

Recognition of Stressed Syllables by Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University

*Dr. Mohamed Eltayeb Abdalla Mohamed, Assistant
Professor of Applied Linguistics, Al-Baha University, KSA*

Abstract: This study aims to measure the abilities of Saudi EFL learners to recognize the stressed syllables within several disyllabic English words. The participants were 18 college students at Al-Baha University in KSA. They were majoring in English Language. All of them had completed the study of some of the B.A. English program courses, among which were Phonetics and Phonology, before taking part in the current study. A test containing 10 disyllabic words was used as a tool to collect the data necessary to achieve the study's objectives. The major findings revealed that these Arab EFL learners encounter difficulties in recognizing lexical stress, and the level of difficulty depends on the part of speech of the word. The study is significant because it helps both EFL teachers and learners diagnose the difficulties related to English lexical stress and find solutions to overcome them.

Key Words: Disyllabic, Stressed, Strong, Syllables, Unstressed, Weak

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the stressed syllables in English words helps EFL learners pronounce words with more than one syllable properly. For example, if native speakers want to pronounce a disyllabic word, they either stress the first or the second syllable. It is not usual to produce such a word with both syllables unstressed. This is part of supra-segmental phonology (Roach, 2009).

Misplacing the stress on word syllables might change their meanings. For instance, native speakers of English can pronounce the word *record* in two different ways: one with the stress on the first syllable, and the other with the stress on the second syllable. The first pronunciation is used when the word is a verb meaning to write down something as a document or to save an audio or video, but the second is used when the word is a noun meaning a document, evidence, or music (Proffitt, 2025).

If EFL learners cannot place the lexical stress on written disyllabic words, they are not expected to pronounce those same words properly segmentally and supra-segmentally. In other words, they are supposed to fail in producing the words with correct pronunciation of the phonemes and syllable prominence. Thus, understanding the patterns of lexical stress is crucial to speaking properly. This is why the present study focuses on recognizing stressed syllables within written words by using the primary stress mark.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the ability of Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University to recognize the stressed syllables within certain disyllabic words. To address these objectives, the researcher formulated the following questions and Hypotheses:

Questions of the Study

- 1- To what extent are Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University able to recognize the stressed syllables within certain disyllabic words?
- 2- Which words are more challenging to recognize their stressed syllables?

Hypotheses of the Study

- 1- Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University are expected to perform well in recognizing the stressed syllables within certain disyllabic words.
- 2- Verbs are less challenging to recognize their stressed syllables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Languages can be categorized into two groups: predictable stress languages and non-predictable stress languages. In English, which belongs to the second group, primary stress is not fixed to a given position, and different placements of stress may result in differences in meaning or parts of speech. This can be seen in noun/verb and noun/adjective pairs such as *import/import* and *content/content*, respectively. But it doesn't mean the stress is randomly assigned. According to Kraidler (1997), English lexical stress is not fixed; it is predictable in a large number of words.

Lexical stress, also called word stress, is one of the suprasegmental features of speech. It can be defined as the emphasis that is put on a specific syllable within a word (Aungcharoen, 2006; Altmann, 2006; Almbark, et al., 2014). More specifically, lexical stress is a combination of four features: fundamental frequency, duration, amplitude, and vowel quality (McMahon, 2002). The features of stress extend over the syllable, word, and phrase. Moreover, English stress is classified into two types, namely word and sentence stress. Couper-Kuhlen (1986) notes that the syllable is the base of word stress, whereas the word is the base of sentence stress.

In multisyllabic words, there is one stressed syllable and at least one unstressed syllable. According to Kavin (2005), a stressed syllable is more salient and assigned metrical prominence; that is, it is produced with greater respiratory energy in comparison with an unstressed syllable. Roach (2009) states that there are four criteria to specify this prominence. The first is loudness, which refers to the fact that stressed syllables are usually louder than unstressed ones. The second concerns length, which means that stressed syllables normally take a longer time to say than unstressed ones. The third criterion is pitch, which refers to the vibration of the vocal cords; the vibration is commonly higher when pronouncing stressed syllables. The fourth is the quality of the vowel acting as the nucleus of the stressed syllable, which is usually strong, unlike the unstressed syllables that tend to have their peaks as weak vowels.

