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The Nature of Stress in English Language A Study from a Perspective of Rule-Governed Approach

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on the stress pattern in English Language (EL). Learning the rules of stress in EL is a complex phenomenon. This article is an endeavor to look at this complex phenomenon in detail. The paper describes the stress placement rules both, at the word and the sentence levels. It gives information about the placement of stress in content and function words. The issue of primary and secondary stress has been discussed in the article. This research also presents the context in which weak form words are stressed. The whole research work is done with the hope that the non-native speakers of English will get insight in learning the rules of stress. The work can provide guidelines for further scientific research in this area.

Keywords: Rules of stress, Word & Sentence stress, Syllable & Stress timed languages, Function & Content words' stress, Weak form words

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1. Introduction

In the language learning process, speech is very important. The child learns to speak before he is capable of writing something that he understands. Language is, first a spoken not a written thing. It appeals to the ear, not to the eye. Thousands and thousands of years before nobody ever thought of representing sound by visible signs. People communicated with each other by word of mouth. They talked and listened ages before there was anything for them to read. In the long history of the human race, the invention of writing was the event of yesterday. It is clear that all language learning starts from speech training, which should come first before learning to read in point of time as well as the point of importance.

Good speech in English involves control of the system of sounds, stress and intonation pertaining to the language. Present literature in the area of teaching English as a foreign/second language suggests that speech development programs should make the basis of language teaching. Experts now seem to believe that even other skills cannot be taught effectively until speech is placed on the top priority. In this context, Saleemi says, "the sensitivity of speaking seems to form the nucleus of all linguistic activity"(1983, p.168).

In the domain of language, many aspects need to be considered while designing any speech development program. However, teaching of pronunciation probably, occupies the most important place. Stress, also known as accent is a phenomenon that has been termed a key to the pronunciation of an English word. This is also a linguistic feature that creates rhythm in English language. Gilani (1996, p.3) writes that:

All the different aspects involved in the making of fluent speech with appropriate pronunciation need to be emphasized in the process of teaching. But the study of stress/accent as a paralinguistic feature is so vital that no one can learn the pronunciation of an English word (of more than one syllable) without learning its accent.

Sethi & Dhmiija (1989, p.132) also believe that:

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Word accent is an essential part of the word shape. Every word in English, for example, has a certain characteristic accentual pattern shared by the speaker and the listener alike. Any arbitrary change in this pattern, as we may find in a non-native speaker's pronunciation of that word, may deform the word beyond the recognition.

Ladefoged (2006, p.243) writes that:

Stress is a suprasegmental feature of utterances. It applies not to individual vowels and consonants but to whole syllables - whatever they might be. A stressed syllable is pronounced with a greater amount of energy than an unstressed syllable and is more prominent in the flow of speech.

In this paper, an effort has been made to unfold the mysteries of stress in English speech that is also sometimes called *accent*. The study describes initially, nature of stress and its importance in a speech development program. Lastly, it assumes a prescriptive role in the light of description of linguistic behaviour of the native speaker in the current literature on the topic. In English language, every syllable is not stressed, but only the required syllables are accented. J.D.'O Conner (2006) asserts very emphatically, "If you stress the wrong syllable, it spoils the shape of the word for an English hearer and he may have difficulty in recognising the word" (p. 91).

2. Focus on Paper

2.1. Syllable timed and Stress timed Languages

Language is the chief source of communication, and it just comes next to food. Different people and communities are living in this universe having different languages with their

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different written and spoken forms. As far as speech is concerned, all these languages can be divided into two categories:

- i. Syllable Timed
- ii. Stress Timed

i. Syllable timed Language

In a syllable-timed language, every syllable is stressed. Here all the syllables are equally emphasised, and they occur at equal time intervals. The rhythm thus created is said to be syllable-timed rhythm. In a syllable-timed language, variation of stress is always absent. Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Phari (self-observation), and French are syllable-timed languages.

However, recorded speech of French speakers shows that although French has a tendency towards syllable timed rhythm, it is usually not strictly syllable timed.

(Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, P. 283)

ii. Stress timed Language

In a stress timed language only the required syllables are stressed. But these stressed syllables tend to occur at equal time intervals, the rhythm thus created in the language is known as Stress Timed Rhythm. According to Marks (203.72.145.166/ELT/files/53-3-6.pdf), Russian, Arabic and English can be categorised as Stress Timed Rhythm. In English if,

Stressed syllables occur close to each other, the speaker tends to slow down, but if unstressed syllables occur in a sequence, he tends to quicken the pace in order to get to the next stressed syllable.

Phonology (AIOU Press Unit 5, p. 77).

Knowledge about rhythm cannot be given less importance. If one does so, it means he/she neglects a vital aspect of English pronunciation. A learner with a goal of learning English for communicative purposes needs to learn the English-rhythm.

2.2 Stress

It is the use of extra respiratory energy during the articulation of a syllable. Stress is the degree of force with which a sound, a syllable or a word is pronounced. In English, some syllables are spoken with a greater degree of force than the others are. Syllables that are pronounced more forcibly than the others are said to be *stressed*. Syllables that are pronounced without much force are called *unstressed*, or more accurately *weakly stressed*. For instance, the word *conduct*, which consists of two syllables, may be pronounced with stress on the first syllable as ‘conduct’ (N) or with a stress on the second syllable as ‘con’duct’ (V). This shows that proper stress on the proper syllable changes the meaning. To Gimson, stress is the greater breath effort and muscular energy exerted in the articulation of a syllable giving it more prominence than its neighbour in an utterance constituting a text. Roach (1993, p. 85-86) writes:

All stressed syllables have one characteristic in common, and that is called **prominence**; stressed syllables are recognised as stressed because they are more **prominent** than unstressed syllables.

How important is teaching to place stress on the right syllable in English, it would be worth quoting to Clifford et.al. (1985, p. 19) who says that stress:

is the key to the pronunciation of an English word, and the location of the accent always be learned with the word. If you stress the wrong syllable it may be quite impossible for anyone listening to understand what you are trying to say.

2.3 Levels of Stress

There are two levels of stress, one is primary stress and other is secondary stress.

2.3.1 Primary Stress

When we pronounce certain words, we put stress on some syllables. Some syllables are very prominent due to stress. Prominence is the result of the pitch movement or tone. This tone gives the strong type of stress, which is called tonic stress. When we refer or wish to refer specifically to this type of stress than it is also called **Primary Stress**.

A. Primary Stress Marking

Sethi (1989) informs that Primary stress can be marked with a vertical stroke ['] above and in front of the syllable.

Examples:

Recognised	['rekəgnəɪz]	Exception	[ɪk'sepʃən]
Absolute	['æbsəljʊ:t]	Contrast	['kɒntrɑ:st]
Cannibalism	['kænbəlɪzəm]		

2.3.2 Secondary Stress

In some words, a type of stress can be observed that is weaker than tonic/strong stress, but it is not as much weaker as we find in the first syllable of the word *around*. So this bit prominent stress is called secondary stress.

B. Secondary Stress Marking

Sethi (1989) also tells the pattern of secondary stress marking. According to him a vertical stroke [,] is placed below and in front of the syllable.

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Examples:

Anthropology	[,æŋθrəpɒlədʒɪ]
Organisation	[,ɔ:gənəɪzɪʃən]
Photographic	[,fəʊtəgræfɪk]
Activation	[,æktɪveɪʃən]
Oversimplification	[,əʊvə,sɪmplɪfɪ'keɪʃən]

2.4 Lexical and Syntactic Stress

One word may contain three or four syllables and in this case, one syllable must be stressed which is called **lexical stress**.

The word *syntactic* is grammatically an adjective which is derived from the noun *syntax* that is the study of how words are combined to form sentences. When one or more than one syllable or words are stressed in a sentence, it is called *syntactic stress*.

