Unstressed Syllables for Pre-Intermediate Learners

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Abstract

Being a stress-timed language, the teaching of English presents a problem in how to approach the very pervasive issue of proper word and sentence stress. Teachers often draw attention to and practice this issue by enabling students to notice and emphasize stressed syllables. A more novel approach is to have learners notice and perhaps secondarily attempt production of reduced syllables. This article contains an analysis of the issue of the occurrence of the schwa in reduced syllables with an eye to how to promote students' ability to notice the unstressed syllables and, by extension, their relation to stressed syllables.

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Keyword: Stress-Timed**,** Pervasive**,** Emphasize Stressed**,** Syllables

Introduction, Rationale and Scope

This essay will deal with the analysis, issues and proposed solutions for teaching unstressed syllables in words and sentences for pre-intermediate (also known as low intermediate) learners. There are finer degrees of stress beyond the binary stressed/unstressed approach, from the three-level distinction of *primary* stress, *secondary* stress and unstress (Kelly, p.69) but these more detailed levels of stress are dealt with only passingly since they ought not to be taught to pre-intermediate learners.

It was when syllable stress interfered with intelligibility that I became interested in the subject. A Thai speaker was asking for help with a /kome di:/ - spoken with the /d/ being a non-plosive /t/ or unvoiced /d/ and with all 3 syllables receiving the same stress – without sufficient context that caused me to hear the word *comedy* when the speaker was actually trying to say *committee.* It was then that I realized then that there are occasions where the message can fail without learning proper syllable stress.

While most of the Thai students I've taught at university are aware of the basic parameters of syllable stress, they do not know how to *de*-stress a syllable for contrast. Learning how to do this will balance the lessons on identifying and producing stress in words and sentences.

Please note that stress may be indicated by either standard phonemic markings (' ˌ) or capitalization according to whether phonemic script is or isn't being used.

ANALYSIS

Definition & Categorization

Syllable

Ladefoged (p.237) notes that the term *syllable* is problematic in that there is no widely-agreed upon definition of a syllable but goes on to explain (p.238) that "nearly everybody can identify individual syllables." The characteristics of this suprasegmental aspect of pronunciation are outlined by Kenworthy (p.9) who states that:

> Each syllable has a vowel at its centre and the consonants 'surround' the vowel, preceding it and cutting it off... it is possible to have a syllable with just a vowel.

A more specific definition from Roach (p.56) characterizes these parts more meticulously:

- A *minimum syllable* is a single vowel in isolation (e.g., *a*)
- A syllable with an *onset* means there is a consonant before the center (vowel) of the syllable (e.g. the *t* in *to*)
- A syllable with a *coda* means there is a consonant after the center of the syllable (e.g. the *n* in *in*)
- Some syllables have both onset and coda (e.g. *ran, sat*)

These definitions, however, neglect to include syllabic consonants such as the /l/ in /bɒtl/. Syllabic consonants such as the /n/ in /sɪtn/, however, may be relevant to pre-intermediate students for purposes of recognition but not for production.

Strong & Weak Syllables

Roach (p.64) divides syllables into either weak or strong. His explanations of the two (p.76-77) are summarized in the following table:

Form	Characteristics	Examples
Strong	A syllable peak which is a long vowel or diphthong, with or without a following consonant (coda)	die /da**ɪ**/ see /si:/
Strong	A syllable peak which is a short vowel, one of **ɪ**, e, æ, **ʌ**, **ɒ**, or **ʊ** followed by at least one consonant	bat /bæt/ much /m**ʌ**ʧ/ pull /p**ʊ**l/
Weak	A syllable peak which consists of one of the vowels **ə**, i, u and no coda except when the vowel is **ə**.	so**fa** /'s**əʊ**f**ə**/ in**flu**ence /'**ɪ**n**flu****ə**ns/ la**zy** /'le**ɪ**z**i**/
Weak	Syllabic consonants	sudd**en** /'s**ʌ**d**n**/
Weak	A syllable peak with the vowel **ɪ** if it occurs before a consonant that is initial in the syllable that follows it.	herbicide /'h**ɜ**:b**ɪ**sa**ɪ**d/ **e**vent /**ɪ**'vent/

Stressed & unstressed syllables

Stress, according to Harmer (p.42), is the term used to describe the point in a word or phrase where pitch, vowel length and volume change. Insofar as these three variables correlate with stress, the absence of all three can correlate to unstress (Underhill, p.53).

Unstressed syllables occur in isolated polysyllabic words and in both monosyllabic and polysyllabic words in sentences.

Correlation of strong & weak syllables to stressed and unstressed syllables

Roach (p.77) clarifies the seeming equivalence of these pairs of terms with these rules:

- Only strong syllables can be stressed
- Weak syllables are always unstressed

This leaves the possibility of unstressed strong syllables, such as dia**lect** /'da**ɪə**lekt/.

