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# Non-native pre-service English language teachers achieving intelligibility in English: focus on lexical and sentential stress

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of ‘intelligible pronunciation’ Turkish pre-service English language teachers may need to develop as to both lexical and sentential stress patterns in English prior to their professional careers. Turkish language, a syllable-timed language, differs from English, a stress-timed language, and such a difference is likely to cause difficulties for Turkish pre-service teachers of English in mastering intelligible pronunciation in English. Thus pre-service English language teachers may need to receive specific training concerning the placement of lexical and sentential stress in English due to the diverse features of English language pronunciation. This paper therefore attempts to outline the major lexical and sentential stress patterns of English prospective English language teachers are expected to acquire before graduation from English Language Teaching (ELT) departments in the Turkish context.

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## 1. Introduction

In non-native settings like the Turkish context, people strive to learn English for many reasons, communication with other native or non-native speakers being one of the first priorities. Such a communication might be arduous due to poor pronunciation, particularly faulty production of sounds and also improper use of stress, intonation, rhythm, or connected speech. Intelligible pronunciation may therefore arise as a feeble element for Turkish learners of English as well as for prospective English language teachers in the Turkish context. The nature of the Turkish language as a syllable-timed language

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(Çelik, 2007) and English as a stress-timed language (Harmer, 2001) and also lack of undue attention exerted to pronunciation instruction in the Turkish context (Demirezen, 2005) may be some of the primary reasons for Turkish pre-service teachers of English in failing to master intelligible pronunciation in English. Thus Turkish prospective English language teachers are likely to transfer poor pronunciation skills to their potential learners of English as regards to segmentals and prosodic features of English. The aim of this study is therefore to discuss the importance of word-stress and sentence stress placement as part of intelligible English prior to pre-service English teachers' professional lives in the Turkish context.

## **2. Lexical and Sentential Stress as Part of Intelligible Pronunciation**

A micro view of pronunciation instruction focuses on correct production of segmentals such as consonants and vowels as well as consonant clusters (Morley, 1991) while a holistic view may cover teaching suprasegmentals such as how sounds change in connected speech, common stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation (Jenkins, 2004). As indicated in a number of studies (Hahn, 2004; Derwing, Thomson & Munro (2006) focus on prosodic features rather than on individual sounds may alleviate speech production or pronunciation problems to a large extent, thereby contributing to learners' communicative competence (Jenkins, 2002). Further, Field (2005, p.418-419) highlights that incorrect stress allocation in words might lead to serious communication problems for the listeners regardless of native or non-native as the stressed syllable acts like an "access code or, at the very least, a reliable signpost to its identity". Non-native learners and teachers of English not conversant with such features of English may risk the failure of conveying incorrect messages in their encounters with native or other non-native speakers of English. Harmer (2001) also highlights the importance of correct stress placement in words and sentences as native speakers pay particular attention to stressed syllables in communicating with others. Thus, training learners as well as teachers of English in hearing and using correct stress patterns may develop better pronunciation, thereby achieving more successful communication.

In the Turkish context such suprasegmentals as stress pattern, rhythm, and intonation may have received relatively little attention (Seferoğlu, 2005; Demirezen, 2009) while most of the research studies have investigated the role of segmental features of pronunciation (Çelik, 2008; Hismanoglu 2009; Demirezen, 2010; Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). However, regardless of their nature, all the studies have proven positive contributions to Turkish learners' pronunciation competency. Turkish speakers of English are expected to develop intelligible language skills in order to communicate effectively with native and also with other non-native English speakers in national and also in international settings. Therefore applying the correct stress patterns becomes vital in producing English words and sentences intelligibly as lack of stress marker or incorrect stress pattern is likely to cause either lack of communication or misunderstanding on the part of interlocutors (Murphy, 2006; Harmer, 2001). Non-native speakers of English with a syllable-timed mother tongue like Turkish, being unaware of prosodic features of pronunciation, may find it difficult to follow or understand the spoken English and may have problems in putting their messages across effectively. Murphy (2006, p.121) stresses that "Attending to stress and rhythm patterns at the level of individual words provides a wonderful opportunity to prepare learners for the important ways in which stress, rhythm and even intonation function across broad stretches of spoken language." Turkish prospective teachers of English may also need to develop an understanding of the nature of stress patterns in English. Word-level stress, difficult to learn due to L1 varieties, plays an important role in speech-intelligibility training (Murphy and Kandil, 2004). In English there is one stressed syllable in a word with two or more syllables and also two or more unstressed syllables. Basic level syllables include 'strongly stressed', 'lightly stressed', and 'unstressed syllables' (Celce-Murcia, et al. 1996, p.132). Word-level stress pattern in English can be analyzed in terms of the

