

Students' Difficulties in Stressing Four-Syllable Words: An Exploratory Study at the English Department, Hamzanwadi University

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the ability and awareness of students regarding word stress, specifically on four-syllable words. The subjects of this research were eight fourth-semester students from the English Language Education study program who had completed the morphology course. The participants were randomly selected from various classes. This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured tests and interviews as data collection methods, conducted in person. The findings indicate that most participants have limited ability in correctly placing word stress on four-syllable words. Common errors occurred due to a lack of understanding of morphological rules, especially those related to prefixes and suffixes that influence stress placement. The participants' awareness of the importance of word stress in communication also varied; some were aware of its function, while others considered it insignificant. The study concludes that despite having received morphology instruction, students still face challenges in applying the concept of word stress practically. The implications of these findings highlight the need for a deeper focus on word stress exercises, particularly in the context of phonology and morphology, to enhance students' skills and awareness in English pronunciation.

Keywords: Word Stress; Four-Syllable Words; Morphology; Phonology; English Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Awareness of the importance of pronunciation in effective communication serves as the fundamental pillar for successful interactions across all domains of human endeavor, encompassing academic pursuits, professional environments, and social engagements (Andini & Zaitun, 2023). In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the acquisition of accurate pronunciation transcends mere imitation of native-like speech; it is, in essence, the bedrock upon which intelligibility and clear conveyance of meaning are built (Mohammed & Idris, 2020). The failure to pronounce words correctly can lead to a cascade of negative consequences, including profound misunderstandings, a significant erosion of self-confidence, limitations on social interactions, and even a detrimental impact on a speaker's perceived credibility. Robust grasp of pronunciation actively contributes to the enhancement of listening comprehension skills, as it facilitates the precise identification and subsequent reproduction of sounds (Diwaly & Bahri, 2023). This in turn fosters a greater sense of confidence in learners, thereby encouraging their active participation in conversations and sustaining their motivation for continuous language improvement. Consequently, the mastery of pronunciation stands as an indispensable component for achieving truly effective communication and fostering overall language proficiency. This intricate interplay between pronunciation and successful communication underscores the critical need for EFL learners to dedicate focused attention to this often-overlooked aspect of language acquisition.

Difficulties in Pronouncing Four-Syllable words students particularly those in the 4th semester of the English department Hamzanwadi University, often struggle to pronounce four-syllable words correctly, such as “agility” and “satisfaction”. They tend to place the stress in the wrong position, several factors contribute to the difficulty in pronouncing four syllable words, including native language influence because the learners' native language accent and phonological rules can influence their pronunciation of English words, Lack of knowledge also plays a very important role because learners may not be aware of the correct syllable stress patterns for four-syllable words, which can make it difficult for them to pronounce the words correctly which can make it challenging for learners to identify the correct stress pattern. Additionally, the learners' native language may have different stress patterns and phonological rules, which can interfere with their ability to pronounce English words correctly. English word stress is inherently intricate, governed by a set of rules that are notoriously challenging to acquire (Yanuar, 2023). Common manifestations of these difficulties include the arbitrary placement of stress on any given syllable, the tendency to imbue each syllable with an almost uniform degree of strength, length, and pitch, and a general lack of sensitivity to the nuanced syllabic structure inherent in English words.

These challenges frequently originate from the pervasive interference of their mother tongue, where stress patterns may be rigidly fixed or considerably less prominent than in English. A compelling study conducted by Soontornwipat (2023) on Thai EFL students revealed that while students demonstrated a relatively commendable performance on two-syllable words, their accuracy experienced a noticeable decline when confronted with three-syllable words . Intriguingly, despite exhibiting some degree of improvement for four-syllable words, the study observed a consistent pattern where the highest pitch and longest duration were frequently assigned to the final syllable, unequivocally indicating a persistent and deeply ingrained difficulty. This particular finding unequivocally underscores a specific and heightened challenge associated with longer words, such as those comprising four syllables, where the established rules for stress placement can be considerably less intuitive and exhibit a greater degree of variability compared to their shorter counterparts. The complexity escalates with word length, demanding a more sophisticated understanding and application of stress rules.

Importance of word stress patterns for EFL, word stress patterns are unequivocally recognized as a pivotal suprasegmental feature of English pronunciation, exerting a profound influence on both intelligibility and comprehensibility. According to Bao (2023), word stress plays a crucial role in conveying meaning and facilitating effective communication in English. Therefore, accurate word stress is essential for achieving intelligibility and comprehensibility in spoken English.

