Teaching English Stress-Patterns at Arab Universities:
An Absolute Requirement
Noureddine Guella

Associate Professor, Department of European Languages and Translation,
College of Languages and Translation (C.O.L.T.),
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract. The proposed presentation emphasizes the urgent need to insert a solid basis for English stress-patterns (and drills) in the current English Language curriculum of most Arab Universities. For illustrative purposes, only a few rules and stress-patterns are introduced, as the full range of English accentual system needs more time and space. These rules, adapted from Louis Guierre’s computational study of English stress patterns, have been chosen for their great generalizing power; they are presented in a simple form to facilitate their learning and automatic drilling.

1) The rule for words ending in \[-ic /-ics\] and \[-ical\] and other related words generated in \[-icist\] and \[-icism\].
2) The rule for words ending in \[-ion\] and generating words in \[-ional\], \[-ionist\] and \[-ionize\], plus other unrelated words.
3) Other related and unrelated rules of some pedagogical significance. Procedural strategies to be applied in the teaching of stress-patterns are outlined and offered as practical pedagogical guidelines. It is felt that an early introduction of stress patterns will be of immense benefit to our students both in terms of efficient foreign language communication and in terms of efficient learning.

1. Introduction
Experience has clearly shown that one of the most visible areas of weakness in Arab students learning English is stress placement. This weakness is further magnified by the fact that no stress patterns and drills are introduced in the early levels of the curriculum or indeed at any other level. Foreign students in general find it difficult to deal with the correct stressing of English polysyllabic words, and it would be maddening for anyone to learn the stress of each word separately. For this reason, and many more related to efficient foreign language communication and efficient learning, teaching as many English stress patterns and supporting them with appropriate drills is of paramount importance and absolute priority.

The six years of high school English to which students are exposed prior to University entrance are mostly inappropriate in terms of foreign language communication. Their total ignorance of stress placement and its intricacies increases their feeling of unfamiliarity and unease when it comes to learning new and vital vocabulary. This situation is, to say the least, detrimental to the effective use of the target language in oral communication.

2. Rationale
The proposed presentation emphasizes the urgent need to insert a solid basis for English stress-patterns in the early levels of the curriculum. The current crowded curricula for these levels in most
Arab Universities and the pressure of standardized final exams do not leave any time for the comprehensive teaching of stress patterns and their drilling, except in a sporadic way. The suggestion here is to use part of the time allocated to some courses (the Speaking course, for example, whose time allocation varies between 4 hours and a minimum of 2 hours per week, depending on individual Arab Universities) to try to provide as many speaking formulae and role playing strategies and also (and in parallel) to offer an efficient platform for stress-patterns and stress placement applications. Time allocated to courses like Listening Comprehension and Dictionary Skills (in both levels 1 and 2) could also be used to provide a feed-back for both the pronouncing dictionary applications and the usual dictionary skills (e.g., variation in stress, pronunciation and stress placement in cognate and non cognate words, etc.). It is of extreme importance that the stress patterns and their derivations and applications be taught by a specialist teacher with experience in the field of phonetics/phonology. The ideal choice would be a trained phonetician.

Stress patterns should be introduced to students as early as possible. This would help them avoid the wrong accentual habits and build a strong foundation for verbal language activity. The stipulation of stress patterns in the English Language curriculum of Arab Universities would certainly liberate students in their search for more and varied vocabulary and their attitude towards more efficient learning.

3. Practical vs. Theoretical Considerations.

It should be stressed that, for purely pedagogical reasons, neither the too complex and technical Nuclear Stress Rule formulated in Chomsky and Halle (1968: 17ff.) and its classes of exceptions nor the ad hoc classroom treatment of isolated stress placement will be of any benefit to students of beginning or even intermediate level. Furthermore, it is of little help to them to know whether stress is explicable by reference to syntax or to semantics or to the lexicon or to a mixture of these. The Trager-Smith stress levels of English (Trager and Smith, 1951), together with the mass of practical and pedagogical rules and data expounded in such works as Arnold (1957), Kingdon (1950), Wijk (1966) and a host of other authorities in the field offer a fairly solid basis for a workable framework for the teaching of English stress and stress patterns. One such framework, helped and supported by an extended computer analysis of English word stress, is satisfactorily exhibited in Guierre (1968). It provides a systematic training and practice in English stress patterns by introducing only the most important word classes.