2.5 Concept of stress with function and content words

English words are generally categorized into two kinds, function and content words. *Function* are closed class words which are about 300 in English while *content* words are open class words. New words are being added in the lexicon of content words day by day. (www://grammar.about.com)

2.5.1 Function or Structural words

These are the words, which have little meanings on their own, but these show grammatical relationship in and between sentences. Conjunctions preposition and articles etc; are the functional words. Usually these remain unaccented. However, in certain circumstances they may receive stress. The table below reflects some function words in English Language.

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Function Words	examples
Prepositions	of, at, in, without, between
Pronouns	he, they, anybody, it, one
Determiners	the, a, that, my, more, much, either, neither
Conjunctions	and, that, when, while, although, or
Modal verbs	can, must, will, should, ought, need, used
Auxiliary verbs	be (is, am, are), have, got, do
Particles	no, not, nor, as

2.5.2. Content or Lexical words

These words give most of the information and usually refer to a thing, quality, state or action. In sentences, only content words are stressed. The table, given below contains the content words.

Content Words	examples
Nouns	John, room, answer, Selby
Adjectives	happy, new, large, grey
Full verbs	search, grow, hold, have
Adverbs	really, completely, very, also, enough
Numerals	one, thousand, first
Interjections	eh, ugh, phew, well
Yes/No answers	yes, no (as answers)

3. Stress Pattern in English Language

3.1 Placement of Stress in English Language

In many of the world languages, stress pattern is predictable and rules can be formulated regarding the placement of stress in majority of words. For example, in Czech and Finnish, stress is always placed on the initial syllable in case of Polly-syllable words. Penultimate (Second from the last) syllable is stressed in Polish words. In French, this is the last syllable that is generally stressed (wikipedia.org/wiki/Stress). But stress in English is not fixed and

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therefore, very difficult to predict, "Some words in English are accented on the first syllable, some on the second syllable, and others on the third syllable and so on" (Sethi P.133).

Roach (1993, p. 88) gives the following information that can be helpful in the placement of stress in English words:

- i. Whether the word is morphologically simple, complex or a compound.
- ii. The grammatical category of the word i.e. noun, verb, adjective, etc.
- iii. The number of syllables in the word
- iv. The phonological structure of those syllables

According to Roach (1993), "it is sometimes difficult to make the decision referred to in (i). The rules for complex words are different from those for simple words..." (Ibid).

3.2 Rules of Stress

It has been known that the study of stress in English words is very difficult and making rules in this regard is a complex matter. Very often one will need to refer a good dictionary or hear the word spoken by a native speaker which itself is a tiresome job.

However, a native speaker knows intuitively which word or syllable is to be stressed. This is possible to describe the linguistic behaviour of the native speaker in this context. In addition, such descriptions have been the basis of attempts to make rules governing the placement of stress in English words, with many exceptions and many a times, it will be preferred to learn marking of stress as a property of the single word.

Though the nature of English stress is very complicated, yet the following rules based on the recent work on phonology by different scholars can be helpful in the context of foreign and second language teaching.

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3.2.1 Simple words

Individual syllable words said in isolation are always stressed.

i. Verbs

Roach (1993, p. 89) writes:

- A. In case of two syllable verbs if the second syllable of the verb has a long vowel or diphthong, or if it ends with more than one consonant, that second syllable is stressed.

Apply	[ə'plai]	Array	[ə'rei]
Arrive	[ə'raiv]	Comport	[kəm'pɔ:t]
Attract	[ə'trækt]	Interrupt	[ɪntə'rʌpt]
Assist	[ə'sɪst]	Intersect	[ɪntə'sekt]

- B. If the final syllable contains a short vowel and one (or no) final consonant, the first syllable is stressed.

Enter	['entə]	Equal	['i:kwəl]
Open	['əʊpən]	Envy	['envɪ]
Gutter	['gʌtə]		

- C. A final syllable is also unaccented if it contains /əʊ/.

Follow	['fɒləʊ]	Borrow	['bɒrəʊ]
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- D. In case of three syllable verbs:

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"If the last syllable contains a short vowel and ends with not more than one consonant, that syllable will be unstressed and stress will be placed on the preceding (penultimate) syllable" (CUP1993, p.90).