Roach (2009) also differentiates between strong and weak syllables. He notes that weak syllables have one of four types of vowels as their nuclei or peaks. First, he states that any syllable whose peak is the schwa is weak. The second type is the middle vowel /i/, and the third is the middle vowel /u/. The fourth one is syllabic consonants, which are five: the three nasals, the lateral /l/, and the retroflex /r/.

When receiving and producing English words with two syllables, EFL learners are recommended to use Roach's four criteria to help them distinguish stressed syllables from unstressed ones (Roach, 2009). They have to know that any weak syllable is unstressed. When there are no weak syllables, they have to apply the stress rules or patterns specified by Roach (*ibid*). If the word is a verb, an adjective, or a preposition, they must consider the second syllable to see whether it contains a long vowel, a diphthong, or ends with a consonant cluster; such a syllable is usually stressed. If the word is a noun, they make sure that the second syllable does not have a long vowel, a diphthong, or end with a consonant cluster; in such a case, the first syllable of the noun is usually stressed. These are strategies that can be adopted when recognizing stressed syllables within disyllabic words.

There are numerous studies on word stress in English. These studies include EFL learners' abilities to recognize the stressed syllables in disyllabic and multisyllabic words. One study (Tuan, 2017) aimed to investigate the extent to which Vietnamese learners were able to recognize and produce English lexical stress properly. 40 elementary EFL learners studying English participated in the study. Data were collected through a recognition test and a production test. The results revealed that learners were highly competent in recognizing English lexical stress.

Another study concerns Arab EFL learners (Alzi'abi, 2023). The participants were 88 male and female Jordanians majoring in English language studying at three different universities. Analysis of the data indicated that these Arabs had a serious problem when producing lexical stress, due to their tendency to mainly stress ultimate heavy syllables—a strategy commonly employed in Arabic. Their performance on the stress recognition task was much better than the production task, but still showed problems.

METHOD

This section of the study focuses on the sample or participants as well as the tool of data collection.

Participants

The participants were 18 male students majoring in English language. They had their classes at the Department of Foreign Languages, College of Arts, Al-Baha University. They had completed the study of the courses of Phonetics and Phonology before participating in the current study.

Instrument

A test was constructed to collect the data needed to complete the present study. Words with two syllables were chosen to represent three parts of speech: four nouns, three verbs and three adjectives. This is because stress patterns are affected by the part of speech of the words. The participants were asked to recognize the stressed syllables within certain disyllabic words. It should be noted that before the test, they had been trained to distinguish between strong and weak syllables. This distinction helps learners to recognize stressed syllables since they simply knock out any weak syllable due to the fact that only strong syllables are stressed. Moreover, they had been taught the patterns of stressed syllables as detailed above in the section of the literature review, and then had done some tasks requiring them to place the stress on the right syllable within disyllabic words before the study test. The test consisted of 10 words having various parts of speech as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1- Disyllabic Words

Word	Part of Speech	Strong Syllable	Stressed Syllable	Reason
1-Office	Noun	Both Syllables	The First Syllable	The second syllable does not contain a long vowel, diphthong, or cluster
2-Include	Verb	Both Syllables	The Second Syllable	The second syllable contains a long vowel
3-Modern	Adjective	The First Syllable	The First Syllable	The second syllable is weak
4-Leader	Noun	The First Syllable	The First Syllable	The second syllable is weak
5-Bottle	Noun	The First Syllable	The First Syllable	The second syllable is weak
6-Early	Adjective	The First	The First	The second syllable is weak

		Syllable	Syllable	
7-Correct	Verb	The First Syllable	The Second Syllable	The second syllable contains a cluster
8-Doctor	Noun	The Second Syllable	The First Syllable	The second syllable is weak
9-Enjoy	Verb	Both Syllables	The Second Syllable	The second syllable contains a diphthong
10-Open	Adjective	The First Syllable	The First Syllable	The second syllable is weak

