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## Perception of Nuclear Stress in Vocabulary Items in Teacher Education in terms of Shadow Listening

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### Abstract

Words are made up of syllables in all languages. Some of these syllables are made more pronounced by bearing a primary stress phoneme which carries the highest prominence among in louder forms the surrounding syllables. The stressed syllable with a primary stress is an innate property of the word; each word carries a primary stress. The syllable with the primary stress is also known as tonic stress. The syllable with primary word-stress is most prominent because it is automatically placed upon the related syllable, drawing attention to native uses of pronunciation and intonation. Recognizing a stressed syllable requires us to perceive its prominence, which is actually an auditory signalling that the hearer's attention is centered upon. Perception of the nuclear stress escapes the attention of prospective Turkish students and English majors, especially in longer words. This research will investigate the perception of tonic stress placement in English words by the first year students in the English Language Education Department in one of the leading universities in Turkey. In the pre-test, the participants listened to 15 words given by a computer in audio forms and then were asked to single out the tonic syllable in a five-answer multiple choice test. After the evaluation of the pre-test results, the participants were taught for 3 hours on the inspection of tonic stress in words. Two weeks later, the same pre-test was administrated as post-test to the participants. While overall rate of success was 17.47% in the pre-test, it increased to 52.4% in the post-. These results indicate that the ability of nuclear stress perception in vocabulary items can be beneficial in learning listening comprehension.

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## 1. Introduction

Strangely enough, it is a surprising to note that listening is the skill most often used in educational and everyday life, but has merited little research or pedagogical attention. Research has demonstrated that “adults spend 40-50% of communication time in listening” (Gilman & Moody, 1984: 331-34). Similarly, according to Miller (2003:16-19), “more than 40% of our daily communication is spent on listening, 35% percent on speaking, about 16% percent on reading, and only 9% percent on writing.” Dalton, et al. (2011:104) state that “in fact, we spend 45% of our time doing it.” Thus, listening is the most important skill as an active process because communication will not properly take place and be complete without effective listening. Yet in spite of its critical role in foreign language teaching and learning, listening has been neglected and remained one of the least researched processes in teacher education. One of the most crucial skills dependent on listening is the perception of word stress in relation to pronunciation and intonation teaching. The aspect of pronunciation is crucial to listening, and the major problem in learning pronunciation and intonation is that students have great difficulty in “hearing and identifying pronunciation and intonation the different patterns and of rising and falling tones” (Harmer, 2001: 370). Pronunciation and intonation perception involve not only cognitive (Fraser, 2001), but also perceptual (Flege, 1995; Kuhl & Iverson, 1995) and psychomotor abilities (Leather & James, 1991) of the non-native learners. Therefore, pronunciation and intonation perception is extremely difficult without explicit instruction on nuclear stress in vocabulary items.

### 1.1. *Suprasegmental background of word stress*

Word stress, as an element of suprasegmental structure, is a universal phonological dimension that varies across languages. In some languages, stress position may vary within the word and this variation is as lexically contrastive as in English. English is a stress-timed language, most words have stable lexical stress patterns and it is often easy to tell which syllables have stress. In other languages, like Turkish, French, Hungarian, and Polish, stress position is not generally fixed due to the fact lexical stress has been shown to be highly language-dependent. “However, despite highlighting the importance of suprasegmentals for communication, communicative proponents have typically failed to equip teachers adequately with strategies for teaching pronunciation in a communicative way, with most materials far from presenting pronunciation in a truly communicative and holistic manner” (Mompean & Fouz-González, 2016:166; Gilbert, 2010).

Nuclear Stress, also called nucleus or tonic stress, is the main stress in the pronunciation and intonation of words, requiring the use of extra muscular and respiratory energy during the articulation of the syllable which receives, due to certain reasons, more emphasis than surrounding syllables. The related syllable gains extra prominence with respect to neighboring syllables as a result of the primary stress it receives. English intonation and stress draws attention to native uses of these pronunciation features, who will be the likely listeners to (and judges of) learners’ pronunciation. That’s why Pennington (1996:253) advises teachers to pay attention to stress and intonation as examples of “general characteristics and overall voice quality which obstructs the intelligibility or make the accent sound especially non-native, i.e. non-English or non-standard.” Inappropriate stress in intonation created by non-native speakers can give rise both to misunderstanding message and create an unintended reception of the message in communication. All it boils down to, for both native and non-native listeners alike, is that misplacement of nuclear stress can get quite a different message. That is partly why nuclear stress placement is a very important aspect of intonation features in the *Lingua Franca Core*.

In English, the syllables in a word or group of words are not uttered with equal force due to tonic stress. Tonic stress refers to the syllable in a word that receives the primary stress in a intonation unit, like phrases and clauses. The tonic syllable is the most prominent, with primary stressed syllables in a word or word groups. A tonic syllable is always centered on a full primary-stressed vowel. Other stressed syllables may sound less prominent and may be interpreted as secondary, tertiary, and weak stresses. Every intonational phrase carries a ‘tonic’ syllable which sounds as one most prominent syllable of the phrase or clause. In Turkish, French, Polish, or Italian, the tonic syllable is always the last one. In English, the nuclear stress rule indicates that “stress is assigned to the rightmost stressable vowel in a major constituent (Chomsky and Halle, 1968).” Similarly, Cruttenden (1997), Spencer (1996), Katamba (1989), and Halle and Vergnaud (1987) confirmed that the Nuclear Stress Rule favors the rightmost constituents of a phrase in general. This rule seems to be the main stumbling block for English as a *Lingua Franca*

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