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Stress Placement and the Difficulties Encountered by Female EFL Students in Saudi Arabian Context

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Abstract
One of the most essential skills for English Foreign Language learners is to learn how to assign stress on words correctly for efficient communication. The current paper aims at investigating the problems that faced English foreign language Female Students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University in assigning stress accurately. Besides, it attempts to identify the reasons of the inapplicability of the rules practically and adequately. The researchers use the descriptive- analytical approach as a method used in this study. A questionnaire consists of 10 items was given to 60 students, the sample of the study. The study is useful to teachers and learners as well as it exposes them to word stress assignment. The results indicate that Participants did not show evidence of rule application, even though they learn word stress placement rules. Lack of overexposing them practically and adequately to word stress placement, performance conditions as time limitations, absence of oral exams, and a large number of the students in the classroom are the essential reasons behind the insufficient command of the rules. Moreover, teachers are in need of more training in teaching pronunciation to be ready for their teaching work. The researchers suggested that more attention should be given to oral production alongside with teaching word stress placement rules.
Keywords: assign stress, inapplicability, pronunciation, Saudi learners, stress placement rules

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Introduction

The main aim of learning the English language is to provide learners with the knowledge of the language used so that they will be able to communicate it effectively and correctly. Knowledge of phonological rules by English foreign language (EFL) learners is of great significance. Learning how and where to assign stress on words for efficient communication will be very useful. Meanwhile, listeners process discourse more easily if stress is correctly placed. Despite the importance of assigning the stress on words or sentences, it is ignored in most teachers' classes (Baker & Westrup, 2003; Nation & Newton, 2009; Hashemi, 2011; Nguyen & Tran, 2015). Most researchers pay much attention to study syntax and morphology; however, the phonological rules of L2 acquisition in general and stress placement, in particular, have been neglected (Liu, 2017). According to Mahripah (2013), EFL learners' oral performance is affected by phonological rules as one of the main components necessary for accurate speaking. This indicates that stress placement rules should be included within the syllabus of learning phonology.

Purpose of the study

EFL students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at King Khalid University do know the rules of word stress placement; however, they do not have the ability to apply this knowledge. The current study aims at investigating the problems faced EFL learners in assigning stress accurately as it affects their vocal performance. Further, it attempts to identify the reasons of their inability for applying the rules of stress placement practically and adequately and then to provide solutions to overcome this problematic issue.

Significance of the Study

Stress placement is one of the problematic issues that hinder EFL learners. Learning L2 pronunciation needs the potentiality to have the same experience as native-speakers when speaking their mother tongue. However, by observing the Saudi female students performance at the Faculty of Languages and Translation (henceforth FLT) King Kahlid University (henceforth KKU), the researchers trace the difficulty students face in applying the rules practically and adequately. This is a beneficiary factor to write this paper. Moreover, the study can be useful to teachers and learners as well when considering teachers-learners' needs for assigning stress in English language teaching and learning context.

Literature Review

For efficient communication, second language (L2) learners are intended to learn the phonological rules of word stress of the target language, which proves to be the most challenging issues in language learning. Intelligibility cannot be obtained with the faulty application of word stress (Benrabah,1997; Checkin, 2012). It seems that language learners are not able to communicate fluently and accurately because they do not have enough knowledge in this field (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). EFL students can speak the language fluently, if much effort has been given to the rules of stress assignment. To L2 learners, Stress placement causes difficulty because stress in English is "highly rule- governed."

Wahba (1998) attributes the difficulty the Egyptian students face in the pronunciation process of the English language to stress as English is a stress language, while Arabic is not. In contrast, Anani (2009), indicates that to assign the stress on words; learners tend to confirm the

overall stress pattern of English to the total stress pattern of Arabic. Almbark, Bouchhioua, and Hellmuth (2014), find that in the course of phonetic realization of stress, EFL learners at the Arab world transfer stress assignment of their first language (L1) in the speech production of L2.

Mahripah (2013) finds that EFL learners' oral performance is affected by phonological rules as one of the main components necessary for accurate speaking. In accordance, to uncover whether stress is problematic to EFL learners or not, Karjo (2016), explores the production of English word stress by Indonesian students. The results indicate that the difficulty of accounting the stress placement and recognition is attributed to phonological factors (p.199).

Betti & Ulaiwi (2018) investigate the difference between Arabic and English stress types and features. They conclude that stress as a phenomenon exists in both languages. Moreover, it is not phonemic; its primary function is emphasis and contrast. Contrary to this, Roach (2009) indicates that stress is signaling meaning. Meaning of a word is determined by stress placement.