RESULTS

After collecting the data needed to accomplish the study, the researcher analyzed the data to come out with the following results. The three tables below show the performance of the participants in the test in terms of percentages. Discussion is provided for each category: nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Table 2- Disyllabic Nouns

Noun	Stressed Syllable	Correctly Placed	Wrongly Placed	Success Percentage
1- Office	First	13	5	72.2%
2- Leader	First	14	4	77.8%
3- Bottle	First	9	9	50%
4- Doctor	First	13	5	72.2%
Average		12.2	5.8	68.1%

Table 2 states that 68.1% of the participants succeeded in placing the lexical stress correctly when dealing with the nouns. This is a satisfying performance to some extent. Half of them failed to mark the right stressed syllable of the word 'bottle'. This might be because the second syllable nucleus is the syllabic consonant /l/. Any syllable having one of the five syllabic consonants as its nucleus is weak and hence unstressed. The researcher noticed that many Arabs learning English mispronounce such syllables by inserting the vowel /ɪ/ between the consonants /t/ and /l/. This deed makes the learner feel that the syllable is strong, not weak.

Table 3 - Disyllabic Verbs

Verb	Stressed Syllable	Correctly Placed	Wrongly Placed	Success Percentage
1- Include	Second	12	6	66.7%
2- Correct	Second	12	6	66.7%
3- Enjoy	Second	11	7	61.1%
Average		11.7	6.3	64.8%

As Table 3 shows, 64.8% of the participants could place the lexical stress correctly when dealing with the verbs. There is no significant difference between this percentage and that concerning the nouns. The lowest performance among the verbs pertains to the verb 'enjoy'. The second syllable nucleus of this verb is one of the eight English diphthongs. The researcher noticed that many Arabs learning English are confused when considering diphthongs since they are made up of two combined vowels.

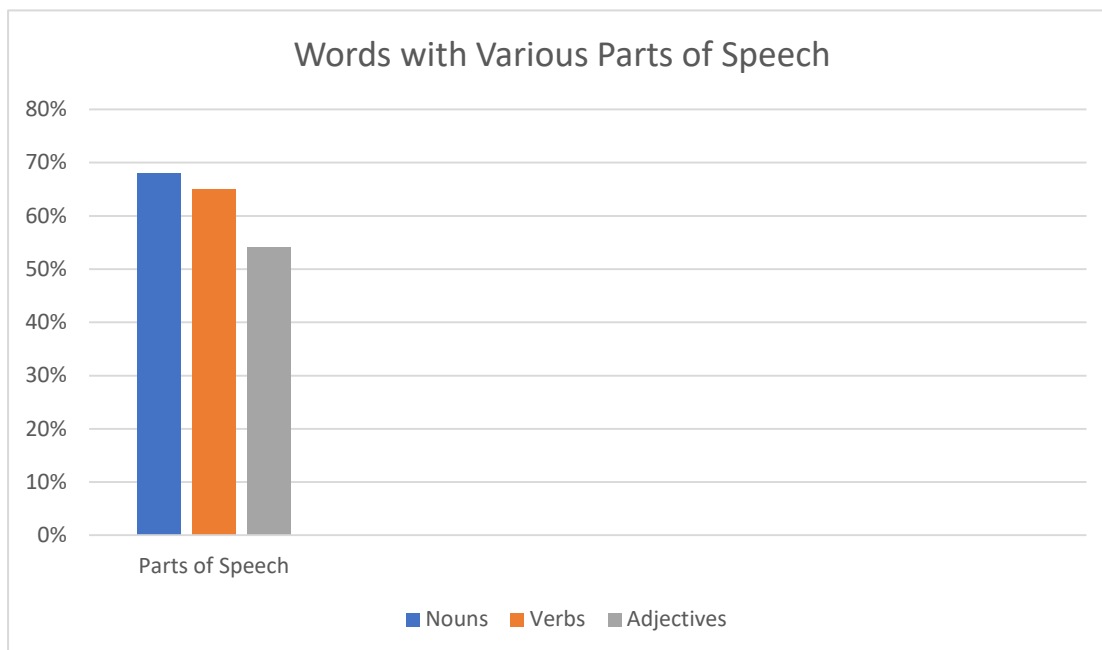
Table 4 - Disyllabic Adjectives

Adjective	Stressed Syllable	Correctly Placed	Wrongly Placed	Success Percentage
1- Modern	First	6	12	33.3%
2- Early	First	9	9	50%
3- Open	First	14	4	77.8%
Average		9.7	8.3	53.7%