Encounter [ɪŋ'kaʊntə] Determine [dɪ'tɜ:mɪn]

"If the final syllable contains a long vowel or a diphthong, or ends with more than one consonant, that final syllable will be stressed" (Ibid).

Entertain [entə'teɪn]

Resurrect [rezə'rekt]

Fourteen [fɔ:'ti:n]

ii. *Nouns/Adjectives*

According to Peter Roach (1993, p. 90), nouns need different rules for placing stress. Some important rules are being discussed here:

- A. If the second syllable contains a short vowel, the stress will usually come on the first syllable; otherwise it will be on the second syllable.

Money ['mʌni] Estate [ɪs'teɪt] Larynx ['lærɪŋks]

Product ['prɒdʌkt] Balloon [bə'lu:n] Design [dɪ'zaɪn]

- B. In case of a three syllable nouns:

If the final syllable contains a short vowel or /əʊ/, it is unstressed:

Mimosa [mɪ'məʊzə] Potato [pə'teɪtəʊ]

Poultry ['paʊltrɪ] Pounder ['paʊndə]

C. If the syllable preceding the final syllable contains a long vowel or diphthong or it ends with more than one consonant, that middle syllable will be stressed:

Disaster	[dɪ'zɑ:stə]	Gymkhana	[dʒɪm'kɑ:nə]
Synopsis	[sɪ'nɒpsɪs]	Hiatus	[haɪ'eɪtəs]

D. "If the final syllable contains a short vowel and the middle syllable contains a short vowel and ends with not more than one consonant, both final and middle syllables are unstressed and the first syllable is stressed" (Ibid).

Quality	['kwɒlətɪ]	Emperor	['emprə]
Cinema	['sɪnəmə]	Custody	['kʌstədɪ]

E. The above-mentioned rules can be equally applied to other two or three syllable stressed words. Stress is placed on the last syllable in case of most words with following endings:

...ette	Cigarette	[sɪgə'ret]
...oon	Cartoon	[kɑ:'tu:n]
...oo	Shampoo	[ʃæm'pu:]
...ique	Technique	[tek'ni:k]
...eer	Engineer	[endʒɪ'nɪə]
...ee	Refugee	[refju'dʒi:]
...esque	Picturesque	[pɪktʃə'resk]
...ain	Entertain	[entə'tem]

F. The stress in these words shifts to initial position if they are immediately followed by another word with initial stress. Stress is placed on 2nd syllable from the end (penultimate) in most words ending with (KJLR 1994, P.11):

...ic	Specific	[sp ə 'sɪfɪk]
...tion	Generation	[dʒenə 'reɪʃn]
...ish	Accomplish	[ə 'kʌmpɪʃ]
...it	Explicit	[ɪk 'splɪsɪt]
...ion	Explosion	[ɪk 'spləʊʒn]
...id	Insipid	[ɪn 'sɪpɪd]
...ive	Defective	[dɪ 'fektɪv]

G. Stress is placed on 3rd syllable from the end (anti-penultimate) in multi syllable words, especially words ending with:

...cracy	Democracy	[dɪ 'mɒkrəsi]
...ual	Habitual	[hə 'bɪtʃuəl]
...ily	Family	['fæməli]
...an	Metropolitan	[metrə 'pɒlɪtən]
...ity	University	[ju:nɪ 'vɜ:səti]
...logy	Analogy	[ə 'nælədʒi]
...graphy	Geography	[dʒɪ 'ɒgrəfi]
...etry	Geometry	[dʒɪ 'ɒm ə tri]
...sophy	Philosophy	[fɪl 'ɒsəfi]
...itor	Solicitor	[sɒ 'lɪsɪt ə]
...itude	Attitude	['ætɪtju:d]
...al	Industrial	[ɪn 'dʌstriəl]
...ian	Librarian	[laɪ 'breəriən]
...ar	Particular	[pə 'tɪkjulə]
...iar	peculiar	[pɪ 'kju:lɪə]

