



## Developing the Recognition of Word and Sentence Stress in Zuara Secondary School Students

A Research submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA degree in Applied Linguistics

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### **Abstract**

Learning English normally accompanied by some difficulties that may hamper the smooth learning of the language. These difficulties are of different types. However, one of the most prominent of them all is learning stress. Though significant to English learning process, stress, whether on words or sentences, seems to be underestimated particularly in foreign context. The study takes into account the word syllable as it is basic in nominating word stress and according to which English rhythm can be learnt. The study also discussed how stress affects English intelligibility in terms of easy communication. Another thing is that stress can decide part of speech a word is. The study aimed at highlighting the role stress plays in understanding and using English particularly in foreign context, where it is often deliberately biased for other language features such as forms and structures. It also aimed at raising learners' consciousness about stress. For that reason, a group of 142 students and 17 teachers in secondary schools in Zuwarha area were subject to a survey, interview and observation where they showed little or no concern to learning or teaching stress as a distinctive word and sentence characteristic.

### **1.Introduction:**

Most teaching English as foreign language programmes did not focus on a systematic development of teaching and learning word and sentence stress. And as a suprasegmental feature of the language, stress in both word and sentence is a real mystery to English foreign language learners. This neglect to the word and sentence stress is due to the mistakenly believed idea that English foreign language learner should first master the grammar of the language and as the time passes they pick the other features of the language like pronunciation and stress. However, this idea turns out to be wrong. English, unlike tone languages, produces stress very naturally; i.e. English word born stressed. So, to learn this word, foreign learners have to know where exactly the stress in the word lies. The same thing is drawn on the sentence stress which also significant to the speaker's message.

Some people might see that both word and sentence stresses are not important for the foreign English language speakers to learn. They may base their attitude on the fact that stress on a word or a sentence does not affect the intelligibility of the speaker. But according to Kenworthy (1987: 18)

"There is a special relationship between the different parts of a word. In an English word of two or more syllables, one of these will have 'prominence' or 'stress'. That syllable is perceived as more prominent because of complex features such as loudness, length of vowel etc. If the learner does not stress one syllable more than another, or stresses the wrong syllable, it may be very difficult for the listener to identify the word. This is because the stress pattern of a word is an important part of its identity for the native speaker."

She continues saying that

There is a great deal of evidence that the native speaker rely very much on the stress pattern of words when they are listening. In fact, experiments have demonstrated that often when a native speaker mishears a word; it is because the foreigner has put the stress in the wrong place, not because he mispronounced the sounds of the word.

Clearly, Kenworthy is drawing attention to the importance of the stress, especially to how it considerably influences the speaker's intelligibility though it seems that, when learning English in foreign environment, stress is of less value since the primary goal of both learners and instructors is to master grammar of the language. But attention should be paid to the fact that English foreign learners usually learn the language for a pure academic purpose: to attend classes which are usually delivered in English. This necessitates that they should be able to understand and be understood. And in both cases they should be aware of the important role the stress plays.

## **2. Research significance:**

The importance of this study comes from the fact that word and sentence stress is an essential requisite to learning EFL in the classroom context. Research proves that this feature in TEFL context must be taught consciously, because they do not occur automatically as the case in L1 or SLA.

The researcher proposes to write about this topic, which is developing the recognition of word and sentence stress in the Libyan Secondary School Students, because being a teacher of English, she has noticed that students demonstrate very poor abilities in placing

the stress, on a word or a sentence, correctly, which negatively affects their reading as well as speaking. It also affects their listening because they cannot understand what they hear, even the words they already know in writing, because they say them differently and they expect to hear those words the way they utter them, which is most of the time wrong. The other reason behind tackling this topic is that there are little or no attempts which have been made to research this area in the Libyan English teaching environments. The researcher has reviewed research presented by Libyan researchers in the field of language teaching in the Academy of Graduate Studies Tripoli University and the Faculty of Arts in Zuwarah. The review has shown that all studies that carried out in this domain dealt with the testing and evaluation of reading and speaking only.

