

Teaching Accentual Patterns in English to Engineering Students

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ABSTRACT

English pronunciation is considered to be one of the vital yet neglected areas in English language teaching. Kelly (1969) named it the 'Cinderella' of language teaching, as this component has received less attention from ESL teachers compared to other components like grammar and vocabulary. An English teacher is expected to range from segmental to suprasegmental features of the English language while training their students in English pronunciation. That is, one first begins with the sound level, moves on to the word level, and gradually to the sentence level. If an English word has more than one syllable, all the syllables are not equally prominent. The syllable that is pronounced with more prominence is said to be accented. Furthermore, the stressed and unstressed syllables occur at regular intervals in English. The present paper deals with some of the techniques to teach accentual patterns in English to engineering students. The paper explores how the learners can be trained in using an appropriate accent, both at the word and sentence levels.

Keywords: ESL, Segmental Features, Suprasegmental Features, Accentual Patterns, Syllable, Stress.

Introduction

Pronunciation is a vital aspect of the communication process. It should receive equal importance as that of the other sub-skills of language, like vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, it has received less attention from teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) compared to other components. Kelly (1969) acknowledged the neglected status of pronunciation in ESL teaching and named it the 'Cinderella' of language teaching.

In congruence with Kelly (1969), other language teaching experts like Gilner (2008) and Baker & Murphy (2011) have discussed the neglected status of teaching pronunciation

skills in ESL and EFL classrooms. Gilbert (2010) calls it "an orphan" in an English classroom. Kelly (2000) says that it is due to its complexity, dearth of scientific foundation, insufficient teaching materials, absence of non-native teachers with formal expertise in pronunciation, and opposing ideas concerning the teaching of pronunciation. It is more due to the teachers' inability to understand how to teach it, rather than lack of interest in teaching pronunciation. Hence, it is very essential to provide appropriate training to ESL teachers, thereby making them competent in teaching pronunciation.

As far as the teaching and learning of English pronunciation are concerned, one must distinguish between segmental and

suprasegmental features of pronunciation. The segmental features include the speech sounds, i.e., vowel and consonant sounds. The suprasegmental features include stress, intonation, and rhythm. That is, one first begins with the sound level, moves on to the word level, and gradually to the sentence level. If an English word has more than one syllable, all the syllables are not equally prominent. The syllable that is pronounced with more prominence is said to be accented. Furthermore, the stressed and unstressed syllables occur at regular intervals in English. Engineering students aspire to work in various reputed multinational companies. This entails intermediate to advanced level proficiency in English as they are expected to deal with international clients. Many engineering students aspire to go abroad for higher education. They need to take international proficiency tests like IELTS, GRE, and TOEFL for the same, and obtain a higher band score. They can obtain it in the pronunciation section only if they can use accentual and intonation patterns of English appropriately. However, Indian students find it difficult to grasp the pronunciation system of the English language. Tickoo (2003) provides the following reasons as affecting the learning of English pronunciation.

1. The learner's first language and the extent to which it differs from the target language.
2. The learner's age.
3. The amount, intensity, and quality of exposure to the target language.
4. The learner's phonetic ability, also known as 'auditory discrimination ability'. In

general, good discriminators profit better from pronunciation skills.

5. Attitudes to foreign pronunciation may often be related to a desire to identify with the culture that the target language may represent.
6. Motivation, which, among other things, is related to personality. Some learners value perfection and find mistakes, big or small, unacceptable. Others are satisfied with effective communication with or without mistakes.

The present study deals with some techniques to teach accentual patterns in English to engineering students. The paper explores how learners can be trained in using an appropriate accent, at both word and sentence levels.

Accentual Patterns in English

Languages are usually classified into two types based on the pronunciation systems they follow. Some languages are syllable-timed languages, whereas others are stress-timed. In syllable-timed languages, all syllables receive equal prominence and take an equal amount of time to pronounce. On the contrary, all the syllables are not equally prominent in stress-timed languages. There is approximately the same amount of time between two stressed syllables in a stress-timed language. Most of the Indian languages are syllable-timed, whereas English is a stress-timed language. Indian students face some problems in acquiring accentual patterns of English due to this difference, and tend to use English in a syllable-timed manner similar to their first language.

English follows a complex accentual pattern

hailing from its sources, i.e., Germanic and Romance languages. The words receive stress at the beginning of the words in Germanic languages, whereas the last syllable is more prominent in Romance languages. English, mixing both these features arbitrarily, has evolved into the language we use today. Bansal and Harrison (2006) rightly say, “it is the interaction of these two principles that have produced the accentual patterns of modern English” (p. 77).

Word Stress

As discussed earlier, English is a stress-timed language, and hence, accent is a very important aspect of the English pronunciation

For Example:

Beginning			End		
I	/ai/	V	I	/ai/	V
My	/mai/	CV	At	/æt/	VC
Cry	/krai/	CCV	And	/ænd/	VCC
Street	/stri:t/	CCCVC	Text	/tekst/	CVCCC
			Texts	/teksts/	CVCCCC

Therefore, a word in English has at least one syllable. And one syllable has at least one vowel sound.

