Understanding Stress

EAE Learning objectives for this lesson

Learn more about word stress and practice using it.

Activity One: Ask and Answer with your teacher.



1. Do you ever find it hard to understand spoken English?
2. If yes, when is it hard to understand?
3. Which people are harder, or easier to understand in English?
4. What do you know about word stress in English?
5. How many meetings do you attend each week?
6. What are the meetings usually about and how interesting are they in general?

Activity Two: Word Stress and Comprehension

Word stress is very important in English. Word stress error can easily cause listeners to be unable to identify a word a speaker is saying. Errors can also stop a listener from understanding the boundaries between words. Also when a speaker stresses the wrong part of a word, a listener notices the nonstandard pronunciation and their attention is monopolised by the mistake, rather than by the meaning of the word. When you are listening to a non native speaker and you don't understand what they are saying, it will often be because your attention is distracted by such mistakes, or else because you don't understand their pronunciation of a word because of such mistakes.

Learning more about word stress and being aware of it yourself can really help you to improve your listening comprehension in such situations.

Let's explore word stress together.

Most multi syllable words have one stressed syllable. This syllable is slightly higher and stronger than the others.

Try these:

- re**PORT**
- **ME**dical
- e**XAM**ple

If you stress the wrong part of the word then people won't understand what you are saying.

Now say the following words and let's see if you get the word stress right:

- Product, production
- Technology, technique
- Politics, politician.

Research tells us that listeners rely on the pitch and rhythm of a word to recognise it.

The position of the stress can also change the meaning of a word.

For example:
- Project and to project

Try saying these words and see if you can pronounce them correctly:

- Capable, capacity
- Initiate, initiative
- Purchase
- Promise
- Establish
- Specific
- Stable



The best way to learn the correct word stress is to:

Be aware that there are specific stress patterns for words.

Notice where that stress should fall, when you are listening to native speakers.

Be attentive to word stress in general.

You will pick it up through exposure so make sure that you are watching films in English, listening to the radio etc.

It's not a very good idea to try and learn rules for word stress because there are so many exceptions that it ends up making you make mistakes. There are exceptions to every rule with word stress. It's really best just to listen actively.

So there are no simple rules for knowing where the stress falls and even if there are some common features to look out for there are too many exceptions to make this really useful.

For example:

If a word contains a prefix, such as pre-, dis-, ex-, re-, over-, under-, etc., a good rule to follow is that the stress will fall on the first syllable of the root word.
For example:

- undo –> un-**DO**
- overcome –> over-**COME**
- extend –> ex-**TEND**
- understand –> un-der-**STAND**



Except for compound nouns with prefixes where the stress will be on the first syllable. (You see, there's no simple rule…).

- overcoat –> **O**-ver-coat
- underwear –> **UN**-der-wear
- output –> **OUT**-put

Furthermore, with suffixes the patterns are even harder to determine.
There can be a variety of different categories and so suffixes can be stress neutral or have the stress in different parts of the word. So, the best advice we can give you, is to **be aware and be exposed**!

If you look up words on google chrome you can listen to the pronunciation. This is a great tool when you are not sure how to pronounce something.

Activity Three: Listening comprehension.

The Power of You to Truly Make Meetings Work



https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_rogelberg_the_power_of_you_to_truly_make_meetings_work

Watch the video for the first five minutes.
Answer the following questions.

1. What percentage of senior managers see meetings and unproductive?
2. How do you pronounce these words: *psychologist, miserable, problematic, consensus, organisational, elimination, research, implication, diary, however, thrive, oriented.*
3. What kind of insights can research provide for example?
4. What did he learn from people maintaining a diary about meetings they attended?
5. Which type of individual likes meeting?
6. What mitigates the negative effects of meetings?
7. What is critical to organisations?
8. What did you think about what the presenter was saying in this talk?

Activity Four: Read the article, paying attention to your word stress and pronunciation!



Why is it hard to understand in international meetings?

1/ If speakers are non-native they could be making mistakes or talking in non-standard ways. Their explanations can be confusing and lack simplicity because they are looking for words or translating from their mother tongue.

2/ People do not often dare to say that they understand or to ask people to slow down or repeat.

3/ In English syllabic stress is a very important element and foreigners make a lot of mistakes with it. Their intonation could make speakers impossible to understand or hear.
It can really be a struggle and can affect your self confidence. It also puts pressure on you in your working life where maybe things are already challenging.



So what's the solution? How can you deal with this challenge and improve.

1/ Find a variety of ways to ask for clarification.

2/ Change your expectations or mindset - no one understands if you don't.

3/ Listen for the MAIN MESSAGE and try to be confident. Then you won't get lost.

Also remember that attitude is everything. If you feel open and confident then you will learn a lot in each new situation. If you are afraid, then you are closed and blocked by the 'filtre affectif'. If you can try to change your mindset then you will find that you learn in each new English situation. It means every new English meeting will become an opportunity for learning.

It's hard to concentrate for a sustained period of time and there will be some things that you miss, either because you lose concentration or else because you didn't understand part of what was said.

Furthermore if there is not much time and a lot to be said, it's hard to ask for clarification.

Think about it another way though. It's the responsibility of each person talking to be as clear as possible. They are probably unaware that they are being unclear. Reminding them will help everyone out. The meeting will be more useful and profitable for everyone.

It's highly likely that if you don't understand either it wasn't important anyway or no-one else understood. Even if you see people responding or answering at a time that you didn't understand it might be just because they are very confident and not worried about taking the risk of speaking and making a fool of themselves. Let's face it - no-one is going to stand up and say that they have got the wrong end of the stick.

This 'blockage you are feeling is self perseveration. When you start to feel stressed your brain will protect you by filtering. So, if you manage to use positive self talk, or positive thoughts to tell yourself to either persevere and move on to the next thing that's being discussed, or to ask for clarification or repetition, then you will avoid feeling blocked. It's a virtuous circle!

If you are sitting there hoping that everyone will forget you are there and that no-one will ask you a question then you can bet you are not the only one!

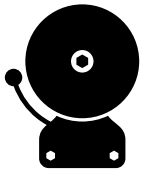
You have a general statement prepared that you say about the subject and if anyone asks anything you just come out with it.

If you have learned that French is the model for you. If you can only be reassured when you have translated into French then you'll never really feel satisfied that you have understood.

You have to get out of the French mindset and listen for meaning! Wanting to translate is just what you are used to. It's just a way of reassuring yourself. Just accept that you don't have to understand everything and we don't have to hear everything. In fact we don't.

Activity Five: What should you say when you don't understand?

Imagine that you are in a meeting and all you hear is blah blah blah… practice using some of these expressions to interrupt your teacher as they speak and ask for clarification.



- Could I ask you to repeat that last part?
- I'd just like to be sure I understood, could you sum up what you just said.
- Excuse me, could I just ask you to repeat that, I want to be sure that I've understood.
- Excuse me, I didn't quite catch that. Could I ask you to rephrase.
- I'm not sure I got all that. Could you just resume the main points again for me, I'd appreciate it.
- Would you mind just saying the main points again, I want to be really sure I got everything.

