

The features and training of English stress and rhythm

CAI Cui-yun

(College of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou Zhejiang 310012, China)

Abstract: In second language learning, to possess a perfect pronunciation, the importance of stress and rhythm should not be ignored. This article explores the nature of sentence and word stress as well as rhythm, thus putting forward some feasible ways of training and acquiring a good English stress and rhythm in EFLT (English as Foreign Language Teaching).

Key words: word stress; sentence stress; rhythm

Speech is a continuous stream of sounds, without clear-cut borderlines between them. Stress and rhythm are the key to gaining a natural, smooth-flowing style of speech. People do not speak in separate words, they speak in logical connected groups of words. Even native speakers sometimes “stumble over their words” because they are unaware of the “little tricks” for avoiding the pitfalls. Thus, the teaching of stress and rhythm should be highly valued.

1. Sentence stress

We have seen that every word of two or more syllables, when said alone, has a stress on one of its syllables. This is called word-stress. But in connected speech we do not hear a stress on every word. Some words lose their stresses, especially when we talk quickly, other words keep their stresses and these stressed syllables form what is called sentence stress.

1.1 Functions of sentence stress

Sentence stress has two main functions: Its first function is to indicate the important words in the sentence (from the point of view of grammar, meaning or the speaker’s attitude). For example:

I could `hardly `believe my `eyes.

In this sentence the words “hardly”, “believe” and “eyes” are stressed because they are important in meaning.

The second function of sentence stress is to serve as the basis for the rhythmical structure of the sentence. The rhythm of English speech is formed by the recurrence of stressed syllables at more or less regular intervals of time and by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Under the influence of the latter peculiarity of the rhythm of English speech, important words in meaning which are usually stressed may be pronounced without sentence stress. For example:

Very good.	Not very good.
[`veri `gud]	[nɔ:t veri `gud]

1.2 How to teach sentence stress in EFLT

We have a very strong impression that many Chinese students speak English with every word stressed,

CAI Cui-yun, M.A., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Gongshang University; research fields: cross-cultural communication, English teaching.

whereas, some students may read texts without modulation in tone.

Here are some suggestions for teachers to help students to grasp sentence stress.

(1) It is improper to accent all the content words in a word group regardless of the contextual situation, although they are more likely to receive accent than the grammatical (form) words. Only the “telegram” words or the words you would wish a somewhat deaf person to hear first should be accented.

(2) To supply students with enough opportunities to decide which words should be stressed in a sentence by themselves, let them read the text silently, think over, then underline the words ought to be stressed. It means that students should comprehend first, then practise, but not model mechanically.

(3) The teacher should read texts loudly. When the teacher is reading or playing the tape, students ought to look at the text. The teacher should direct students to pay attention to the lowering, rising, loudness, pause, slowing of sounds.

2. Word stress

Words which are usually stressed in English unemphatic speech belong to content words, namely, nouns, adjectives, numerals, notional verbs, adverbs, demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite pronouns and possessive pronouns functioning as nouns. Those that are usually unstressed in English unemphatic speech are form words, namely, auxiliary and modal verbs, verb to be, monosyllabic prepositions, monosyllabic conjunctions and articles. Personal pronouns, possessive pronouns (except absolute ones: mine, hers...), reflexive pronouns, reciprocal pronouns and relative pronouns are also usually unstressed.

Examples:

I am `reading a `very `interesting `novel.

`Dress yourself more `neatly.

However, it is necessary to point out that any word in a sentence may be logically stressed if it implies special emphasis or contrast.

Examples:

We `heard `John `talking (plain statement of fact).

We `heard John talking (implied contrast-“but we didn’t see him”).

We heard `John talking (implied contrast-“but didn’t hear Mary”).

`We heard John talking (implied contrast-“but others didn’t”).

We heard John `talking (implied contrast-“but we didn’t hear him singing”).

A word that is logically stressed may stand at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a sentence, and is usually the last stressed word in it. Sentence-stress on words following logical stress disappears.

Here are some other examples:

I `can do the job (Don’t think I can’t do it).

I `didn’t `know `you were leaving (I thought it was he who was leaving).

2.1 Stress of auxiliary and modal verbs

Auxiliary and modal verbs, as well as the link verb to be, are stressed in the following cases:

(1) At the beginning of a sentence, that is to say, in general and alternative questions, e.g.

`Are you on `duty to`day?

`Have you `finished your `homework?

Note that in the examples above, the initial auxiliary or modal verbs or verb to be may be unstressed, but this will make the questions sound casual.

(2) When they are in the end, used as short answers to general questions, e.g.

Have you read the book? Yes, I have.

However they are not stressed when used as answers to special questions, e.g.

Who is on duty today? I am.

(3) In contracted negative forms, e.g.

He won't be late.

It doesn't matter.

(4) The auxiliary verb "to do" is stressed in emphatic constructions, e.g.

Do come again.

He did write to me.