Table 4 displays that only 53.7% of the participants were able to recognize the stressed syllables when considering the adjectives. This is the lowest performance compared with verbs and nouns. Among the adjectives, the most challenging one was 'modern'. Many Arabs mispronounce the word 'modern', saying it with a long vowel /e:/ in the second syllable instead of the correct vowel, which is the schwa, the weakest vowel in English. When students mispronounce the word 'modern', pronouncing it with a long vowel in the second syllable, they tend to stress that second syllable instead of the first one. Any syllable with the schwa as its nucleus is weak and hence unstressed. Half of the participants failed to mark the right stressed syllable of the adjective 'early'. They have to know that the second syllable cannot be stressed because it is weak; any syllable ending with the middle vowel /i/ is weak. Some mispronounce this middle vowel by replacing it with the long vowel /i:/.

CONCLUSIONS

Almost 68% of the participants succeeded in recognizing the stressed syllable in disyllabic nouns, whereas about 65% of them were able to assign the stressed syllables in disyllabic verbs. The lowest performance was the one that concerns adjectives; only about 54% of the participants could place the stress on the right syllable correctly. The overall performance was below expectations since the students were English Language specialists. No doubt, the factors behind the unsatisfactory performance include mother tongue transfer, given that Arabic language differs significantly from English Language as far as stress patterns are concerned. The chart below compares the participants' performance in terms of the parts of speech of the disyllabic words:

Chart 1- Recognition of Stress within Disyllabic Words

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that:

1. English stress patterns should be taught to EFL learners as early as possible at the pre-tertiary level.
2. EFL students should be given more activities to familiarize themselves with English stress patterns.
3. EFL students should listen to native speakers to promote their skills of lexical stress recognition.
4. To bridge the research gaps, more studies are needed on lexical stress recognition. Such studies should focus on Arab EFL learners to minimize the problems they encounter when producing English words.

REFERENCES

1. Almbark, R., Bouchhioua, N., & Hellmuth, S. (2014). Acquiring the phonetics and phonology of English word stress: Comparing learners from different L1 backgrounds. Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Acquisition of Second Language Speech, Concordia Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 5.
2. Altmann, H. (2006). The perception and production of second language stress: a cross-linguistic experimental study. PhD Thesis, Univ. of Delaware,

Newark.

Cite as: <https://hdl.handle.net/11858/00-001M-0000-0012-92C9-9>

3. Alzi'abi, S.E.(2023). Arab learners' stress perception and production of English multisyllable items. *Experimental Journal of Experimental Phonetics* ISSN: 1575-5533 · ISSN-e: 2385-3573
4. Aungcharoen, Nipa. (2006). An Investigation of The English Word Stress Perception and Production Skills of Thai 12th -Grade Student. Master of Arts Degree in English: Srinakharinwirot University. (Thesis)
5. Couper-Kuhlen, Elizabeth. (1986). An Introduction to English Prosody. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer and London: Edward Arnold.
6. Kevin, C.K. (2005). The processing and representation of lexical stress in the short-term memory of Cantonese-English successive bilinguals. MA thesis, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong.
7. Kreidler, Charles W. (1997). Describing Spoken English: An Introduction. Routledge, London
8. McMahon, April. (2002). An Introduction to English Phonology, Edinburgh University Press
9. Proffitt, Michael, et al (2025). Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press.
10. Tuan, D. M. (2017). An Investigation into EFL learners' Recognition and Production of English Lexical Stress. *Phranakhon Rajabhat Research Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences)* Vol.12 No.2