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...ety	Society	[sə 'saɪəti]
...nomy	Economy	[i 'kɒnəmi]

H. Stress is placed on the fourth syllable from the end in most words of four syllables or more especially word ending with:

..iater	Radiator	['reɪdɪeɪtə]
...ary	Vocabulary	[və 'kæbjʊləri]
...acy	Accuracy	['ækɪrəsi]

The study of the linguistic behaviour of native speaker of RP indicates a dominant tendency to stress:

- 1). The first syllable for the nouns and adjectives and the second syllable for the verbs in case of two syllables words.
- 2). The third syllable from the end is stressed in case of multi-syllable words. Although, lots of exceptions would be found as regard the above generalisations. "We can say that, confronted with multi-syllable words, if you stress the third last syllable you will be right most of the time" (AIOU Press Unit 10, P.36).

3.2.2 Complex words

Complex words are made from a basic stem word with the addition of an affix, i.e. composed of two or three grammatical units:

Care + less	(2 grammatical units)
Care + less + ness	(3 grammatical units)

Native English words tend to place the stress on the basic word and to maintain it there even if prefixes and suffixes are added:

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Man	[' mæn]	Friend	[' frend]
Stand	[' stænd]	Understanding	[ʌndə ' stændɪŋ]
Manly	[' mænli]	Unmanly	[ʌn ' mæli]
Standing	[' stændɪŋ]	Upstanding	[ʌp ' stændɪŋ]
Outstanding	[aʊt ' stændɪŋ]	Manlike	[' mænlaɪk]
Friendly	[' frendli]	Unfriendly	[ʌn ' frendli]
Friendship	[' frendʃɪp]	Mannish	[' mæniʃ]

Stress remains on the same syllable in words ending with:

... able	comfort	[' kʌfət]	comfortable	[' kʌmfətəb]
... age	anchor	[' æ ŋ kə]	anchorage	[' æŋkəri dʒ]
... al	refuse	[rɪ ' fju:z]	refusal	[rɪ ' fju:zl]
... en	wide	[' waɪd]	widen	[' waɪdn]
... ful	wonder	[' wʌndə]	wonderful	[' wʌndəfʊl]
... ing	amaze	[ə ' meɪz]	amazing	[ə ' meɪzɪŋ]
... ish	devil	[' devl]	devilish	[' devəlɪʃ]
... like	bird	[' bɜ:d]	birdlike	[' bɜ:dlai k]
... less	power	[' paʊə]	powerless	[' paʊəles]
... ly	hurried	[' hʌri:d]	hurriedly	[' hʌri:dlɪ]
... ness	yellow	[' jeləʊ]	yellowness	[jeləʊnes]
... ous	poison	[' pɔɪzn]	poisonous	[' pɔɪzənəs]
... fy	glory	[' glɔɪri]	glorify	[' glɔ:rɪfaɪ]
... wise	other	[' ʌ ðə]	otherwise	[' ʌðəwaɪz]
... y	fun	[' fʌn]	funny	[' fʌni]

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...ment punish ['pʌnɪʃ] punishment ['pʌnɪʃmənt]

3.2.3 Compound words

If the first part of the compound is a noun, the stress goes on the first component and the secondary stress on the second. The following examples fulfil the claim CUP (1993, p. 98).

Typewriter ['taɪp ,raɪtə]

Suitcase ['su:t ,keɪs]

Tea-cup ['ti: ,kʌp]

If the first part of the compound is an adjectival, the stress goes on the second component with secondary stress on first component.

Loudspeaker [,laʊd 'spi:kə]

Three-wheeler [,θri: 'wi:lə]

Bad tempered [,bæ 'tempəd]

Second class [,sekənd 'kla:s]

In case of reflexive pronouns, it is the last syllable, which is always given the primary stress

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------|------|-------------|
| i. | My'self | iii. | Them'selves |
| ii. | Your'self | iv. | Him'self |

Generally, each syllable of abbreviations is stressed.

