Responses to the Oral Diagnostic Test

The responses to the oral diagnostic test of the 44 students were tabulated and computed. The following is an analytical interpretation and discussion of the findings regarding different points related to the objectives and hypotheses of the study.

Each statement in the test is analyzed statistically and discussed. The following table will support the discussion.

Question One

Hypothesis One: Students of English get confused when using words with stress in spoken form

Table (4.1) : The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of table No.(1)

Number	Frequency	Percentage
Successful	8	18.1
Failure	36	81.9
Total	44	100

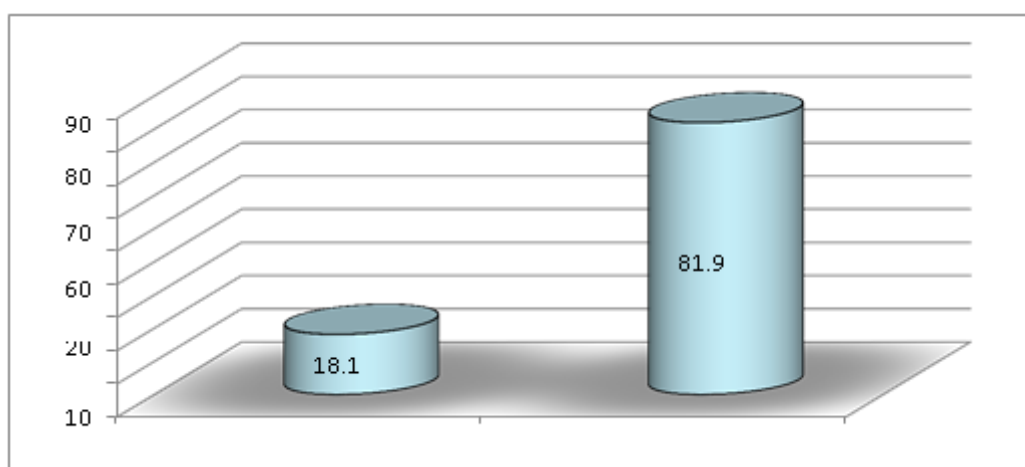


Figure (4.1)

With the reference to above table (4.1) and figure (4.1) illustrate the percentage and frequency of the answers of the study sample that concern with the questions and shows that most of the sample answers were failure which are represented by the percentage (81.9%). This justifies that students need to be given adequate activities on stress focus on words that encourage students to master it in spoken context.

Question Two

Table (4.2) : The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of table No.(2) :

Number	Frequency	Percentage
Successful	14	31.8
Failure	30	68.2
Total	44	100

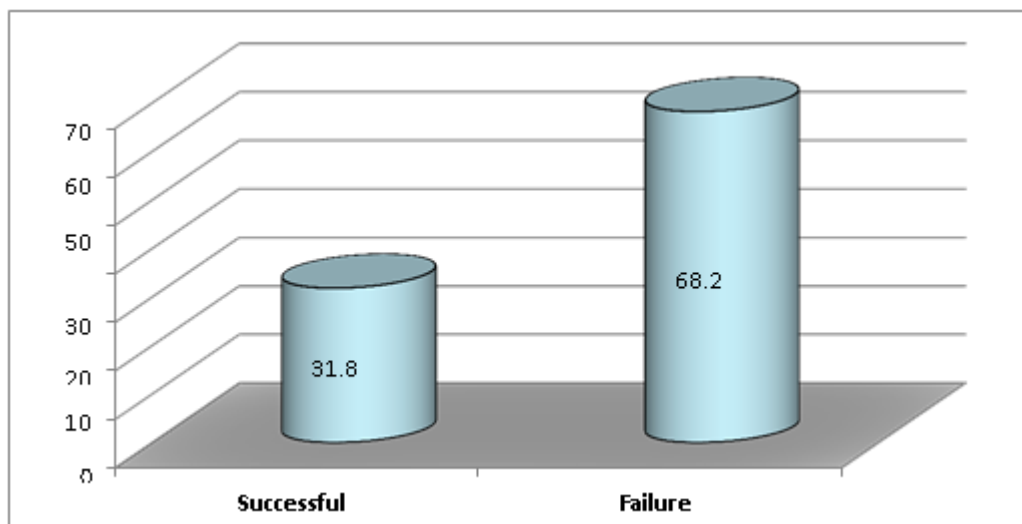


Figure (4.2)

Regarding the above table (4.2) and figure (4.2) illustrate the percentage and frequency of the answers of the study sample that concern with the questions and shows that most of the sample answers were failure which are represented by the percentage (68.2%). This justifies that students need to be trained and developed in using English stress.

