

Correcting English learner's suprasegmental errors

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Abstract

The main cause of pronunciation problems faced by EFL learners is their lack of a suprasegmental background. Most of those having oral comprehension and expression difficulties are unaware that their difficulty comes from their negligence of concepts of stress, pitch, juncture and linkers. While remedying stress problems, students should be taught the general rules, emphasising on primary and secondary stress, using various forms of pitch to give emotions to their utterances, taking shorter and longer pauses between meaningful thought chunks through junctures, and solidifying such suprasegmentals through constant exercises in dialogues as seen in model videos. Native speakers react more violently to unacceptable suprasegmental errors than segmental ones; thus, neglect of such important pronunciation elements risk harming the quality of communication. Learners of English should consider the good old di che, *It's not what you said, it's how you said it*, if they want to have effective communication with their audience.

Keywords: Stress placement, primary, secondary stress, prominence, compound/phrasal stress, pitch, juncture, fossilised error, algorithm of suffixes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. General Outline of Suprasegmental Features

Suprasegmental features include stress, juncture, pitch, rhythm and linkers. Stress is the prominent element in a word. Prominent syllables are referred to as strong, and those unstressed as weak. Strong syllables are stressed while weak syllables are unstressed. Stress in any form is perhaps the most important element of English pronunciation, enabling communication. Thus, errors in stress are a common cause of misunderstanding, as stressing the wrong syllable in a word or a different word than intended can make comprehension extremely difficult (Scribd, 2012). English speech also has rhythm, beginning with the syllable and moving on to words, phrases and sentences forming intonation as a whole. Every syllable has a beat that can be either strong or weak. The rhythm of English is created by the patterns of strong and weak beats or strong and weak syllables. Stressed syllables are louder, longer and higher in pitch and have a full, clear vowel, while unstressed syllables are softer, quicker and lower in pitch. Most errors committed in the rhythm is stressing every word in the sentence, not reducing the unstressed syllables and function words, not using contractions (I'll, he'll, what's, what've, etc.) or unstressing one-syllable content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and short numbers) and pronouncing them too quickly. As for junctures, the basic unit of connected speech, there are pauses between 'thought groups' or meaningful group of words. A 'thought group' may consist of one short sentence or it may be just one part of a longer sentence. Each 'thought group' has a focus word, thus stress, even one primary stress and one secondary stress. The end of such 'thought groups' are typically signalled by pauses and pitch changes on the focus words. e.g., [A\mazing↓] [Meet me at \two↓] [She got up↗early→→ had a cup of ↗ coffee, →→ but couldn't force herself to \ eat↓] (Gilbert, 2008).

Suprasegmental elements such as stress, pitch, juncture and linkers are uttered naturally and correctly in the mother tongue without prior training, but need to be learned systematically in the target language. Therefore, it is vitally important in order to establish the intended communication in the language learned and taught such techniques of pronunciation alongside segmental issues. Experience has clearly shown that one of the most visible areas of weakness in Turkish students learning English is stress placement. Sentence stress along with pitch and rhythm are the main components of intonation. Juncture is the suprasegmental feature that indicates the borders of most words and groups of words in speech. Shorter pauses usually indicate a continuing topic, either immediately following or after an interrupting clause, and may coincide with a comma as well as possibly occurring at a number of other optional sites in an utterance. Natives normally distinguish the juncture in contrastive twins of word pairs, such as play+nice and plain+ice, but learners of L2 must be trained to watch such intonation items to be better understood (Martin, 1976). The statement (Woman → without her man →→ is nothing ↓) may be uttered with a different juncture format to give out a completely different meaning, when juncture format is changed into this: (Woman →→ without her →→ man → is nothing ↓) (Wilkes, 2012). In order to correct juncture errors, students must first be made aware of them and the related phonetic functions while forming meaningful structure.

In connected speech, linking, stress, pausing and intonation along with weak and strong forms of grammar words [for example saying 'does' (dʌz) rather than (dɒz) or contractions 'I'll', 'he's' etc.] are less likely to cause a communication breakdown. Rather, they impart to the speaker a heavy foreign accent (Lev-Ari, 2010). Without good linking, good stress or pausing and the versatility of intonation patterns, stretches of words become undear chunks that interfere with communication. Sentence stress involves giving greater prominence in a sentence to some more words than others. For instance, as content words express the essential meaning and carry information, they are therefore typically stressed. As for function words, as they are also termed as structure or grammar words, they serve to connect words in order to complete the sentence and are not normally stressed. Stress highlights the most important words in the message; a rhythmical approach to English pronunciation will help the foreign listener to concentrate on the meaningful words in the message and to strengthen the links

between pronunciation on the one hand and grammatical structure and meaning on the other. This approach encourages the understanding of language as communication rather than a set of isolated segments (Sabater, 1991).