Research has consistently shown that word stress patterns can significantly impact the way speakers are perceived and understood by listeners. For example, a study by Lewis & Deterding (2018) found that incorrect word stress can lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. Furthermore, Yang (2025) noted that word stress patterns can also affect the perceived fluency and naturalness of spoken English. This phonological phenomenon entails the strategic emphasis of specific syllables within a word, rendering them audibly louder, perceptibly longer, and notably higher in pitch. This emphasis is far from arbitrary; instead, it serves as a crucial auditory cue, enabling listeners to accurately identify individual words and decipher the speaker's intended meaning.

Several studies specifically address the complexities of word stress in multi-syllabic words and students' ability to overcome them. Research by Nurpahmi et al., (2023) provides valuable insights into students' stress production across various syllable counts. It highlighted that word length increases, the complexity of stress placement also rises, making it more challenging for learners . The study also pointed out factors such as a lack of pronunciation training and limited

knowledge of word stress rules as contributing to these difficulties. Findings from Veronica et al., (2018) further support this, showing a decline in accuracy as words become longer. The intricate rules for stress placement in English, which are often less predictable for words beyond two or three syllables, pose a significant barrier to students' ability.

This research offers novelty in identifying specific difficulties faced by fourth semester students of the English Department at Hamzanwadi University in pronouncing four-syllable words with accurate word stress. By analyzing patterns of ability and awareness, this research provides new insights into how to improve students' pronunciation skills and develop more effective learning strategies to overcome these difficulties. Additionally, this research offers novelty in developing innovative and effective learning models to improve students' pronunciation skills, utilizing interactive learning technology or specific pronunciation training techniques, which can enhance students' ability to pronounce four syllable words with accurate word stress, serving as a reference for educators and policymakers to develop more innovative and effective learning programs. Thus, this research aims to respond the following research questions:

1. What is the level or ability of English Study Program at Hamzanwadi University especially fourth semester students in placing word stressing on four syllable English words?
2. To what extent are English Study Program at Hamzanwadi University especially 4th semester students aware of word stress patterns in the pronunciation of four syllable English word?

METHOD

In this study, the researcher applied a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to examine the challenges faced by students when pronouncing four-syllable English words. Research with a descriptive qualitative approach is a method used to understand phenomena based on the experiences, views, and expressions of participants without any modification of variables (Ugwu and Eze, 2023). According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), the purpose of qualitative research is to investigate the meaning, concept, characteristics, symbols, and descriptions of various aspects. This method opens up opportunities for researchers to dig deeper into the patterns and elements that influence students' errors in word stress, especially in longer and more complex vocabulary. The focus of this study is on collecting naturalistic data through test and interviews with recordings of students' pronunciations during pronunciation tasks. The participants in this study were fourth semester students from the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University. The selection of individuals was carried out purposively, namely by selecting students who had completed phonology courses and had basic knowledge of English pronunciation. The total number of participants involved in this study was 15 students, who came from various levels of academic ability and different educational backgrounds, to provide a broader perspective on the challenges faced in stressing four syllable English words. The main method in the data collection process was a pronunciation task, in which students were asked to read and pronounce a text of four-syllable words. This process was carried out in a quiet atmosphere and recorded using high-quality audio devices so that the recordings could be analyzed acoustically with phonetic software such as PRAAT. The aim was to identify which syllables were stressed, by observing characteristics such as duration, intensity, and pitch. In addition to the semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more insight into students' experiences and views on word stress. These interviews provided an opportunity for students to explain the reasons behind their choice of stressed syllables and the extent to which they understood English stress rules. Direct observation during the activity was also conducted to record students' facial expressions, gestures, and reactions that may not have been directly recorded in the audio but are still relevant for data interpretation. The data in this study were

analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach. After collecting data through from the interviews were analyzed by applying thematic analysis techniques. The answers from the participants were categorized and grouped based on themes related to problems in placing word stress. For example, the influence of the mother tongue, lack of understanding of phonology, lack of practice in pronunciation, or confusion over irregular stress patterns. This analysis aims to reveal common patterns, differences between individuals, and the relationship between pronunciation ability and external and internal factors that influence it. The final results of this analysis were used to identify the most frequent types of errors and the main factors causing difficulties in pronouncing word stress in four-syllable words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The next step in this research is focused on the results to answer the formulation of research questions that have been proposed previously. to collect data, the researcher collected a number of fourth semester students who have studied the course morphology for further in interviewed with a semi-structured interview process to obtain valid data. this finding is based on interview data from eight fourth semester students of the english department of hamzanwadi university. this interview aims to explore their awareness and understanding of syllables, as well as their ability to identify word stress in four-syllable words