Question Three

Hypothesis Two:

Mother tongue interference affects student's pronunciation of words having stress when they are involved in real communication.

Table (4.3) : The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of table No.(3)

Number	Frequency	Percentage
Successful	16	36.4
Failure	28	63.6
Total	44	100

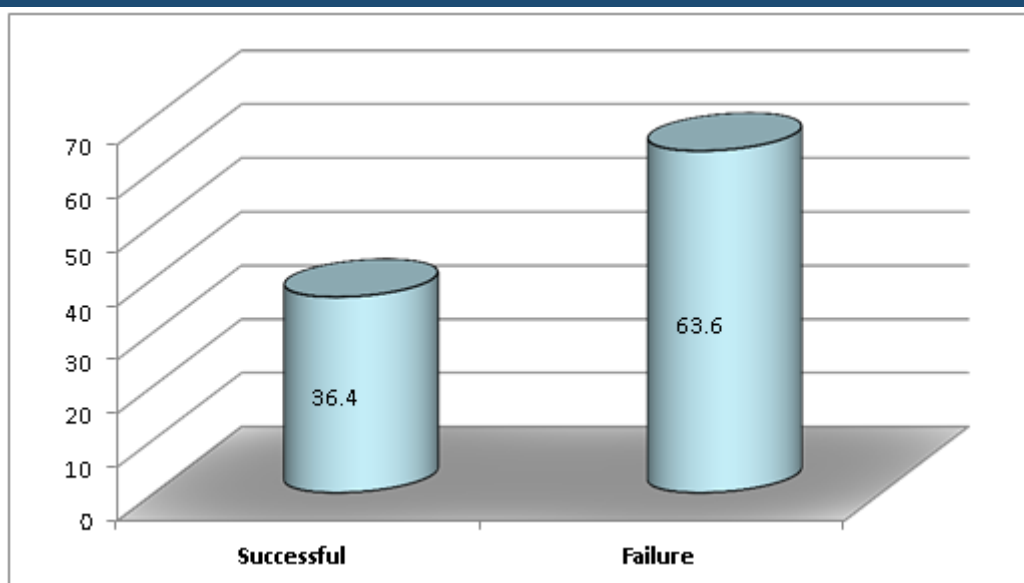


Figure (4.3)

Concerning the above table (4.3) and figure (4.3) illustrate the percentage and frequency of the answers of the study sample that concern with the questions and shows that most of the sample answers were failure which are represented by the percentage (63.6%). This justifies that students need to be trained and developed so as to avoid mother tongue interference when pronouncing word stress.

Question Four

Table (4.4) : The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of table No.(4) :

Number	Frequency	Percentage
Successful	19	43.1
Failure	25	56.9
Total	44	100

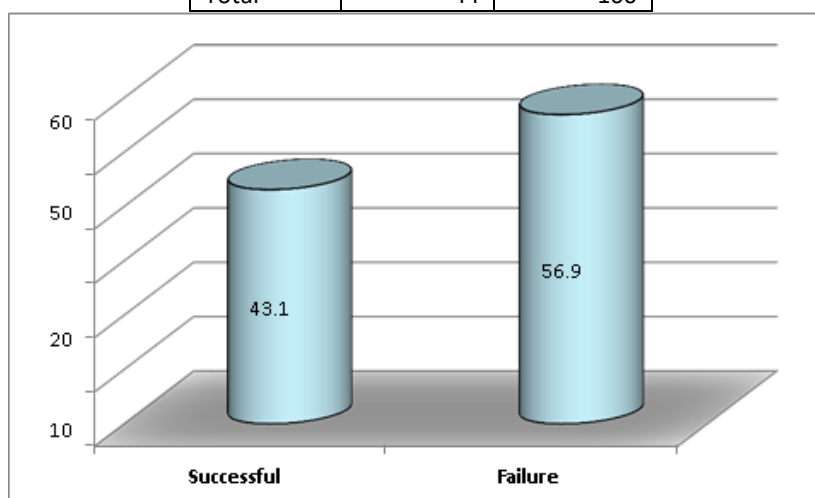


Figure (4.4)