The drives behind conducting this study, developing the recognition of word and sentence stress in the Libyan Secondary School Student, stems from the fact that the researcher, who is also a teacher of English, noticed that students demonstrate very poor abilities in placing the stress, on a word or a sentence, correctly, which negatively affects their reading as well as speaking. They rarely read a word or a sentence easily. For example long words are big problems for them and reading a fairly long sentence take they so long time that they sound like robots when reading it. The absence of stress in students' performance does not only affect the way they read or speak it also affects their listening in the sense that they find it difficult understand lengthy connected fast speech even though the words they hear are already within the range of their vocabulary. This is because they are unaware of rules that govern the use of those words and sentence in English. They know those words very well in their written forms but they say them in the way that they are accustomed to. This is not to assume that those students are incapable of producing good performance, but that is how they come to know them over a time and still saying them different from the way English say them. Accordingly, when they listen to connected speech, they expect to hear those words in the same way that they have in their minds. At this point particularly they are confused. The result is that some of students claim that the speaker (who is usually native) is speaking very fast or they are dropping many words from their speech or even they often argue that the speaker has an accent. The other reason behind tackling this topic is that there are little or no attempts have been made to research this area in the Libyan English teaching environments. The researcher has reviewed research presented by Libyan researchers in the field of language teaching in the Academy of Graduate Studies Tripoli University, the Faculty of Art in Azzawia and the Faculty of Arts in Zuwarah. The review has shown that all studies that carried out in this domain dealt with the testing and evaluation of reading and speaking only.

### **3. Research context:**

This research is an attempt to improve the recognition of stress pattern in both word and sentence in English, including inability to contribute to reading and speaking, and to lesser extent, listening activities that are encountered by secondary school Libyan students.

The study will take place in some secondary schools in Zuwarah (...). The schools will include both state run schools and private ones where English is taught alongside other subjects.

### **4. Objectives:**

By conducting this study, the researcher aims at raising the consciousness of both teachers and learners, in particular, of the importance of teaching and learning stress pattern in the foreign language classroom environment. The researcher also aims at finding appropriate method(s) that can be used to teach stress pattern. Most importantly, she aims at developing students' reading and speaking skills.

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The study will take place in some secondary schools in Zuwarah. The schools will include both state run schools and private ones where English is taught alongside other subjects. They are as follows: Ahrar Zuwarah for Boys, 20<sup>th</sup> February School, Zuwarah Secondary School for Boys, The 17<sup>th</sup> of April School, Anas School. All of them are state-run schools except Anas School which is private. All of the schools are well equipped, lit and ventilated with good power supply in them. All schools have the same number of English periods; four periods per week each of which lasts forty minutes.

Ahrar Zuwarah consists of tens classrooms; three classes for the first year, three ones for second, and four classes for the third year. It also contains a library and administration office and a theatre. It has two hundred and twenty students. The 20<sup>th</sup> of February consists of eight classrooms two for the first year, two for the second year, and four for third year. It also contains theatre and administration office. Zuwarah Secondary School for Boys consists of ten classrooms. Three for the first year, three for the second year, four for third year and. and it has two hundred students. The 17<sup>th</sup> of February School consists of twelve classrooms. Six For the first year, three for the second year, three for third year and. It has three hundred students. Anas School consists of seven classrooms. Three classrooms for the first year, two for the second year, two for third year. It has one hundred eighty nine students.

## **5. Research methodology:**

To test her hypotheses and to carry out the research, the researcher will adopt mixed method: quantitative and qualitative. The first type will depend on collecting data through questionnaire and interview and the second type will depend on observation.

As for the questionnaire, it is composed of two different sets: one for the teachers and the other for the subjects of the study. Each set comprises three parts. Part A contains personal information of the participants; part B contains ten statements about teaching and learning stress pattern in word and sentence in English.

Regarding the interview, it has also been structured into two sets: one for the teachers and the other for the students. Each set is made up of ten questions that focus on teaching and learning stress pattern.

With respect to observation, the researcher prefers to divide it into three stages: pre-observation stage which is based on introspection into the nature of stress as an essential element in both English word and sentence, other teachers' approaches to teaching stress pattern and how students perceive it. The second stage involves observing students' language behavior, with regard to stress, while being engaged in reading or speaking activity. The third stage is the post-observation in which the collected data is analyzed and discussed. The observation is structured in a way which maintains detecting the existence or the absence of accurate word stress or/and sentence stress and the way they affect students' language performance with respect to reading and speaking and the effort, if any, both teachers and students make to improve the application of stress pattern.