role affixation has in word-stress, how nouns are stressed, and how verbs are stressed (Çelik, 1999). Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996, p. 133) suggest that “The first syllable of the base form of word is typically stressed” in words of Germanic origin such as “WATER” and “YELLOW”. Furthermore many two-syllable words of French or other languages follow a similar word stress pattern in such words as “DOCTOR” and “FOREIGN” (Celce-Murcia, et al. 1996, p. 133). In addition, stress pattern for compounds falls into first word stress, second word stress and stress on both words. The other category concerns stress pattern in verbs. Verbs usually tend to have the primary stress on the second syllable such as ‘PRESENT’ and ‘CONDUCT’ for verbs used as objects and ‘UNDO’ and ‘INFERR’ for verbs that begin with prefixes (Çelik, 1999). Another prominent pattern is related to suffixation. In words with “prefixes of German origin such as *a-*, *be-*, *for-*, *fore-*, *mis-*, *out-*, *over-*, *un-*, *under-*, *up-*, and *with-* and Latin origin such as *com-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *ex-*, *en-*, *in-*, *ob-*, *per-*, *pre-*, *re-*, *sub-*, and *sur-*, the base or the root usually receives the strong stress (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996, p. 133-135) as in “SURPRISE” and “DISTURB”, respectively. In words with suffixes of German origin such as *-en*, *-er*, *-ful*, *-hood*, *-ing*, *-ish*, *-less*, *-ly*, and *-ship* the base of the word usually receives strong stress as in “CHILDHOOD” and “FRIENDLY”, while for suffixes of French origin such as *-aire*, *-ee*, *-eer*, *-ese*, *-esque*, *-ique*, *-eur/euse*, *-oon*, *-ette*, *-et* usually the final syllable of the word receives strong stress such as “QUESTIONNAIRE” and “ENGINEER”. On the other hand, in words with such suffixes as *-eous*, *-graphy*, *-ial*, *-ian*, *-ic*, *-ical*, *-ious*, *-ity*, *-ion*, the stress falls on the syllable preceding the suffix. Certain suffixes allow penultimate stress pattern in which case the syllable before the suffix or second syllable from left is stressed as in “CLIMATIC”, and “EDUCATION (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996, p.137). In addition, various forms of the suffix ‘-y’ such as *-cy*, *-gy*, *-dy*, *-ty*, and *-al* follow antepenultimate stress pattern in which the third syllable from end is stressed as in “DEMOCRACY” and “CRITICAL” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2003).

Another element of suprasegmentals in English, stress pattern in sentences can be classified as “tonic stress”, “emphatic stress”, and “contrastive stress” (Çelik 1999; Çelik, 2007). To Çelik (1999, p. 43-44) tonic stress (syllable) falls on “a content word at the end of intonation units ... in statements, referring or proclaiming; statements that are uttered in unemotional circumstances, which are not contrastive, nor emphatic ...” Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen, & Spencer (2009, p.42) give the example “Tom builds HOUSES” and highlight that while “In a neutral pronunciation each word receives an even amount of emphasis” primary stress falls on the first syllable of the last word “HOUSES”. Unless there is contrastive stress or emphatic stress, in tonic stress content words such as nouns, main verbs, adjectives, interrogatives, demonstrative pronouns, possessive pronouns, adverbs, adverbial particles following phrasal verbs, negative contractions, and the negative particle “not” when uncontracted are stressed in a sentence (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996, p.153). As for contrastive stress, regardless of function or content word any word that is contrasted receives the tonic stress (Çelik, 2007).

### 3. Conclusion

Stress allocation in words and sentences might be one of the major hassles in non-native settings with syllable-time languages like Turkish. However, pre-service teachers of English can achieve such a competence if provided with opportunities to practice various elements of English pronunciation while in their undergraduate studies. Intelligible pronunciation as a realistic expectation in non-native settings of English would add to non-native English language teachers’ professionalism as Demirezen (2005, p.82) argues poor pronunciation “impedes good language skills, condemning the non-native teachers of the English language to less than their deserved social, vocational and occupational promotion and development”. Since Turkish as a syllable-timed language has approximately the same loudness, length and pitch, such features may pose possible difficulties while learning stress-timed language like English

in placing stress in words and sentences. As each syllable receives a similar amount of time and stress in Turkish unlike English, Turkish speakers of English tend to allocate the same amount of time to each syllable in English, thereby producing artificial English, sending incorrect messages or causing possible misunderstanding on the part of interlocutors. This particular paper may indicate that prospective teachers as well as any learner of English with a syllable-timed native language like Turkish may need to receive special education in using stress patterns in English. Turkish non-native teachers of English may need to learn to focus on stressed syllables, use correct stress allocation in words and sentences as in stress-timed languages in undergraduate programmes since attention to be paid to basic stress patterns as well as other suprasegmentals elements in ELT programs is of paramount importance to achieve intelligibility in English, securing a better status in their future professional lives.

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