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An Analysis of English Word Stress Error Made by First-Year English Department Students

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Abstract: Word stress is an important suprasegmental feature that affects speech intelligibility and effective oral communication. However, many Indonesian EFL learners still experience difficulties in producing correct English word stress patterns. This study aimed to identify the types and frequency of word stress errors made by first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo when pronouncing English trisyllabic words. A descriptive qualitative design supported by simple quantitative analysis was employed. The participants were 17 first-year students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through a pronunciation test consisting of 20 trisyllabic English words. The students' pronunciations were recorded and phonetically transcribed. The data were analyzed by comparing the students' pronunciations with standard English word stress patterns, identifying and classifying the errors into lack of stress, misplaced stress, and overstress, and calculating the frequency and percentage of each error type. The findings showed that, out of 340 pronunciation tokens, 178 (52%) were pronounced correctly, while 162 (48%) contained word stress errors. The highest error rates were found in the words relaxing, election, development, and occasion (76.47%). Three types of errors were identified: lack of stress (49.38%), misplaced stress (42.59%), and overstress (8.02%). These findings indicate that students still face difficulties in producing correct English word stress and require more focused pronunciation instruction and practice.

Keyword: word stress, pronunciation errors, suprasegmental features, English pronunciation, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role for humans as a means of communication with others. Through language, humans can effectively convey messages, both verbally and in writing. Language has been used as a means of communication for centuries. As the era of

increasingly widespread development, mastery of language, especially English, has become a crucial aspect of life. In Indonesia, English is considered a foreign language, serving as a bridge of communication between people in other countries. English's status as a global lingua franca has expanded its influence on the development of education, the economy, and communication in various countries, especially those with a non-English-speaking background (Fadillah, 2020). The presence of English in schools is beneficial for increasing knowledge, so greater effort is required to master it. English pronunciation has characteristics that Indonesian does not have (Merrita, 2021). English has a very different structural system, including word choice and pronunciation.

English pronunciation is considered complex when compared to other languages because it has a greater variety of vowel and consonant sounds (Maiza, 2020). Pronunciation is considered the most important part of oral communication because it can directly affect the success of conveying messages when interacting verbally (Salsabila, 2025). Good pronunciation affects communication and clarity of speech (Krisdianata & Bram, 2022) also explain that good pronunciation helps messages to be conveyed clearly and can also avoid misunderstandings. In this case, there are two groups of errors categorized as segmental (individual sounds, for example vowels, consonants) and suprasegmental (extending to syllables, words, or phrases, for example stress, rhythm, intonation) (Wang, 2022). Both groups of errors have an important role in language perception, production, and comprehension. Segmental features are speech characteristics that can be separated from speech, such as consonants and vowels, while suprasegmental features are features that appear together with segmental features. (Senowarsito & Ardini, 2023). Teaching segmental and suprasegmental features is important in improving students' English skills (Mawardi et al., 2023). This must be considered by EFL learners so that their pronunciation can develop well.

Word stress is one of the suprasegmental elements that plays a crucial role in the clarity of spoken English communication. Knowing the correct use of word stress allows listeners to recognize and understand the words spoken, and the message can be conveyed. Conversely, if word stress is used incorrectly, it can lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, mastering word stress is an important part of pronunciation skills because it affects the clarity of expression. According to (Roach, 2009), every word with more than one syllable generally has one syllable that receives the main stress, and this stress can help distinguish the pronunciation patterns of words in English. English words with many syllables are usually not pronounced with the same weight, so each syllable in a word can be pronounced with or without stress (Nuraini et al., 2024). For example, the word Hospital in English is pronounced /'hɑː.spɪ.təl/. To pronounce the word hospital, the first syllable appears more prominent than the second syllable. On the first syllable, there is stress. Thus, it can convey the true meaning, and the listener can understand the speaker's intention. For learners in Indonesia, mastering word stress is a major challenge due to the fundamental differences between Indonesian and English. (Dohu et al., 2025) note that stress patterns in Indonesian are more orderly and predictable, while English requires specific study and its patterns are unpredictable.