## **6. Literature review:**

As it has already been mentioned in the introduction, little emphasis has been given to developing listening competence for foreign language learners. In chapter two related literature in developing listening competence for foreign language learners is reviewed. This includes a summary of what is already known about this field and why these background studies are insufficient. In other words, what issues that have not been covered and whether to deal with any of them in this study. In particular, the researcher will try to give a clear account of the problem that teachers face at Zwara secondary schools.

This review of literature will present relevant information which is required to understand and also maintain the current study: developing the recognition of word and sentence stress in the learners of English as a foreign language. The reader will be provided with the fundamental concepts that are essential for developing this research. These concepts are generally referred to as suprasegmental features that Radford (p.88) identifies as "the level of organization which exists above the level of segment"; i.e. the level of individual sound and its pronunciation. Ladefoged (1993:14) views suprasegmentals as the combination of vowels and consonants which together build up utterances. They include syllable, variations in stress and pitch, rhythm, which have much in common and to the extent that the presence

of any of them presupposes the others. Further, they decide how English native speakers convey a particular message easily and smoothly. The study will present the definitions of all of the three features that are suggested by previous research, i.e. syllable, stress and rhythm. And since these features are closely connected, it is important that the reader should be acquainted with the relationship that underlies these features. However, the focus will be on stress as it is the topic of this study.

In this chapter, the reader will also be provided with information related to the reason why stress (in both words and sentences) should be an important goal to both teachers and learners in a foreign language environment. In this regard, Kreidler (1997:43) highlights the fact that “In some polysyllabic languages, stress occupies the first syllable. In English, stress shifts”. This means that stress in English has to be carefully dealt with. The chapter also highlights the role that teaching stress has played in different teaching methods, the role of teaching pronunciation in emphasizing teaching stress, and finally the types of instruction carried out in this respect.

By the end of this chapter, the study will have formed a good idea about the importance of developing word and sentence stress in a foreign language classroom based on how effective the stress is in conveying a particular message provided that it is well performed by the speaker. Besides, he will have understood the reasons why teaching stress pattern should explicitly be presented to the learners of English as a foreign language.

## **7. Limitations of the study**

To test her hypotheses and to carry out the research, the researcher will adopt mixed method: quantitative and qualitative. The first type will depend on collecting data through questionnaire and interview and the second type will depend on observation. With respect to observation, the researcher prefers to divide it into three stages: pre-observation stage which is based on introspection into the nature of stress as an essential element in English word and sentence, other teachers' approaches to teaching stress pattern and how students perceive it. The second stage involves observing students' language behavior, with regard to stress, while being engaged in reading or speaking activity. The third stage is the post-observation in which the collected data is analyzed and discussed. The observation is structured in a way which maintains detecting the existence or the absence of accurate word stress or/and sentence stress and the way they affect students' language performance with respect to reading and speaking and the effort, if any, both teachers and students make to improve the application of stress pattern.

As for the questionnaire, it is composed of two different sets: one for the teachers and the other for the subjects of the study. Each set comprises three parts. Part A contains personal information of the participants; part B contains ten statements about teaching and learning stress pattern in word and sentence in English.

They are scaled as follows: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (DA), strongly disagree (SD), Don't Know (DN). Part C contains ten statements that are scaled as follows:

always (A), usually (U), sometimes (S), rarely (R), never (N). The participants are required to tick the choice that they believe to be true for them.

Regarding the interview, it has also been structured into two sets: one for the teachers and the other for the students. Each set is made up of ten questions that focus on teaching and learning stress pattern.

As the case with other studies, this one has some limitations that should be mentioned. As it is remarked in research methodology above, the questionnaire presented is likely not to be answered properly and by all participants or they ask for translation to their mother tongue, which raises question about reliability. The other thing is that there a possibility the questions come in the interview will not be accurately and sincerely answered. One more thing is that during observation participants might over/under-react as a response to being observed and thus some misleading conclusion might be drawn. Still, the number of both school are limited to a certain area which is difficult to generalize or to apply to another context.