Syllable stress in words

Qualities of English word stress

English syllables are both *variable* and *mobile.* Roach (p.59) explains that the variable quality of word stress dictates that any syllable of a polysyllabic word may have the main stress. Contrast this with French, where the second syllable consistently carries the stress.

English syllables are also mobile. Roach (p.59) states:

> In 'economy', the stress falls on the second syllable (eCONomy), but in 'economic', it falls on the third syllable... having become familiar with the pronunciation of one form of a word, learners will assume that the stress stays on the same syllable in other forms of the word...

The combination of these qualities necessitates that learners frequently receive instruction on syllable stress when meeting a new word.

Two-syllable words

Underhill (p.55) says that the tendency is to stress the first syllable in two-syllable nouns and adjectives. Field (p.328) confirms this when he cites Ann Cutler explaining that native listeners locate word boundaries using a *strong-syllable strategy*, which is born out of the fact that over 85% of all content words in running speech are monosyllabic or stressed on the first syllable. The first-syllable stress serves "a demarcative role" and thus indicates a prevailing pattern.

Three-syllable words

Three-syllable words are difficult to explain in terms of word stress. Roach (p.78) attempts nonetheless:

Rule	**Example(s)**
In simple verbs, if the final syllable is strong, then it will receive the primary stress	entertain /ˌen tə 'teɪn/
If the last syllable is weak, it will be unstressed, and stress will be placed on the preceding syllable if that syllable is strong	encounter /ɪŋ 'kaʊn tə/
If both the second and third syllables are weak, the stress falls on the initial syllable	parody /'pæ rə di/
With nouns, stress generally falls on the first syllable unless it is weak	quantity /'kwɒn tə ti/
In words with a weak first syllable, the stress comes on the next syllable	potato /pə 'teɪ təʊ/
When a three-syllable noun or adjective has a strong final syllable, that syllable will not usually carry the main stress	intellect /'ɪn tə lekt/ derelict /'der ə lɪkt/

Other rules of word stress

- Affixes are usually unstressed.
- Words formed from a combination of two words tend to be stressed on the first element (TEApot, POSTman) (Kelly, p.69)
- With words that can be used as either a noun or verb, the noun will be stressed on the first syllable (IMport) while the verb on the last syllable imPORT) (Kelly, p.69)

Syllable stress in sentences

English is a *stress-timed* (or *isochronous*) language, which means that there is a rhythm to it in connected speech based on the number of stressed syllables (or words) in an utterance. This is distinct from *syllable-timed* languages, such as Spanish, where each syllable carries a very similar quality. The stressed syllables or words in an isochronous language are often *content words,* which convery the greater part of the meaning

...he wants to go to a movie.

In this example, the content words are *wants, go* and *movie*. *Movie* is stressed on the first syllable, which, as mentioned before, is typical of nouns.

The *tonic syllable* is the most-stressed syllable in an utterance. In the example above, the tonic is first syllable in *movie*.

The remaining unstressed words are *function words* and serve a grammatical purpose. These are often function words like prepositions and conjunctions. These words often have both a *strong form* (or as Kelly calls them [p73], *full* form) with a more clear vowel sound and *weak form* where the vowel sound is reduced.

Weak forms

Weak forms are an alternate way to pronounce a word. The word *to* can be said either /tu/ or /tə/. The latter is he weak, or reduced form. These make up much of the backdrop against which the stressed content words are given prominence.

Schwa

Schwa is a mid-central vowel sound formed with neutral lips. Being used in unstressed syllables and weak forms, it is the most common sound in English. Roach describes the sound as "lax – not articulated with much energy." There is only the phonetic symbol to represent schwa (ə). Every vowel in English can carry the schwa sound. Kenworthy (p.51) cites these examples:

*a*bout pock*e*t pup*i*l c*o*ntain circ*u*s

It is important to note that not all weak syllables are a schwa sound, however, schwa may only occur in weak syllables and reduced forms.

ISSUES AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Learning issues & solutions

Perception of unstressed syllables

Learners coming from syllable-timed languages such as Chinese, French or Indonesian will have less of an advantage than learners whose L1 is a stress-timed language such as Russian or Arabic. Learners may take time to learn to perceive unstressed syllables.

This problem is compounded by the fact that the schwa sound occurs almost nowhere else except English. In his index, Kelly (p145) shows in his table of potentially difficult vowels and diphthongs that every one of the 13 languages he lists lacks the schwa sound.

This brings us to the problem of perceiving a new sound. Kenworthy (p.45) notes that "people tend to hear the sounds of a new language in terms of the sounds of their mother tongue."

Teachers may choose from an assortment of means of allowing students to develop their perception of a new sound.