There are several previous studies on the analysis of word stress errors. The first study conducted by (Afri & Dewi, 2022) entitled "An Analysis of Students' Abilities in Pronouncing Word Stresses of the English Education Section of IAIN Bukittinggi Academic Year 2019/2020". The findings suggest that students' ability to pronounce word stress in the English Education Department of IAIN Bukittinggi is classified as poor because the percentage of their ability to pronounce word stress only reaches 43% of all items. Another study was conducted by (Sihombing & Napitupulu, 2026) with the title "Word stress in English two-syllable words among poetry seminary students". This study investigated word stress errors in English two-syllable words produced by poetry seminary students. The results show that incorrect stress placement often changes grammatical function and distorts the

intended meaning. The third study was conducted by (Dohu et al., 2025) Titled "Analysis of EFL Students' Word Stress Pronunciation at SMA Negeri 4 Pulau Morotai," this study aimed to analyze word stress in the pronunciation of EFL students at SMA Negeri 4 Pulau Morotai and identify factors influencing their difficulties. The findings revealed that second-grade students' abilities in word stress and consonant clusters at SMA Negeri 4 Pulau Morotai were still relatively low. They found that students experienced greater difficulties in the suprasegmental aspect (word stress) than in the segmental aspect (consonant sounds).

Based on the four previous studies, it can be concluded that word stress remains one of the aspects of English pronunciation that is difficult for EFL learners to master. The findings consistently show that students still frequently make errors in word stress placement, especially in words with more syllables. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the word stress errors made by first-year students of the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo. The study focuses on identifying the types of word stress errors and analyzing the frequency of errors in each word pronounced by the students. The findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive description of students' word stress performance and contribute to a better understanding of their pronunciation difficulties in English.

Literature Review Pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of the main elements of language. Pronunciation can be defined as the process of producing speech sounds used in a language (Afri & Dewi, 2022). To achieve fluency in pronunciation, learners must understand its features. These include segmental and suprasegmental features. (Roach, 2009) states that pronunciation involves the pronunciation of various language sounds, including vowels and consonants, as well as suprasegmental features such as word stress, rhythm, and intonation, which support comprehensibility in communication. Among these features, word stress plays a crucial role, as inappropriate stress placement can lead to misunderstandings and reduce speech comprehension.

Pronunciation plays a crucial role in speaking skills. Speaking ability is determined not only by mastery of vocabulary and grammar but also by the ability to pronounce words correctly. Pronunciation is a crucial component of oral communication, helping speakers convey messages effectively and enabling listeners to understand the information conveyed more easily (Gilakjani, 2012). Good pronunciation can boost learners' confidence when speaking English and support smooth communication.

Conversely, pronunciation errors can cause various communication problems. Mispronunciation can make speech difficult to understand, even when the sentence structure and vocabulary are correct. In some cases, pronunciation errors can even change the meaning of words and lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, mastering pronunciation is a crucial factor in achieving effective and successful communication in English.

Word Stress

Stress fundamentally implies that one phonological element is accentuated inside another, lengthier phonological element (Fudge, 2015). Word stress is a suprasegmental aspect that refers to the emphasis of one syllable over another within a word. This emphasis is characterized by a combination of phonetic features such as longer duration, stronger intensity, changes in pitch, and clearer vowel quality. Another opinion, according to (Sharma, 2021), states that the additional force used in pronouncing a syllable is called stress. A stressed syllable is pronounced with a louder sound, longer duration, and higher pitch than an unstressed syllable (Roach, 2009). Thus, word stress is a crucial element of the English phonological system because it functions as a marker of prominence at the word level.