(5) Modal verbs "ought to", "must" (expressing strong certainty and expectation), "should" (meaning ought to) and "may" (indicating possibility) are always stressed, e.g.

You ought to do it now.

It should be fine tomorrow.

(6) "Will" and "would" expressing determination or desire always receive sentence stress, e.g.

Of course, we will do our work well.

2.2 Stress of prepositions

Prepositions are usually stressed in the following cases:

(1) If they consist of two or more syllables and are followed by an unstressed personal pronoun at the end of a sense-group, e.g.

The dog ran after him.

We should note that prepositions consisting of one syllable in this position are usually unstressed. They may have either strong forms or weak forms.

Here is a letter for you. [f:] or [f]

(2) If they are at the beginning of the sentence or after verb "to be" and followed by an unstressed syllable, they may be stressed, e.g.

In the countryside, he made many friends.

It's in my pencil-box.

(3) Conjunctions are usually stressed if they stand at the beginning of a sentence and are followed by an unstressed word, e.g.

If he comes, please ring me up.

2.3 No stress of some content words

Some content words are not stressed in certain cases as follows:

(1) A word that has just been used is not stressed, as it is a known message, e.g.

How many times? Three times.

(2) The word "street" in names of streets is never stressed, e.g.

Wall Street

(3) In exclamatory sentences such words as "what", "how" etc, are usually not stressed in order to give emphasis to the adjectives (or adverbs), e.g.

- a. What a `good `comrade!
- b. What `lovely `weather!
- c. How `hard they are `working!

However, “What” in sentence a may be stressed for rhythmical reason as it is followed by an unstressed syllable (i.e. a)

(4) The word “so” used as a substitute word to stand for a whole statement has no sentence stress. e.g.
Is he `coming? I `don’t `think so.

(5) Demonstrative pronouns “this” and “that”, having the meaning of “it” and “the”, are not stressed:
He’ll `never for `get that `day when he `joined the `Party (that = the).
`When did you `read this? (this = it)

(6) Demonstrative pronoun “this” in “this morning” (afternoon, evening) is not stressed:
He ar`rived this `morning.

(7) Adverb “enough” preceded by an adjective or another adverb is not stressed, e.g.
The `book is `easy enough for us to `read.
He `ran `fast enough.

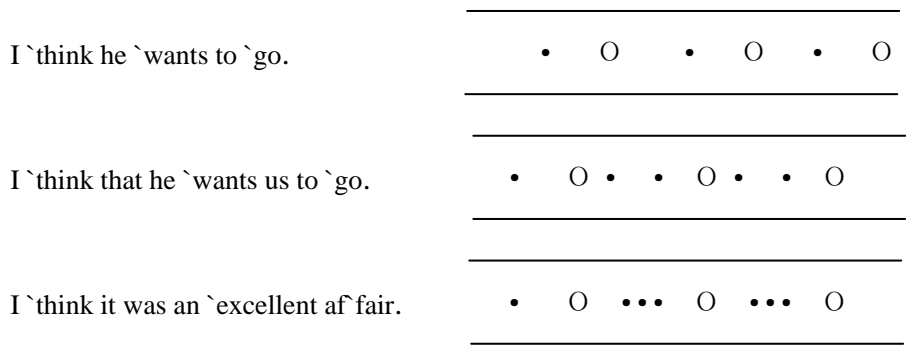
(8) Adverbs of degree followed by strongly stressed words often lose their stress, e.g.
It’s much `better than I ex`pected.
It’s rather too `late.

3. Rhythm

In English there’s a strong tendency in connected speech to make the stressed syllables occur at fairly regular intervals. This regular reoccurrence of stressed syllable is rhythm. Generally speaking, rhythm consists of intonation, syllables of stress and weak stress, pause and continuant. So, besides the mastery of sentence and word stress, it is as equally important for English learners to recognize the stress-timed rhythm. Students should be able to develop sensitivity to English rhythm and therefore contribute to a new articulatory habit.

3.1 Nature of rhythm

In connected speech, the stressed syllables follow each other nearly at roughly equal intervals of time, and the unstressed syllables (whether many or few) occupy almost the same period of time between the stressed syllables. The greater the number of unstressed syllables, the quicker they are pronounced. e.g.



Each of these three sentences contains the same number of stressed syllables, but a different number of

unstressed syllables. However, they are pronounced almost in the same period of time, although in the first sentence the stressed syllables are separated by one unstressed syllable, while in the last the stresses are separated by three.

3.2 How to acquire a good English speech rhythm

If one wants to acquire a good English speech rhythm, one has to pay attention to the following three points:

(1) Giving proper emphasis to stressed syllables, and making them recur rather regularly within a sense group. Weakening unstressed words and syllables and obscuring the vowels in most of them.

(2) Proper organization of words into sense groups by means of pauses. Blending the final sound of each word and syllable with the initial sound of the one following within the same sense group.

(3) One way to improve the rhythm is to beat the rhythm with hand, one beat for each stressed syllable and with exactly the same time between each pair of beats.

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