Thus, teachers wishing to improve their students' oral performance need to spend more time teaching them such rules for word stress, intonation and rhythm in English as much as they focus on teaching individual sounds. Because prosodic features of language – word stress, intonation and rhythm – are extremely important for comprehensibility, correcting the pronunciation should not be restricted to the field of individual sounds only. Thus, teachers should include prosodic training in their instruction (Iyere, 2012). Teachers should also concentrate on pitches during their listening activities (e.g., listening for rising intonation in yes/no questions), have their learners compare question intonation in English with that of their native languages; and then have them imitate dialogues and perform plays while watching videos in which yes/no questions are used. They should read perception exercises on duration of stress, loudness of stress and pitch, do exercises on recognising and producing weak, unstressed syllables, present pronunciation rules for stress and finally teach them juncture, meaning how to break words in a sentence to make meaningful thought chunks.

1.2. Common Errors in Suprasegmentals

Errors of misplacing stress on an irrelevant syllable or word in a sentence are a common cause of misunderstanding English, because this makes the word and its meaning very difficult to comprehend. Even if the speaker can somehow be understood, mistakes in stress placement can be annoying and cause overall communication breakdown (Poedjosoedarmo, 2012). In ESL–EFL classes, word meaning and spelling are usually clarified. However, mispronounced sounds and incorrect stress are often neglected and left unattended. Ignoring such items as stress, pausing and intonation and linking are used in connected speech for successful communication. Other aspects of connected speech such as weak and strong forms of grammar words (e.g., saying *does* [dʌz] rather than [dɒz] or contractions (I'll, he's, etc.) are less likely to cause a communication breakdown, apart from attributing to the speaker having a heavy foreign accent.

Most often, variations in the melody of English speech are 'alien' to those language learners who use monotonous, flat or chopped patterns of intonation. Before practicing intonation of the language, the learners must be exposed to it so that intonation becomes embedded subconsciously in their memory bank. Most people do not make a conscious effort to learn this melody of speech, however, after having practiced certain speech items a number of times, it becomes another asset to their image and confidence when they start speaking. Even this can only explain why suprasegmental errors are just as important as segmental errors for their great influence on conveying meaning. The prosody of a language should be seen as its basic structure. The major difficulty of acquisition lies in the fact that two different languages have differences at the suprasegmental level (Institut numerique, 2012), and English and Turkish are no exceptions. Turkish learners automatically reproduce first language (L1) prosodic features, and the resulting errors have a devastating effect on intelligibility, just as segmental errors do. Native speakers are often unaware of intonation and its role in their language. While native English speakers can easily recognise the grammatical and pronunciation difficulties faced by non-native speakers and make allowances for their segmental errors, they are unable to do so for intonation. The intonation errors made by non-native speakers may not be recognised, hence it may lead to misunderstanding. When non-native speakers mistakenly use intonation patterns, they are considered by non-native hearers as unintended notes of rudeness (Al-Sibai, 2004). Unaware of their possible intonation errors, native hearers may then take the perceived rudeness to be deliberate. 'Natives often react more violently to . . . intonational meanings than to . . . lexical ones; if a man's tone of voice belies his words, we immediately assume that the intonation more faithfully reflects his true linguistic intentions' (Atoye, 2012).

Most suprasegmental errors occur on the stress level. Some students neglect to place prominence on the relevant syllable, some do not reduce the unstressed syllable to [ə] yet some others place

prominence on the wrong syllable, which all cause misunderstanding of meaning and giving wrong impression of one's intention. The misplacement of stress occurs often on compounds such as 'SUN glasses' or 'BUS stop' and phrasals as 'take it OUT' or 'dean it UP' and polysyllable words 'interNAtional' 'DICtionary' and more often in full sentences 'You NEVER know what you can DO till you try'. As for the sentence stress, some students place the focus on the wrong word or do not indicate it at all. A total ignorance of juncture (pausing in the wrong place) and linking (between words) prevails among English learners, which causes great inconvenience of communication with their audience. The general observation of professional phoneticians is that most learners of English can hardly distinguish between the primary and secondary degrees of stress in a sentence. Luckily there is a remedy to these ills, but 'prevention is always better than cure' in correcting suprasegmental errors, as it is in other pronunciation problems.