Words with one syllable: cow, dress, boat, cook.

Words with two syllables: upstairs, winter, country, ago.

Words with three syllables: umbrella, potato, magazine, difficult.

Words with four syllables: information, supermarket, January, pedestrian.

system. Before discussing the accentual patterns in English, it is essential to understand the concept of syllable structure. We use the air we breathe out to produce utterances. We can produce a limited number of sounds in one breath. A word in English is made up of one or more syllables. We can produce one syllable in one breath. One syllable can have one or more sounds. The syllable structure in English is $C^{0-3} VC^{0-4}$

Thus, one syllable in English can have **zero to three** consonants in the beginning, **one vowel sound**, and **zero to four** consonants at the end. This means that one syllable must have at least one vowel sound. Consonant sounds are optional.

Words with five syllables: university, accommodation, congratulations, communication.

The teacher can explain the syllable structure to the students and encourage them to divide words into syllables based on the number of vowel sounds the words contain. They can conduct various activities to make students understand how many syllables a word is made up of. The activity of breaking a word into parts based on the syllable divisions is one of the popular methods. For example, the teacher can write the word

'communication' on the board and then split it into parts, like 'co-mmu-ni-ca-tion'. The word consists of five parts, and hence five syllables. The clapping game is also very effective in practising syllable divisions in a fun way. Associating syllables with beats can enable students to learn syllable divisions and the number of syllables in a

word. Here, the teacher makes students clap after every syllable. This kinaesthetic activity can help students internalise the concept of syllable structure very well. For example, while pronouncing the word 'communication', the students can be asked to clap after every syllable division, as follows.



The teacher can then check the students' understanding of the concept by giving them a list of words and asking them to count the number of syllables in those words.

As discussed earlier, an English word can have one or more syllables. If an English word has more than one syllable, all the syllables are not equally stressed. The syllable that is more prominent than the others is said to receive the accent. For example, the word 'winter' consists of two syllables, namely 'win' and 'ter'. Here, the first syllable is more prominent than the second one and hence is accented. On the contrary, the disyllabic word 'decide' has stress on the second syllable. The teacher can initially give examples of two syllables and gradually move on to words with more than two syllables. The stressed syllable is pronounced louder, higher, and longer than the unstressed ones.

For example,

1. The following words have stress on their first syllables – **winter**, **mother**, **English**, **early**, **nation**, **kitchen**.

1. The following words have stress on their second syllables – **about**, **explain**, **believe**, **decide**.

In English, there are a number of two-syllable words in which the accentual pattern depends on whether the word is used as a verb, a noun, or an adjective. In these words, the accent is on the second syllable when they are used as verbs. It is on the first syllable in all other cases.

Word	Noun	Verb	Adjective
Subject	/'sʌbdʒɪkt/	/səb'dʒekt/	/'sʌbdʒekt/
Object	/'ɒbdʒɪkt/	/əb'dʒekt/	—
Perfect	—	/pə'fekt/	/'pɜ:fɪkt/
Desert	/'dezət/	/dɪ'zɜ:t/	—
Present	/'preznt/	/pri'zent/	—

If an English word is followed by an inflectional suffix, there is no change in the stress pattern. For example,

1. **nation** – **nations**
2. **kitchen** – **kitchens**
3. **remove** – **removed**
4. **alarm** – **alarmed**
5. **want** – **wanted**

However, if there is a change in the grammatical function of the word after adding a suffix, it is called a derivational suffix. The accentual pattern of the word usually changes in such derived words. For example,

1. a'cademy (n) – /ə'kædəmi/
 aca'demic (adj.) – /ækə'demɪk/
 acade'mician (n.) – /əkædə'mɪʃən/
2. 'photograph (n) – /'fəʊtəgrɑ:f/
 pho'tography (n.) – /fə'tɒgrəfi/
 photo'graphic (adj.) – /fəʊtə'græfɪk/

The teacher can use various methods for making students understand the correct uses of stress in English words. It is beneficial for learners if they start using a good English-to-English dictionary to practise correct pronunciations of words with appropriate stress. The method of 'listen and say' is also very effective, as the learners first listen to the correct pronunciation of words and then follow it. The drilling activity where the students are given a list of words and are asked to pronounce them aloud benefits them a lot, as they can be corrected by their teacher if they use incorrect pronunciation or inappropriate stress while pronouncing the words. Here, the teacher can give a list of words that are usually mispronounced by Indians and make them aware of the correct pronunciations of those words. For example, the word 'breakfast' is usually mispronounced as /brek'fa:st/ by many Indians. The teacher can make his students understand that the correct pronunciation of the word 'breakfast' is /'breɪkfəst/.

The dictionary activity is very useful too.

Here, the learners can be given a list of words and asked to find the correct pronunciation and stress patterns for those words from a good English-to-English dictionary. The teacher can give the students a list of words with the same number of syllables and then ask them to classify the words based on the syllable that is stressed in the words. This activity can be done after the students have understood the concept of word stress well.