Word stress plays a crucial role in spoken English communication. Correct stress placement helps listeners recognize spoken words and understand the speaker's message more easily. Mistakes in stress placement can make speech more difficult to understand, even if the consonants and vowels are pronounced correctly. Therefore, mastering word stress is crucial for improving effective communication and English speaking skills. Stressed syllables have phonetic characteristics that distinguish them from unstressed syllables. (Fleming & Winn, 2022) explain that word stress is generally characterized by longer vowel duration, higher intensity, changes in fundamental frequency (pitch), and clearer vowel quality compared to unstressed syllables. These characteristics make stressed syllables more prominent and thus easier for listeners to recognize.

Although English does not have completely fixed stress rules, there are some general patterns that can help learners determine word stress. In many two-syllable nouns and adjectives, stress typically falls on the first syllable, while in many two-syllable verbs, stress tends to fall on the second syllable. Furthermore, certain suffixes, such as -tion, -sion, and -ic, often influence the position of stress within a word. Therefore, understanding word stress patterns is an important part of learning pronunciation because it can help learners recognize and produce English words more accurately.

Word Stress Errors

Errors in word stress placement are common among learners of English as a foreign language because the stress pattern in English differs from that of their first language (Nuraini et al., 2024). These errors occur when learners place stress on a syllable that does not conform to the prevailing word stress pattern. Incorrect stress placement can affect pronunciation clarity and lead to misunderstandings in spoken communication. Word stress errors occur when speakers emphasize the wrong syllable or fail to produce the expected stress pattern. These errors can affect listeners' comprehension of spoken English.

In this study, word stress errors were categorized into three types: misplaced stress, overstress, and understress. Misplaced stress occurs when the primary stress is placed on the wrong syllable. Overstress refers to excessive stress on more than one syllable, while understress occurs when there are not enough stressed syllables. Understress is the pronunciation of a word without a clear stress difference between syllables, so that all syllables sound almost equally strong (Noroniyah et al., 2025).

Word stress errors can negatively impact speech intelligibility. According to Roach (2009) incorrect stress placement can make it difficult for listeners to recognize spoken words even though the segmental sounds are correct. Incorrect word stress can even change the meaning or grammatical function of a word. Therefore, mastering correct word stress is crucial for improving clarity of pronunciation and the effectiveness of spoken communication in English.

Error Analysis

Error analysis is an approach used to identify sources of errors, which is crucial for second language learners and teachers to explore areas of learning that still need improvement (Li, 2024). In the context of disclosure, error analysis helps reveal error patterns that occur and the factors that influence them. Hamad (2023) explains that pronunciation error analysis allows researchers to identify various types of errors, including word stress errors, which can lead to unnatural accents and misunderstandings in communication. Therefore, error analysis not only serves to describe the errors made by learners but also serves as a basis for designing more effective pronunciation strategies.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design supported by simple quantitative analysis. The study aimed to identify and describe the types and frequency of English word stress errors made by first-year students of the English Language Education Department. A qualitative approach was used to examine students' pronunciation patterns and classify the errors based on word stress placement, while quantitative data in the form of frequencies and percentages were used to support the findings. This study was conducted on May 31, 2026, at the English Language Education Department, Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo, in the 2026/2027 academic year.

The participants of this study were 17 first-year students selected through purposive sampling. The participants were chosen because they had studied English pronunciation and were considered suitable subjects for investigating word stress production. The instrument used in this study was a pronunciation test consisting of 20 English trisyllabic words. These words were selected because they represent common English vocabulary requiring accurate word stress placement. During the test, each participant was asked to pronounce the words individually. Their pronunciations were recorded using a digital recording device to ensure accuracy and allow for detailed analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis supported by simple quantitative analysis. First, all recorded pronunciations were transcribed phonetically using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Second, the transcriptions were compared with the standard word stress patterns provided in reliable pronunciation references, particularly the Cambridge Dictionary. Third, the researchers identified and classified the word stress errors into three categories: misplaced stress, understress, and overstress. Misplaced stress refers to the placement of primary stress on an incorrect syllable, understress occurs when the expected stressed syllable is pronounced without sufficient prominence, and overstress refers to excessive emphasis on a syllable that should not receive primary stress. After the errors had been identified and classified, the frequency of each error type was calculated. Subsequently, the percentage of each error category was determined using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100 \%$$