1. The main method in the data collection process was a pronunciation test, in which students were asked to read and pronounce a text of four-syllable words. This process was carried out in a quiet atmosphere and recorded using high-quality audio devices so that the recordings could be analyzed acoustically with phonetic software such as PRAAT. The aim was to identify which syllables were stressed, by observing characteristics such as duration, intensity, and pitch, this method use to answer research question “What is the level or ability of English Study Program at Hamzanwadi University especially 4th semester students in placing word stressing on four syllable English words?” as presented in this data table:

Table 1. Four-Syllable Word Stress Analysis

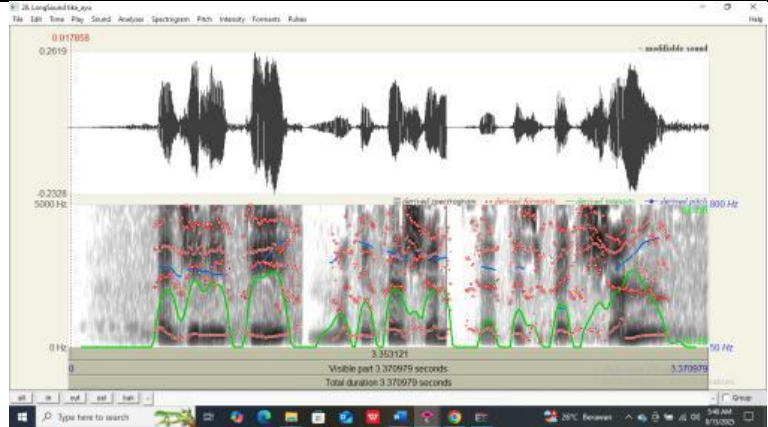
Word	Syllable Breakdown	Stress Pettern	Ipa	Notes
Agility	A-JIL-i-ty	o o o o	/ə' dʒɪ.lə.ti/	Stress is on the 2nd syllable, following the pattern of words ending in -ity.
Motifation	mo-ti-VA-tion	o o o o	/,mou.ti'veɪ.fən/	Stress on the 3rd syllable is very common for words ending in -tion.
Satisfaction	sat-is-FAC-tion	o o o o	/,sæt.ɪs'fæk.fən/	Just like motivation, this word also follows the ending pattern -tion.

The researcher has taken 3 words in the paragraph that were used as a test, these three words are words that have 4 syllables, then the researcher used these 3 words as a sample to analyze the word stress pattern for each participant where the recording of the 3 words spoken by the participants was processed using the PRAAT software.

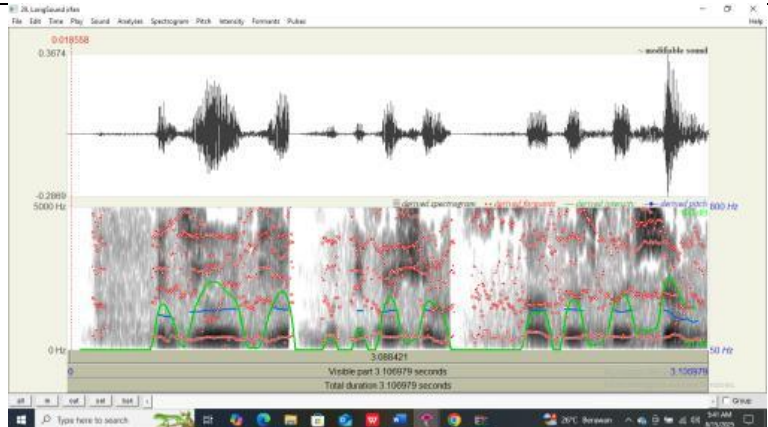
Table 2. four-syllable word stress PRAAT analysis