Stress in Connected Speech

As we know, we do not speak words in isolation. Words are combined to form sentences. English is a stress-timed language, and hence, the accented syllables tend to occur at regular intervals of time in sentences. Content words like nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are stressed in connected speech, whereas functional words -- pronouns, helping verbs, prepositions, articles, and conjunctions -- are unstressed. Furthermore, these unstressed functional words are spoken softly and quickly, and hence tend to get reduced to their weak forms. For example, in the sentence 'Ram is going to Paris', the content words *Ram*, *go*, *Paris* are stressed, whereas the functional words *is*, *to* are unstressed and reduced.

Improvement in pronunciation skills goes hand in hand with the improvement in listening, reading, and speaking skills. In fact, pronunciation skills are often practised and honed via these skills. The teacher can make the students watch and/or listen to video or audio conversations to make them observe, understand, and thereby internalise accentual patterns in English.

Loud reading of a sentence or group of

sentences can involve the following steps:

1. Divide sentences into tone groups or breath groups.
2. Mark the content and functional words.
3. Stress appropriate parts of the content words and reduce the functional words.

For example,

Read the following paragraph aloud.

I have a reason to believe that our new priest is preaching next week. If it is convenient to you, I should like to seize the opportunity to hear him. Quite recently he made a speech about evil people who secretly deceive their female employees. I was in complete agreement with all he said. It is no secret that such cases are extremely frequent even in our own factory. I gave details of one to my own chief, but he received my news with immediate disbelief and was clearly eager to shield the man, so I had to yield and admit defeat.

Step 1

I have a reason to believe/ that our new priest/ is preaching next week. // If it is convenient to you, /I should like to seize /the opportunity to hear him. // Quite recently / he made a speech / about evil people / who secretly deceive / their female employees. // I was in complete agreement / with all he said. // It is no secret / that such cases / are extremely frequent / even in our own factory. // I gave details of one / to my own chief, / but he received my news / with immediate disbelief / and was clearly eager to shield the man, /so I had to yield and admit defeat.//

Step 2

I have a reason to believe / that our new priest / is preaching next week. // If it is convenient to you, /I should like to seize /the opportunity to hear him. // Quite recently / he made a speech / about evil people / who secretly deceive / their female employees. // I was in complete agreement / with all he said. // It is no secret / that such cases / are extremely frequent / even in our own factory. // I gave details of one / to my own chief, / but he received my news / with immediate disbelief / and was clearly eager to shield the man, /so I had to yield and admit defeat.//

Step 3

I have a 'reason to be'lieve / that our 'new 'priest / is 'preaching 'next 'week. // If it is convenient to you, / I should 'like to 'seize / the oppor'tunity to 'hear him. // 'Quite 'recently / he 'made a 'speech / about 'evil 'people / who 'secretly de'ceive / their 'female emplo'yees. // I was in com'plete a'greement / with 'all he 'said. // It is 'no 'secret / that 'such 'cases / are ex'tremely 'frequent / 'even in our 'own 'factory. // I 'gave 'details of 'one / to my 'own 'chief, / but he re'ceived my 'news / with i'mmediate disbe'lief / and was 'clearly 'eager to 'shield the 'man, /so I had to 'yield and ad'mit de'feat.//

Conclusions

Whenever someone speaks, the first thing people observe about their language use is their pronunciation. We can say that our pronunciation is our first impression, hence English teachers need to be careful while training their students in this area. It is

essential that students have a neutral accent, with minimum first language influence on their *target language*. Accent is a very important aspect of the English pronunciation system, but Indian learners find it difficult to internalise. Hence, teachers need to provide more practice to their students in this area.

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ELTAI READING CLUBS

ELTAI has launched Reading Clubs in educational institutions with the primary objective of creating a 'culture of reading' among school and college students. This initiative is based on a research-based framework that takes into account differences in age, gender, interests, and location.

Objectives of the Reading Club:

- q To create a love for reading in students and enable them to become better, lifelong readers;
- q To enable them to reflect on what they read in order to lead them to become effective writers and speakers;
- q To familiarize them with different text types (genres) and enable them to engage in appropriate reading strategies; and
- q To employ synchronous (both virtual and physical meetings) as well as asynchronous modes – Web tools, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Reading Logs, MOOCs (audios, videos, quotes, blurbs, reviews, etc.) to sustain their interest.

ELTAI would like to have MoUs with institutions that are willing to implement this initiative and help to achieve these objectives collaboratively. Institutions interested in this project may please write, expressing their interest, to: indiaeltai@gmail.com with a copy (Cc) to Dr. Zuleiha Shakeel, the Coordinator of the project at:

zoowasif@gmail.com.

For a brief description of this initiative, visit our website at: <http://eltai.in/reading-clubs/>.

For an outline of the respective roles and responsibilities of the host institution and ELTAI, visit the website at: <http://eltai.in/roles-and-responsibilities-of-the-host-institution-and-eltai/>.