where P represents the percentage of errors, F represents the frequency of a particular error type, and N represents the total number of errors. Finally, the results were interpreted descriptively to determine the dominant types of word stress errors and to answer the research questions regarding the types and frequency of errors made by the students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher presents findings based on pronunciation tests, phonetic transcriptions, and frequency analysis. The research findings demonstrate the types and frequency of word stress errors made by first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo when pronouncing three-syllable English words. To answer the first research question, data analysis shows that students made several types of word stress errors with varying frequencies across the tested words.

Overall Performance

Table 1. Overall Results of Word Stress Production

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Correct Stress	178	52.00%

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Incorrect Stress	162	48.00%
Total	340	100.00%

All 17 participants completed a pronunciation task involving 20 trisyllabic English words. Of the total 340 tokens (17 students × 20 words), 162 tokens (48%) contained word stress errors, while 178 tokens (52%) were pronounced with correct stress placement. This finding indicates that more than half of the students' pronunciations exhibited correct word stress placement.

Frequency of Stress Errors each Word

The table below shows the number and percentage of mispronunciations for each target word.

Table 2. Frequency of Stress Errors each Word

No	Word	Correct Stress Pattern	Incorrect Pronunciation (N=17)	Percentage
1	Important	6	11	64.71%
2	Amusing	7	10	58.82%
3	Entertain	8	9	52.94%
4	Element	10	7	41.18%
5	Discussion	5	12	70.59%
6	Recommend	12	5	29.41%
7	Hospital	16	1	5.88%
8	Relaxing	4	13	76.47%
9	Employee	8	9	52.94%
10	Capital	15	2	11.76%
11	Beginner	7	10	58.82%
12	Election	4	13	76.47%
13	Cinema	17	0	0.00%
14	Develop	4	13	76.47%
15	Volunteer	5	12	70.59%
16	Energy	14	3	17.65%
17	Understand	9	8	47.06%
18	Wonderful	14	3	17.65%
19	Engineer	8	9	52.94%
20	Occasion	4	13	76.47%

The results showed that 177 pronunciations (52.06%) were pronounced correctly, while 163 pronunciations (47.94%) contained word stress errors. Some words showed a very high percentage of errors. The highest error rate was found in the words "relaxing," "election," "develop," and "occasion," each with 13 mispronunciations (76.5%). These results indicate that students experienced significant difficulty in identifying and pronouncing the correct stress in these words. Similarly, the words "discussion" and "volunteer" recorded 12 mispronunciations (70.6%), while the word "important" showed 11 errors (64.7%). In contrast, some words were pronounced correctly by the majority of students. The word "Cinema" was pronounced correctly by all participants (100%), so there were no

pronunciation errors. Other words with low error rates included "hospital" (5.9%), "capital" (11.8%), "energy" (17.6%), and "wonderful" (17.6%).

Types of Stress Error

Based on phonetic transcription and analysis, stress errors were classified into three categories: misplaced stress, lack of stress, and overstress. The distribution of these error types is presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Types of Stress Errors

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Missplacements	69	42.59%
Lack	80	49.38%
Overstress	13	8.02%
Total		100.00%

Representative Examples of Word Stress Error

Table 4 presents examples of word stress errors produced by first-year students of the English Education Department

Student	Word	Standard Pronunciation	Student Pronunciation	Position	Error Word Stress
S2	Important	/ɪm'pɔ:rtənt/	/'ɪmpɔ:rtənt/	1st Syllable	Misplaced Stress
S3	Recommend	/,rekə'mend/	/rekəmend/		Lack of Stress
S6	Understand	/'ʌndər'stænd/	/'ʌndər'stænd/	1st and 3st Syllable	Overstress
S11	Element	/'elɪmənt/	/e'ɪlɪmənt/	2st syllable	Misplaced Stress
S12	Relaxing	/rɪ'læksɪŋ/	/rɪlæksɪŋ/		Lack of Stress
S10	Understand	/'ʌndər'stænd/	/'ʌn'dər'stænd/	2st and 3rd syllable	Overstress