No	Initial	PRAAT analysis
1	BA	
2	BP	
3	DF	
4	MI	

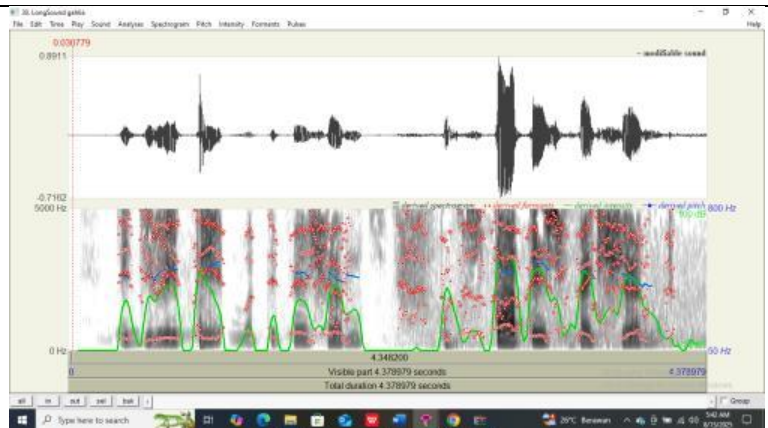
5 TA



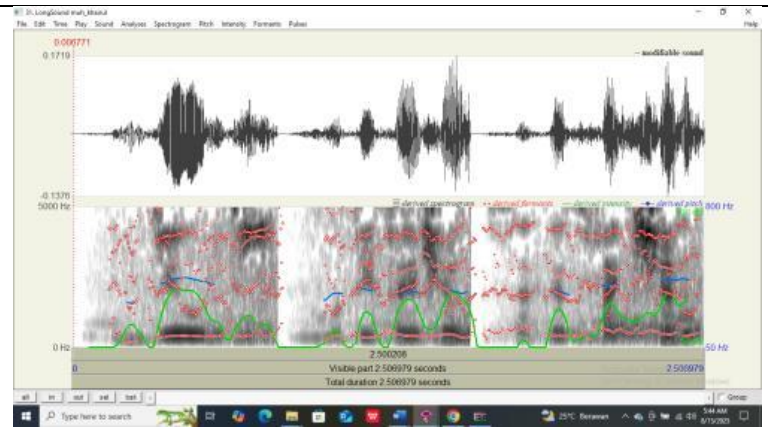
6 IR



7 GV



8 MK



From the two tables above, the researcher explains that of the eight participants studied by the researcher, all participants were far above average in being able to be said to have an understanding of word stress, where the level of ability of the participants could be said to be inappropriate, even some participants made mistakes in pronouncing the 3 sample words used by the researcher.

- The next instrument is interview, these interviews provided an opportunity for students to explain the reasons behind their choice of stressed syllables and the extent to which they understood English stress rules, this method use to answer research question “To what extent are English Study Program at Hamzanwadi University especially 4th semester students aware of word stress patterns in the pronunciation of four syllable English word?”. The interview consisted of five main questions

Table 3. Students’ Awareness of Syllables

Initial name	Q1: Heard of Syllables?	Q2: Know What Syllables Are?	Q3: Definition of Syllables	Q4: Noticed Syllables?	Q5: Identified Syllables?
BA	I have heard about it but I forgot.	I know (yes).	In my opinion, maybe this syllable here is related to phonetics and phonology.	No, I didn't notice syllables in the paragraph.	I don't know which syllable is in the paragraph from there.
BP	Yes, I have heard about syllables before. I read it in an article and learned about it in the context of the superlative degree.	In my opinion, a syllable is a part of a word that has two syllables such as 'table' and 'high' which has one syllable.	I think syllables are a crucial part in 'superlative degree' material to enhance the meaning of a word.	Of course, there are syllables there.	I think the syllables in the paragraph are: optimization, significance, effective.
DF	I have learned it in phonetics material but I didn't fully understand because it was explained via Zoom.	I know a little, syllables are taught as if there are parts of words or sounds that form syllables.	It is a word or an audio sound.	Yes, in every paragraph.	Height, weakness.
M I	Never heard.	Don't know.	In my opinion, syllables are one of the topics discussed in a subject/course.	I didn't notice.	No, I don't know.

TA	Yes, in English morphology material.	A syllable is a unit of a word.	A unit of a word that forms a syllable.	Yes, I did notice.	Optimization, significance, collaboration.
MK	Yes, in phonetics class.	Yes, a syllable is a small part of a word (a unit of a word).	A syllable is part of a word in English.	Yes, of course.	
IK	Yes.	Yes, syllables are part of a word.	Maybe a nightmare.	Yes.	
GV	Yes, I have but forgot where.	No.	I think I can't explain it, maybe I learned it in one of the courses.	I never noticed, maybe because I focused on reading and not paying attention.	Optimization.