This study, as other studies, has limitations. One limitation is the number of the participants. Because the number of the participants (students) is small, it may not be possible to generalize the findings of this study to other learners from other contexts. A second limitation relates to the time span for teaching stress pattern

Participants in the study are expected to receive instruction in stress pattern in a very limited time. In this case, testing the progress in learning stress pattern over a longer or shorter period of time may reveal different results.

A third limitation associates with the task-based questionnaires and interviews which the researcher adopts. Participants may not be accustomed to the procedures of these tasks. Additionally, because the questionnaires and interviews are in English, participants often seek help by asking for translation to their L1. Therefore, data interpretation demands careful management in order to correctly interpret the intentions of the participants' reports on certain questions.

## **8. Organization of the study**

Chapter one introduces an overview of the research by giving a brief research background, stating the research objectives and research questions, the significance of the study. Chapter two describes the methodological procedures including the description of research participants, the procedures for data collection, the materials used in the experiment, and the statistical methods for data analysis. Chapter three introduces the relevant literature for the theoretical framework for this study and reviews the literature of teaching and learning stress pattern in English classroom in foreign context. Chapter four includes data analysis. Chapter five includes discussion of results, recommendations and the conclusion.

## 9. Hypotheses:

Through close detection of the students under the study and by observing their weak language performance with respect to reading and speaking, the researcher has set forth three hypotheses that may underlie the research problem.

H1) The students under investigation have not received adequate instruction in word and sentence stress pattern.

H2) they have not been sufficiently exposed to oral English that is delivered by a native speaker or well modeled language performance carried out by a well trained Libyan teachers.

H3) offering appropriate instruction in learning stress pattern to sample students will enhance their reading and speaking competence in English.

## 10. Conclusion

This study tried to respond to the hypotheses that the students in question did not have adequate instruction in learning stress, they were not exposed to English sufficiently or otherwise they could have better understanding about it that might help them learn and use it easily.

To accomplish the study, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative method comprised two sets of questionnaire one was responded to by the teachers and the other by students. The qualitative method consisted of interview directed to the teacher, classroom observation which was oriented to both teachers and students and a test for students, which all revealed a serious absence of stress, the feature that marks English words and sentences. Below is the discussion of the results obtained from the collected data.

**The ultimate aim of the teaching and learning process is to guarantee that learners' needs have been materialized. In the case of language teaching in general and English language in particular, attention should be drawn to the fact that English language requires to be taught comprehensively; i.e. the process should take into account all of its skills with neglecting any. This is more demanding when the process takes place in a foreign environment.**

**This study aimed at developing the sense of word and sentence stress in both teachers and students of secondary schools in Zuwarah area in Libya, investigating how teachers and students act in the classroom regarding it. To do so, the study adopted various methods of data collection. It used questionnaires, interview as well as classroom observation. The results obtained were in complete contrast with the previous studies done in the same jargon giving arise to a question about how the teaching and learning process occurs in Libyan secondary school classrooms.**

As the nature of any conducted research, this study had some limitation. First, the questionnaires were unlikely to be answered properly especially by the students who repeatedly asked for help with translation into their mother tongue and that questions the reliability of the questionnaires. The other drawback was that the questions came into the interview were not sincerely responded to. One more shortcoming was abnormality in the classroom behavior during the observation sessions; some students, and even some teachers, showed some exaggerated enthusiasm that really blurred a considerable part of what actually happens in normal situations.

### **Recommendations**

**In the light of the results that have been discussed, I recommend**

- English inspectors should immediately intervene and correct the teachers' attitude, which has now become convention, towards teaching listening and speaking lessons that are already incorporated in the syllabus and end it.
- Because language teaching is always changing, teachers have to cope with whatever new; methods, approaches, techniques etc, about that process in order to face the challenge.
- Teachers should educate themselves because language teaching does not only depend on how well a teacher speaks the language, but on how knowledgeable he is.
- Teachers should join and participate in language teaching training courses and workshops because that would keep them updated.
- Teachers should be very dedicated in imparting language learning knowledge.
- There should also be more and more studies about this topic to cover a wider range of it.

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