In fact, the main purpose of this paper is to emphasize this systematic approach to English stress pattern, especially with reference to the classification of some English word-endings. In this sense, I take the view that stress and stress patterns should be approached from a purely practical angle, and
that any tight or esoteric theoretical framework at this level of classroom activity should be simply ignored.

4. Implementation/ Integration of Stress Patterns

For illustrative purposes, only a few stress patterns are dealt with here. In a first stage, only the main stress is accounted for. Because of the general linguistic level of our students and the wrong accentual habits that they might have acquired in high school, and the possible interference from the mother tongue, the stress patterns and rules should be proposed to them in a simple form to facilitate their learning and automatic drilling. The exceptions to the rules should be rote-learnt to avoid confusion.

4.1. Words in [-ic(s)], [-ical] and their derivatives.

Rule A: Words ending in [-ic] or [-ics] have their main stress on the first syllable before the last (or penultimate syllable).

Examples: spe'cific - diplo'matic - idio'matic - demo'cratic - au'thentic - fan'tastic - pho'netics - re'public - scien'tific - pessi'mistic - sta'tistics - ritua'listic - mathe'matics - sympto'matic

It is worth mentioning that the Daniel Jones English Pronouncing Dictionary has more than 1,500 words in [-ic]. The number of irregular words (i.e. exceptions to this rule) is less than 20. The most common exceptions are:

'Arabic - a'rithmetic - 'arsenic - 'catholic - 'heretic - 'lunatic - 'politic(s) - 'impolitic - 'rhetoric.

Rule B: Words ending in [-ical] have their main stress on the second syllable before the last.

Examples: e'lectrical - me'chanical - eco'nomical - paren'thetical - psycho'logical

Both rules A and B above can be merged and taught together in one or two sessions so that their related drills (reading and repeating words) are mixed, including the exceptions.

Rule C: When a word in [ -ic] generates a word in [-icist], [-icize] or [-icism], then the main stress remains on the same syllable. This means that these words behave accentually like words in [-ical].

Examples: ro'mantic > ro'manticism
'Critic > 'criticism
'Classic > 'classicist
Fa'natic > fa'naticize
I’italic > I’italicize

But: ‘politic > po’liticize
’Catholic > ca’tholicism

The above examples show some variation in pronunciation and, for the last two, a change in stress allocation. The following remarks should be noted:

a) The letter {-c} in the generated words is pronounced [s] instead of [k].

b) The irregular words in [-ic ] are regularized when they take the endings [-ical], [-icist], [-icize] and [-icism]

4.2. Words in [-ion], [-isonal], [-ionist], [-ionism], [-ionize].

Rule D: Words ending in [-ion] are stressed on the syllable before [-ion].


There are thousands of [-ion] words. They come in all shapes and forms. The following remarks will help to see some order in them.

(a) [-ion] is often preceded by the letters {c}, {g}, {sh}, {s} or {t}. But the majority of [-ion] words are words ending in {-tion}: in this case, [-ion] counts as one syllable.

(b) The word ‘dandelion’ (primary stress on {dan-}) appears to be the only exception to rule D.

(c) The /zn/ and /šn/ pronunciation is a result of palatalization:

E.g. dis’cuss + -ion = /dis’k^s/ $+$ /jan/ > dis’cussion = /dis’k^šn/  
    [ /s/ + /j/ = /š / ]

dec’ide + -ion = /di’said/ $+$ /jan/ > de’cision = /di’sižn /  
    [ /d/ + /j/ = /ž / ]

Rule E: Final [-ional ] words are stressed in the same way as [-ion] words. The same applies to final [-ionist], [-ionism] and [-ionize] derived words.