1.3. How to Correct Suprasegmental Errors in English as a Second Language

The main cause of suprasegmental errors in English is that most EFL learners are not aware of such concepts as stress, pitch, juncture and linkers forming the prosody and intonation of the language. They neither recognise nor express the distinction between unstressed syllables and stressed ones let alone differentiating primary and secondary stressed syllables, and simply articulate them all with equal effort. They do not separate the 'thought groups' into chunks and separate them in shorter and longer pauses in their sentences. They do not reflect in their utterances the emotions their words are loaded with. Their pronunciation teachers basically tend to focus on segmental features, leaving all suprasegmentals elements unattended. Therefore, while correcting such suprasegmental errors, the remedy should come from exactly where the problem was caused and the solution was neglected. Thus, students should first be made aware of and briefed on various functions of suprasegmentals to start with. Their phonetics teacher should teach them how to make stressed syllables prominent in their words and sentences by making them raise their voice where relevant. Students should be taught which words are stressed and which are not. They should keep in mind that 'content words' such as nouns, principal verbs, adjectives and adverbs are stressed and 'function words' such as determiners, auxiliary verbs, prepositions and conjunctions are not. As they try to grasp several related stress rules, their pitch will automatically go up and they will start lengthening the vowels on the stressed syllables. They will eventually realise that correct stress and intonation are keys to their speaking English fluently. Their teachers will also teach them some stress paradigms (Yurtbasi, 2012), by allowing them to compare minimal pairs representing compound words and phrasals and asking them to tell the difference between the two. They will also learn to realise the importance of reducing the unstressed syllable to schwa [ə] (e.g., com'PLETE, pro'FESSor), by making the neighbouring stressed syllable stand out. They will be able to distinguish between the primary and secondary stress in multi-syllabic words such as [,MANifes'TAtion] and [,NAtio'NAlity]. They will remember to place stress on the first syllable on 'nouns' and final on 'verbs' and stress the prefixes and suffixes. In 'compounds' they will be focusing on the first words and in 'phrasals' on the second. In sentence stresses, they will be dividing the sentences into thought chunks and place shorter and longer junctures or pauses in between. While correcting their errors in pitch, their teachers will remind them that in statements, for wh-questions, imperatives and interjections they must use a 'falling pitch' [↘]; and for 'non-finality', 'incompleteness' or an 'invitation' to continue the conversation they should use a 'rising pitch' [↗]. For 'commas' a 'shorter sustained juncture' [→] and for 'colons', 'semi colons' and 'periods' a 'longer sustained juncture' [→→] should be used to identify pauses they should make. Students must be taught the special rhythm of the English language and the linking process in connecting sounds in their speech. Students will thus be learning that in the flow of speech, there is no space between words – as in the writing – but rather pauses and words linked to one another like links in a chain. Teachers, while teaching about such such links, for instance, those between a consonant and a vowel, will be utilising perhaps some exaggerations such as 'broke it'–'bro kit', 'gave up'–'ga vup' and many more, all to ensure clear articulation in their students' pronunciation (Shakhbagove, 2006). Last but not least, we phonetics teachers will always keep in mind during this process that the

importance of teaching and correcting suprasegmental elements can never be overemphasised as illustrated in this simple and commonly heard justification 'It's not what you said, it's how you said it' that matters in effective communication.

2. Conclusion

Suprasegmentals can be one of the most difficult parts of English for learners to master and one of the least favourite topics for pronunciation teachers to address in the classroom (Florez, 1998). This explains the inefficacy of most learners of English as a second language when it comes to their oral communication, which causes much misunderstanding and inconvenience. It is observed that limited suprasegmental skills can undermine learners' self-confidence, restrict their social interactions and negatively influence estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities (Morley, 1998). Suprasegmentals produced unconsciously by native speakers and providing crucial context to determine meaning must be carefully studied during the early stages of the foreign language learning process (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996). Suprasegmentals dealing with such aspects of pronunciation as stress, rhythm, connected speech and the rising and falling of the voice pitch must assume a more prominent place in the pronunciation instruction curricula, by using various teaching materials in order to instill in the learners relevant suprasegmental features and correct existing errors (Morley, 1998).

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