Table 4. Research Summary

No	Category	Summary of findings
1	Awareness	Most students have heard of syllables, but knowledge is inconsistent
2	Understanding	Definitions are incomplete; conceptual understanding is partial.
3	Application	Only four out of eight could correctly identify syllables in context.
4	Four-syllable stress	Students struggle to place stress correctly, with performance affected by L1 interference and lack of explicit training.
5	Implications	Stronger focus on explicit pronunciation instruction is needed to bridge the gap between knowledge and application

Discussion

This study reveals that despite participants having above-average ability in understanding word stress, many still make mistakes in pronouncing sample words. This indicates a deficiency in their ability to apply knowledge of word stress in accurate pronunciation. According to phonological theory, word stress is a crucial aspect of language pronunciation that can affect the meaning and understanding of words. Therefore, errors in word stress pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings in communication. Furthermore, this study also shows that most participants have previously been introduced to the concept of syllables, but their definitions remain incomplete or unclear. When asked to identify syllables, only a few participants succeeded in doing so accurately. This result indicates that participants' understanding of syllables still needs improvement. In phonological theory, syllables are the basic units in the phonological structure of words that can influence word stress patterns.

Thus, this study provides insight into areas that need improvement in participants' learning, particularly in word stress pronunciation and syllable understanding. Further training or learning is necessary to help participants better understand and master phonological concepts,

including word stress and syllables, to enhance their communication skills. These findings revealed that although most participants had heard of syllables, their understanding was limited and highly inconsistent. This aligns with Wardana et al., (2022) who stated that EFL learners often struggle with phonological awareness, which impacts their ability to recognize and apply syllable division rules.

Students' difficulties in noticing and identifying syllables indicate a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Although six students reported knowing what a syllable was, only four were able to correctly identify it in authentic text. This also aligns with Asadova (2024) who emphasized that pronunciation instruction should bridge the gap between conceptual knowledge and listening/production skills. The data also showed that students exposed to syllables in phonetics or morphology classes performed better on identification tasks. This supports Hong (2018) who argued that explicit pronunciation instruction can improve learners' awareness and accuracy of stress placement.

Interview results showed that only half of the participants could identify syllables in context, and even fewer could indicate the correct word stress placement in four-syllable words. This is consistent with the findings of Puspandari & Basthomi (2022) who reported that EFL learners often misplace stress on pre-antepenultimate syllables in four-syllable words, demonstrating a common challenge in mastering complex stress patterns. Chen & Tian (2020) highlighted that explicit training in metaphonological awareness significantly improves learners' accuracy in stress placement for multisyllabic words. This suggests that the limited ability of students in this study could stem from insufficient exposure to explicit syllable segmentation and stress placement exercises. Moreover, Listyani et al., (2024) noted that in the Indonesian context, mother tongue interference can influence English stress patterns, as many local languages tend to place stress on the second syllable. This may explain why some students in this study consistently misplace stress. Factors contributing to these difficulties include:

1. Weak phonological awareness (metaphonological awareness).
2. Limited explicit training on stress in four-syllable words.
3. First language interference in stress placement.

Irregularity of English stress rules, which even advanced learners find challenging.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the difficulties faced by fourth-semester English students at Hamzanwadi University in recognizing and applying word stress in the pronunciation of four-syllable words. Based on the interview data, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Syllable Awareness
Most students had heard of syllables before, often from phonetics or morphology classes, but two participants had never been exposed to them before or could not recall them. This suggests that awareness exists but is not universal among the target group.
2. Syllable Understanding
Although six students reported knowing what a syllable is, their definitions were often incomplete or vague. Some simply associated syllables with "parts of words" without a more in-depth phonological explanation, indicating partial knowledge rather than comprehensive understanding.
3. Noticing and Identifying Syllables in Context
Five students reported noticing syllables in a given paragraph, but only four were able to identify them correctly. This gap between recognition and accurate identification indicates challenges in applying theoretical understanding to practice.
4. Difficulty in Word Stress in Four-Syllable Words

The majority of participants struggled with accurate stress placement in four-syllable words. This difficulty aligns with recent studies (Le Thi Diem Lan, 2024; Soontornwipat, 2023) which show that multisyllabic stress patterns, especially in the pre-antepenultimate position, remain a challenge for EFL learners.

5. Factors Influencing Difficulties

These challenges appear to be influenced by:

- a. Weak phonological or metaphonological awareness.
- b. Limited explicit instruction on stress in multisyllabic words.
- c. Mother tongue interference, which affects stress patterns (Nurhadi et al., 2025).
- d. The irregular nature of English stress rules.

In short, although students have some awareness of syllables, their understanding is inconsistent, and their ability to apply appropriate stress to four-syllable words is limited. This indicates the need for more explicit and practice-oriented pronunciation instruction.

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