

English is a Stress-Based Language: a Tool for Learners of English as a Second Language

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English is a difficult language. It does not sound the way it looks. Learners are often frustrated trying to understand what others are saying and too self-conscious about their accents to speak. The good news for ESL students is that one tiny piece of information takes the mystery out of the spoken language: **English is a stress-based language.** What that means and how that impacts students is easy and fun to explore.

Learners are tragically misinformed about the significance of individual sounds in conversation. It is important to know that native speakers find accents *charming* and communication does not break down because of them. The seat of miscommunication in English is not in mispronounced letters, but in absent or misplaced *word stress*. If the boss called for a meeting on 'VENS day', everyone would show up the day after Tuesday, but if he said the meeting was on 'vensDAY,' no one would know when the meeting was, and they couldn't guess. The truth is, native English speakers have tremendous latitude for accommodating sound variations, and do not rely on perfect pronunciation for understanding.

The Impact of Word Stress in ESL – Maria's Story

Maria is Latino, plucky and gorgeous. Her warmth and charm transcend any language or cultural barriers. She moved to Canada from Central America many years ago with her husband and four small children. As is often the case, she was extremely isolated in her new country. Her children learned English in school and her husband learned it at work. Thirteen years after leaving El Salvador, she spoke no English and had no friends. Fortunately, Maria did understand that domestic violence is not tolerated in Canada. When she had finally had enough, she left her abusive husband and started a new life for herself and her children.

Maria rented an apartment, applied for social assistance, and enrolled in school. Her kind, effervescent personality was an asset to our ESL classroom. But one day she arrived sad and depressed. Everyone noticed. "What is the matter?" they wanted to know. Maria told a story every student could relate to. It was her eldest son's sixteenth birthday and she wanted to take her family out to celebrate. She couldn't afford to take everyone to dinner, so she took them out for breakfast. When it was her turn to order, the server asked what she wanted and she said, "Coffee an pekundaneesh." The server asked her to repeat her order. Beginning to feel uncomfortable, Maria repeated, "Coffee an pekundaneesh." The server turned on her heel and walked away, scoffing, "Why doncha speak English?"

Maria was devastated. The celebration was ruined. She told the class she was never going to a restaurant again. After we talked about her disappointment, we resumed our lesson on **Word Stress**. Maria learned that there is one and only one 'stressed' syllable in any word. She learned that the stressed syllables are higher, longer and louder than other syllables, and if the word stress is missing or in the wrong place, native speakers cannot understand what is being said no matter how perfectly the individual sounds are pronounced. At the end of the day Maria

stood up and shouted, “**PE** can **DA** nish!” She understood the lesson – and the breakdown that happened in the restaurant the day before.

Monday morning Maria bounced into the classroom, her cheerful, energetic self again. Everyone noticed. How was your weekend? In her adorable Spanish accent, with her hand on her hip and her index finger wagging, Maria filled us in. “Yesta day, I go back to dat restrant, I see dat lady and I say to she - I wanna **PE**can **Danish!** An she bring me.”

The crowd went wild. When her classmates’ clapping and cheering died down, she made a graceful curtsy before taking her seat. I have only an inkling of the courage it took for her to go back and face that waitress, but her triumph over word stress and restaurants was a triumph for us all.

The Lesson: English is a Stress-based Language

Most languages are sound-based, where each letter represents a different sound and every syllable is equally important. When East Indians, Arabs or Asians speak, they sound like sewing machines to native English speakers. Native speakers can’t hear the ‘stress’ because there isn’t any (apart from the anxiety everyone feels about not being able to understand what is going on). Word stress works differently in Spanish, French and German than in English. “Ze fr**EN**CH have ze ac**CEN**T on ze de**ffer**ENT **sylla**BLE” – again charming.

Word stress is so important in English that if the stress gets moved around, the word changes meaning.

PROduce is a noun meaning fruit and vegetables, and **proDUCE** is a verb that means to manufacture. **CONtent** is a noun for what is inside something and **conTENT** means happy.

There is virtually no indication how a word is going to sound from its spelling, but its context, or the words around it, can often give a clue.

Rule of Thumb

80% of *two-syllable nouns* have the stress on the first syllable.

TEAcher, STUdent, DOCTor, RUler, COffee, ANgel, PEOple, PAper, PENcil, SUGar, ORange...

Conversely, most *two-syllable verbs* have the stress on the second syllable.

enJOY, beLIEVE, surPRISE, deLAY, emPLOY, reLAX, conSERVE, emBRACE, suPPORT...

For words longer than two syllables, sorry, you are on your own.

HOspital, TRiangle, baNAna, poSItion, tangeRINE, engiNEER

Summary

The meaning in English is not in the production of individual sounds but in finding the correct syllable to pronounce higher, longer and louder than the rest of the word.

ESL students can stop worrying about their accents. Accents don't prevent ESL students from being understood, and native English speakers find them charming.

LEARners must **GE**nerate **EM**phasis to be suc**CESS**fully under**STOOD**.

As published on: EzineArticles.com, GoArticles.com and ArticleCity.com