Table 4 presents representative examples of word stress errors made by students. According to Table 4, stress placement errors were found in the pronunciation of the words "important" and "element." Student S2 pronounced "important" as /ɪmpɔ:rtənt/ instead of the standard pronunciation /ɪm'pɔ:rtənt/. The stress marker on the second syllable was omitted, and the word was pronounced with the stress on the first syllable. Similarly, student S11 pronounced "element" as /e'ɪlɪmənt/ instead of /'elɪmənt/. In this case, the stress shifted from the first syllable to the second. These errors are categorized as stress placement errors because the student placed the primary stress on the incorrect syllable.

Unstressed errors were identified in the words "recommend" and "relaxing." Student S3 pronounced "recommend" as /rekəmend/ instead of /,rekə'mend/, while student S12 pronounced "relaxing" as /rɪlæksɪŋ/ instead of /rɪ'læksɪŋ/. In both cases, the students failed to produce the necessary stress, resulting in a flatter pronunciation pattern. This finding suggests that some students were unaware of the stressed syllables in the words.

The overstress error occurred in the pronunciation of the word "understand." Student S6 pronounced the word as /'ʌndər'stænd/, and student S10 pronounced /'ʌn'dər'stænd/. The standard pronunciation is /'ʌndər'stænd/, with primary stress only on the third syllable. The students added additional primary stress to the first and second syllables, creating overstress. Therefore, these pronunciations are categorized as overstress errors.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the types and frequency of word stress errors produced by first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo. The findings revealed that students still experienced considerable

difficulties in placing stress correctly on English trisyllabic words. Out of 340 pronunciation tokens, 162 (48%) were produced with incorrect stress placement, while 178 (52%) were pronounced correctly. Although the percentage of correct pronunciations was slightly higher, the high proportion of errors indicates that word stress remains a challenging aspect of English pronunciation for Indonesian EFL learners. The present finding is also consistent with Pebriani & Rianto (2024). Their research result showed misplaced word stress and double-stressed words were the most common causes of errors in this research. Similarly, the students in the present study showed high error rates in trisyllabic words such as *relaxing*, *election*, and *occasion*, indicating limited mastery of English stress placement patterns.

The findings support previous studies which suggest that suprasegmental features, particularly word stress, are often difficult for learners whose first language does not employ lexical stress in the same way as English. Indonesian tends to have relatively predictable stress patterns, whereas English stress placement varies according to word structure, grammatical category, and etymology. As a result, learners frequently transfer the stress patterns of their first language when pronouncing English words, leading to incorrect stress production.

The analysis of individual words showed that the highest error rates occurred in the words *relaxing*, *election*, *develop*, and *occasion* (76.47%), followed by *discussion* and *volunteer* (70.59%). These words generally require stress placement on the second syllable, which appears to be difficult for many students. One possible explanation is that students tend to rely on spelling rather than phonological knowledge when determining stress placement. In addition, several of these words contain suffixes such as *-ion* and *-ing*, which influence stress patterns in English. The findings suggest that students may not yet be familiar with stress rules related to word formation and affixation.

In contrast, the words *cinema*, *hospital*, *capital*, *energy*, and *wonderful* showed relatively low error rates. The word *cinema* was pronounced correctly by all participants. These words share a similar stress pattern in which the primary stress falls on the first syllable. This result indicates that students are more familiar with words that follow common and predictable stress patterns. Furthermore, some of these words are frequently encountered in classroom instruction and everyday communication, which may contribute to greater pronunciation accuracy.