With reference to the above table (4.4) and figure(4.4) illustrate the percentage and frequency of the answers of the study sample that concern with the questions and shows that most of the sample answers were failure which are represented by the percentage (56.9%). This justifies that students need to be trained and developed so as to avoid mother tongue interference when pronouncing words stress within sentences.

Table (4.5) one sample T-TEST for the questions of the study

Questions	N	Mean	SD	t-value	DF	p-value
1	11	1.4	2.2	12.7	10	0
2	11	1.5	1.81	7.75	10	0
3	11	1.3	0.3	4.2	10	0
4	11	1.2	0.4	3.3	10	0

The calculated values of T – TEST for the significance of the differences for the respondent's answers in all questions is greater than the tabulated value of T – TEST at the degree of freedom (10) and the significant value level (0.05%) which was (2.34). This indicates that, there are statistically significant differences at the level (0.05 %) among the answers of the respondents. this mean that our hypotheses are accepted.

Discussion

In this section, the data is analyzed and discussed in terms of the results of the questionnaire. There was one question and one hypothesis to be answered and tested respectively. The respondents, on whom the diagnostic test was applied, were 44 respondents. The method used to analyze the data was descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages)

Statistical Package for the social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. Chi-Square tests were applied to examine the observed differences in the frequency distribution of responses on all the items of the diagnostic test in order to guarantee their statistical significance.

Results of the Study

From the analysis and discussion of the data in the previous subsections, the following results are obtained:

1. Students get confused in pronouncing stress on word classes: noun, verb, adjective that have same spelling and pronunciation.
2. Mother tongue interference affects students' pronunciation due to absence of such sounds (e.g. p ,v)
3. Student's mother tongue interference transfers the rules of L1 into L2 when they are learning stress..

Recommendations

In the light of the results of the study, the followings are recommended:

1. Songs, rhymes, and chants are wonderful means of teaching stress and intonation patterns of English.
2. Stress should be introduced in context so that the learners may be able to associate an attitude with the stress patterns being used to realize it.
3. In any case, it is perhaps most crucial to practice stress after a native English speakers utterance. In this case, the voices of different people should be introduced.

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.10.Issue.6. 2022(Nov-Dec)****ISSN:2455-0302****References**

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APPEDIX

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Diagnostic Test Subject: Stress**Name:****Class:****Question One:** Identify the stressed syllable in the following words

- 1- record (N) 2- subject (V) 3- contents (N) 4- occurrence 5- determine
6- resurrect 7- industrialist 8- imperialism 9- extraordinary 10- executive

Question Two: Pronounce the stressed patterns in the underlined words:

- 1- There is no record of their first name.
2-The city was subjected to heavy bombing
3-The bedroom's contents have all been packed. 4- Lighting is a natural occurrence.
5-He is trying to resurrect his acting career.
6-An inquiry was set up to determine the cause of accidents. 7- There are industrial uses for plastic.
8- British imperialism created the enormous British Empire. 9- The researchers made an extraordinary discovery.
10- He has an executive position in the company.

Question three: Identify stressed syllable in the following words:

- 1-text 2- spring 3- next 4- allow 5-connect 6- cotton 7- little 8- clothes 9-months 10- street



Question four: show the place of stress underlined words :

- 1- The newspaper had printed the full text of the president's speech.
- 2- There's a feeling of spring in the air today.
- 3- The next six months will be harder.
- 4- She won't allow herself to be dictated to.
- 5- The towns are connected by train and bus services.
- 6- They are in the field picking cotton.
- 7- I got very little sleep last night.
- 8- I need some new clothes for the summer.
- 9- He had to wait for months for visas to come through.
- 10- He is used to being recognized in the street.

Thank you very much.