- 'A'M, 'P'M, 'M'L'A, 'B 'B 'C, 'U 'S 'S 'R, 'U 'S 'A

The primary stress is placed on the first part in case of names ending with street:

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- 'Dawning street, 'Baker Street etc

In two-word verbs, made up of a verb and adverb, it is normally the adverb that receives stress, not the verb:

- to split'up, to put'on.

In compound verbs there is usually a secondary stress on the first component and a primary stress on the second component:

- ,under'stand, ,over'look, ,out'run etc.

3.2.4 Context when content words are not stressed

All the above mentioned groups of words are generally used their strong forms; however, they are not stressed by the native speakers in the following contexts:

In connected speech, content words that simply repeat what is already known are not usually stressed:

- Ali was advised to consult four *books* on phonology.

['ʌli wəz əd'vaɪzd tə kən'səlt fɔ: bʊks ɒn fə'nɒlədʒi]

But he consulted only two *books*.

[bət hi: kən'səltəd 'əʊnli'tu: bʊks]

Sometimes, content words are left unstressed if the information contained by them is already known to both speaker and listener:

- Does your *father* work in a *college*?

[dʌz jɔ: fa:ðə 'wɜ:k ɪn ə kɒlɪdʒ]

3.2.5 Weak form words

Most of the personal and relative pronouns, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles and a few other words have strong and weak forms in spoken English. Strong form is used when there is stress on the word and weak form is used when there is no stress.

Roach (1993, p. 102) introduces 28, Sethi(1992) & Sardar (2008) observe 46 words in British English generally referred to as RP that can be pronounced in two different ways; one strong pronunciation and one or more than one weak pronunciations. This category of words is known as weak forms words.

For intelligibility to the native speakers, understanding their speech and making one's pronunciation natural, it becomes obligatory on the part of a foreign learner to learn the use of weak-form words. These function words usually perform a grammatical function and do not have semantic values like content words. Function or structural words include *prepositions, pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, modal verbs, auxiliary verbs and particles* (no, not, nor) etc.

These words are generally pronounced in their weak forms. However, their strong pronunciation is preferred by the native speakers in certain circumstances. It is therefore, important for a foreign learner of English to note the following context when only the use of strong form of these words will make the speech sound natural. (KJLR 1994, p. 16)

3.2.6 Auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs are generally stressed:

- When placed before sentences to form questions.

'Am I giving right answer?

- When they are attached to n't: haven't.

'Didn't you realise she was deaf? Or I am sorry I 'haven't done my homework today.

- When they occur in final position of a sentence.

Can you tell me where the hospital 'is?

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- When they are emphasised.

I am not sure he will win. But he 'is winning

3.2.7 Pronouns

- Pronouns are stressed when they contrast as in:

'My pen is superior than 'yours.

- Reflexive pronouns are always stressed when they are used as subject intensifier:

*Mohsin wrote this letter to me **him 'self.***

- When they are used as subjects and occur in a sentence finally.

*You will damage **your 'self.***

- But they are not stressed when used as objects and occurs sentence medially.

You will damage yourself in this way. (Unstressed yourself)

3.2.8 Prepositions

Prepositions are stressed when:

- they occur at the end of a sentence:

*Where does Roach come '**from?***

- When one is being contrasted with another:

*The letters' '**from** him not '**to** him*

- Polysyllable prepositions are stressed when they occur before pronouns:

*What do you know '**about** this valley of Kashmir?*

Conclusion

The above discussion reveals the fact that there is no fixed place for stress in English language. There are certain tendencies, especially, with longer words, but they are of very doubtful value for teaching purpose. A foreign learner can often use wrong vowel sounds, and yet be quite intelligible, but his faulty use of stress can often lead to a breakdown of communication.

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However, an effort has been made to familiarize the reader with the nature of rhythm and basic ideas of stress. The acquaintance finally aims to elevate awareness regarding the proper use of stress in English language speech. With many exceptions, a rule-governed approach can be adopted for teaching the complications of stress. It is hoped that this effort would help the learners, knowing and learning about the nature stress in English language. This discussion would encourage and support the students to explore the subject in a greater depth.

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