- Give students plenty of opportunities to hear the sound together with 'familiar' sounds from the mother tongue (Kenworthy p.45)
- Allow students to distinguish the sound from a familiar one with minimal pair activities such as pointing to one of two words or pictures or labeling the sounds 'a' and 'b' (Kenworthy p.48). For 3 words or more Kenworthy's "Which order?" (p.47) activity where students write 1, 2 or 3 above rows of familiar words are appropriate.
- Distinguishing-sound activities, such as minimal pair work, should come before identifying activities, (Nation, p.83) such as giving the students the script of a text on which they mark the occurrence of the sound as they listen to it being read.

Production of unstressed syllables

Stevick in Nation (p.79) lists 3 reasons why learners have problems copying new sounds:

1) They overlook some feature.

2) The learners sound bad to themselves when they copy well.

3) The learners become anxious about making the new sounds.

The solutions:

1) The teacher provides a suitable model which is not too difficult for the level of the learners (Nation, p.79)

2) Learners' pronunciation improves when they feel more comfortable about the way they sound and when they develop positive attitudes towards the native speakers of the foreign language. (Nation, p.79)

3) The teacher 'guides' them to the correct sound using techniques such as Underhill's (pp.100-107) use of the phonemic chart with a pointer. Another student may be used as the model toward which the student with the problem may be guided. Using another student rather than the teacher makes the target sound seem more accomplishable.

Teaching issues & solutions

Effective modeling of new sounds

Teachers who model a new sound ineffectively put learners at a big disadvantage to correctly copy the sound. This is especially true when presenting a sound like schwa, which is intentionally unclear.

One technique for modeling schwa is to saddle it within other familiar sounds, similar to what is mentioned regarding perception of unstressed syllables above.

Underhill (p.110) offers 4 ways to give models:

The repeated model – teacher gives the model several times, the learners repeat.

The single model – teacher gives the model once only, forcing students to concentrate. Learners may ask for it to be repeated.

The internal imaging model – same as the single model, except learners are given a moment to process the sound and hear it again in their mind's ear before drilling.

The non-verbal model – Using mime or gesture, 'lifting' a sound from a known word, or using a sound spoken by another learner.

Teachers can create a happy hybrid of these modeling concepts by using a single (or internal imaging) model, introduced with a dramatic pause, after which the schwa, housed in two other familiar sounds, is understated. This will help students to understand when the teacher explains "quick, quiet and relaxed

Underhill (p. 115-117) adds these techniques for enhancing the effectiveness of modeling for a range of learner types:

Use **mime:**

- Imagine you are speaking to someone through a thick glass wall
- Pay attention to your own tongue, jaw & lip movements as you exaggerate the formation of individual phonemes.

Use **gesture:**

- Draw the sound out slowly with your hand after miming with no sound.
- Emphasize the degree of jaw opening or vowel clarity using the distance between thumb and index finger.
- Use the fingers for syllables and for manipulating stress and unstress.

Lack of Material Support

Teachers concerned enough for their students' pronunciation to want to focus on it will find precious few course books which allot a decent portion of their text to pronunciation work in general. P. Kerr's *Straightforward (Pre-intermediate)* deals passingly with word stress in one exercise with recognition and short, very controlled productive exercises. *Face 2 Face* (*Pre-intermediate)* and *Headway (Pre-intermediate)* neglect explicit pronunciation instruction altogether.

English Pronunciation in Use (Elementary) has units dedicated to strong and weak forms. These could easily be used in a pre-intermediate class whose past instruction has been with non-native speakers who rarely work on pronunciation. The intermediate version of *English Pronunciation in Use* contains a fairly robust minimal-pairwork activity with schwa which could easily be used in a pre-intermediate class. Books dedicated to pronunciation like Linda Grant's well said *(3rd ed.)* are extensive and the teaching points could be adapted to pre-intermediate learners easily; however, in its raw form, the book is overly technical.

The solution lies in either giving pronunciation more attention within each lessons a part of each lesson or the development of classes focusing on it using such activities as those listed above for perception and production of unstressed syllables.

Conclusion

Syllable stress is an important part of learning good English pronunciation. Thornbury (p.164) notes that Received Pronunciation is somewhat unrealistic as a model of pronunciation for English as a global lingua franca but states, borrowing Jennifer Jenkins, that *nuclear stress* – the correct placement of stress in an utterance - is one of the 4 parts of a simplified pronunciation syllabus for English as a global lingua franca if a non-native speaker would like to be intelligible.

Teaching unstressed syllables offers an accomplishable goal in terms of improving pronunciation while not requiring native-like accuracy. Kenworthy (p.9) notes that we, as teachers, must show concern for learners' pronunciation and their progress in it since a teacher who pays little or no attention to it will induce complacency in their learners' attitudes to pronunciation while a teacher who demonstrates concern for good pronunciation will cause the learners to have a similar concern themselves.

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