Sen’sation > sen’sational
Tra’dition > tra’ditional
’Fra’ction > ’frac’tional
’Na’tion > ’na’tional
Abo’lition > abo’litionist
Edu’cation > edu’cationist
Im’pression > im’pressionism
Per’fection > per’fectionism
There is a change of vowel from /ei/ to /æ/ in such words as nation > national.

Rule F: Rule D for [-ion] (see above) also applies to words ending in the following:

- **-io**: ora’torio, port’folio, ’ratio, ’patio, ’radio.
- **-ior**: ’senior, su’perior, ’junior, ul’terior, in’terior.
- **-ious**: sus’picious, har’monious, pre’cocious, no’torious, a’trocious, te’nacious.
- **-uous**: con’temptuous, con’tiguous, con’tinuous, discon’tinuous, ’strenuous, ’virtuous.
- **-eous**: spon’taneous, homo’geneous, advan’tageous, cou’rageous, er’roneous, dis’courteous.

5. Procedure

The following strategies can be applied in teaching stress patterns of English.

1. Teaching the accentual rule, insisting on the primary stress in a first stage. Make sure the pattern is well-understood. For example, let’s take rule A ([-ic /-ics] words have their main stress on the penultimate syllable): Try to make its learning and internalization as easy and practical as possible by providing, if need be, rule-of-thumb procedures.

2. Selection of a large corpus of words intended for a straightforward application of the basic rule. Jones’s *English Pronouncing Dictionary* contains over 58,000 words in International Phonetic Alphabet, of which more than 43,000 are ordinary words. The selection of the corpus should be made on judicious grounds. If the students are asked to provide examples from Jones’s E.P.D., their work should be carefully monitored to avoid confusion and increase efficiency.

   Active production on the part of students and drilling are mostly encouraged.

3. Selection of the most important and common irregular forms (exceptions). Note that these will be very few in comparison with the regular ones and thus should be learnt by heart to avoid confusion. For example, refer to rule A’s most common exceptions which are given in the text of this paper.

4. Methodical introduction of “weak derivations”: these entail no change in the “basic” stress-pattern and should not be too difficult to internalize.

   E.g.: ’logic > ’logical > ’logically
         ’rational > ’rationalist > ’rationalism > ’rationalize

Once again, the general purpose is to avoid theoretically complex and technically burdensome references and works in the field of stress patterns, such as those produced by transformational-
generativists and other similar developments. Always remember that what our students need are simple rules presented in a practical form to facilitate their internalization without alienation.

5. Making students practice by drilling and reading. One student may read the “base” and a different student “decline” the derivations. Students may also be encouraged to produce sentences (even non-sense ones) containing the words with the endings under study. Examples of such sentences are:

- It was a dra'matically fan'tastic book made into a dia'bolically philo'sophical film.
- We don’t like his hys'terically me'chanical ideas and his dra'matically ro'mantic approach.
- It was a rea'listically philo'sophical book and its purpose was syste'matically scien'tific.
- They were sus'picious of his 'dubious re'lations and his dis'courteous edu'cation.
- His su'perior abo'litionist views led him to revo'lutionize per'fectionism in human edu'cation.

Many more of these sentences can be devised by both teachers and students alike. More than one stress pattern may be used and irregular forms should be inserted in the various examples to reinforce their learning. The whole procedure should offer a lot of fun at the same time as a great deal of practice and internalization.

6. Other strategies may be devised to offer more practice to students, with the aim of developing automatisms. Some patterns involve stress shifts and thus require more practical work.

6. Conclusion

The rules presented here constitute but the tip of the iceberg, as the full range of the English accentual system demands a more lengthy study and a lot of patience and hard work. In spite of time and curriculum constraints, I believe it is worth going to the trouble of systematically reinforcing the adoption of valuable attitudes and strategies by our students. Teaching our students English stress placement is a daunting task and a big challenge, but it is a minimal price to pay if we want to encourage them to adopt and apply an effective learning strategy. This will certainly have a beneficial effect on their overall communication strategies. For this reason, the stipulation of English stress patterns and rules in the English Language curricula of Arab Universities remains an urgent priority and an absolute requirement.
7. **References**