Regarding the types of errors, the most frequent error was lack of stress (49.38%), followed by misplaced stress (42.59%), while overstress represented only 8.02% of all errors. The dominance of lack of stress suggests that many students failed to realize that English words require a prominent syllable. Instead, they pronounced all syllables with nearly equal prominence, resulting in a flat stress pattern. This finding indicates limited awareness of the role of stress in English pronunciation and intelligibility. The dominance of lack of stress is comparable to the findings of Nuraini et al., (2024), who reported that many EFL learners failed to produce sufficient prominence on the stressed syllable and tended to pronounce words with relatively equal emphasis across syllables. This tendency reduces the perceptual contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables and may negatively affect intelligibility.

Misplaced stress was the second most common error type. Students often shifted the primary stress from the correct syllable to another syllable, as observed in the words *important* and *element*. This finding suggests that learners were aware that a stressed syllable should exist but were uncertain about its correct location. Such errors may arise from insufficient knowledge of English stress rules or interference from the learners' native language. Similar findings were reported by Abdulrahman & L (2021), who found that misplaced stress was among the most common pronunciation errors produced by EFL learners. Their study suggested that learners often transferred stress patterns from their first language or applied incorrect assumptions about English stress placement. This explanation

appears relevant to the present study, where students frequently shifted stress to an incorrect syllable despite recognizing the need for stress in English words.

Overstress occurred least frequently, accounting for only 8.02% of the total errors. In this type of error, students assigned excessive prominence to more than one syllable, as observed in the pronunciation of *understand*. Although less common, this error indicates that some learners attempted to emphasize important syllables but lacked adequate control over English stress patterns. Consequently, they produced multiple stressed syllables instead of maintaining a single primary stress. Although overstress was the least frequent error type in the present study, similar cases were identified by Nurpahmi et al (2023), who observed that some Indonesian learners assigned excessive prominence to more than one syllable. Such errors indicate partial awareness of stress but insufficient control over the acoustic realization of English word stress.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that first-year students still face difficulties in mastering English word stress, particularly in identifying the correct stressed syllable and producing appropriate prominence. Since word stress contributes significantly to intelligibility and effective communication, explicit instruction and regular pronunciation practice focusing on stress patterns may help learners improve their pronunciation accuracy. Teachers should provide greater attention to suprasegmental features, including stress placement, through listening activities, phonetic transcription exercises, and guided pronunciation practice.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the types and frequency of word stress errors produced by first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo in pronouncing English trisyllabic words. The findings revealed that students still experienced difficulties in producing correct word stress patterns. Out of 340 pronunciation tokens, 178 (52%) were pronounced correctly, while 162 (48%) contained word stress errors. Although the percentage of correct pronunciations was slightly higher than that of incorrect pronunciations, the results indicate that word stress remains a challenging aspect of English pronunciation for Indonesian EFL learners.

The analysis of individual words showed that the highest error rates occurred in the words *relaxing*, *election*, *develop*, and *occasion*, while *cinema* was pronounced correctly by all participants. These findings suggest that students encountered greater difficulty with words requiring stress placement on the second syllable and words influenced by specific morphological patterns. Furthermore, three types of word stress errors were identified: lack of stress, misplaced stress, and overstress. Among the three identified error types, lack of stress was the most frequent, followed by misplaced stress and overstress. This result indicates that many students failed to produce sufficient prominence on stressed syllables, while others placed stress on incorrect syllables or assigned excessive stress to more than one syllable.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that first-year students still need further improvement in mastering English word stress, particularly in identifying the correct stressed syllable and producing appropriate prominence. Since word stress plays an important role in speech intelligibility and effective communication, greater attention should be given to suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation in English language instruction.

The findings also have pedagogical implications for English Phonetics and Phonology courses. Lecturers are encouraged to provide explicit instruction on English word stress and to design systematic drilling activities focusing on problematic trisyllabic stress patterns, particularly words with suffixes such as *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-ing*. Integrating listening practice, phonetic transcription, reading aloud, and communicative pronunciation activities, supported by regular corrective feedback, may help students improve their stress placement accuracy and speech intelligibility."

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