Word stress placement is problematic not to the learners but the teachers as well. Checklin (2012) claims,

> It is necessary for teachers to draw learners' awareness to all features of word stress and to provide them with explicit training" to enhance the process successfully. He (2012) adds, "In principle, stress alone could serve to distinguish words, but in reality it seldom does (p.3).

To Ahmad & Nazim (2014), negligence of sound system of English in EFL classrooms is the core of non-mastering of pronunciation by the EFL learners as they had not been practiced English well at schools. On the other hand, the researcher put it clear enough to the EFL teachers to teach their students the sound system of English accurately to reduce problems of English pronunciation among L2 learners.

In their study, Yuan & Cheng (2017) attempt to find out to what extent Chinese-speaking learners whose native language has less evidence of stress can acquire English stress. The results showed that Chinese Learners from a no-stress native language appeared to experience more difficulty than learners from a stress language. Liu (2017) investigates the production of word stress by the Mandarin EFL learners, and he concludes that the lack of knowledge of rules is the real reason for the improper assignment of word stress. However, Brawata & Rybinska (2017) find that sensitivity is one reason for EFL learners to obtain stress. They tend to assign word stress successfully because they are more sensitive to acquire stress, and so they achieve proper pronunciation. Moreover, motivation can influence the components of language learning (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

To sum up, the above-related literature indicates that Stress Placement and the difficulties encountered by EFL Students in Saudi Arabian context has not been studied before to the researchers' knowledge. The previous studies have investigated the process of pronunciation in the Saudi Arabian context but not the applicability of stress placement. Therefore, this paper aims at investigating the problems faced EFL leaners in assigning stress accurately and to find out the factors and the reasons that stand behind the inapplicability of the rules of stress placement. To

fulfill the aim of the paper and to capture the entire phenomenon that happened in the classroom in a natural setting, it is hypothesized that L2 learners at FL&T at KKU have difficulty in assigning word stress.

Methodology

Instrument and Procedure

The researchers use the descriptive-analytical approach as they thought that it is an effective one frequently used to collect and analyze the data (Borg & Gall, 1989). A mixed-method combination of quantitative and qualitative design (Creswell, 2005) is used so that the researcher will have an opportunity to apply statistical operations. Through this method the researchers will be able to interpret the research aim and purpose comprehensively. Jick (1979) states, "above all, [mixing qualitative and quantitative] demands creativity from its user-ingenuity in collecting data and insightful interpretation of data"(P. 610). The data collected were computed in excel format to display the percentage of the results, the means and the standard deviation. The researchers then have given a descriptive analysis of the responses. Students have been observed by the researchers while teaching them stress placement in the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. A questionnaire consisted of 10 items, then, was distributed as a method of collecting data to 60 students. The researchers used the questionnaire to obtain practical and valid views (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The participants' responses were varied, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) on a five-point Likert scale. For the validity of the questionnaire, three experts were asked and requested to read it. After the feedback had been received from the experts, the items were modified and finalized (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Participants

The participants of the study are female students at the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Translation King Khalid University who were taking phonology class in the Second Semester of 2018/2019. To ensure to what extent female EFL students at the Faculty of Languages & Translation, KKU encounter difficulty in assigning stress accurately and in addition to identify reasons of the inability of applying the rules correctly, 43 students Out of 60 students have responded to the items.

Data analysis

After collecting the data, they were analyzed carefully. The means and standard deviation for each statement were represented in excel format, revealing the percentage of the results in figures to present the responses of the participants more comprehensive. Finally, the findings were analyzed then discussed in the light of the previous literature review.

Findings

The researchers started to illustrate the findings, uncovering the means and the standard deviation as shown in the table 1.

Table 1 . *The means and the standard deviation of the students' responses*

	Q10	Q9	Q8	Q7	Q6	Q5	Q4	Q3	Q2	Q1
Average	3.20	3.02	3.16	2.70	2.41	2.50	2.75	3.07	3.50	4.45
StDev	1.47	1.62	1.18	0.98	1.37	1.11	1.22	1.09	1.11	1.02
	Count	count	count	count	count	count	count	count	count	count
Never	9	10	3	8	19	7	4	3	2	2
Rarely	6	11	12	4	1	21	22	9	7	1
Occasionally	6	6	10	26	14	4	4	20	10	2
often	13	2	13	5	7	11	9	6	17	9
Always	10	15	6	1	3	1	5	6	8	30

The percentage of the results, on the other hand, has been represented in the figures (from 1- 6) revealing the students responses to the items of the questionnaire.

Results and interpretations of the items

1. Do your English teachers speak English in the classroom when teaching?

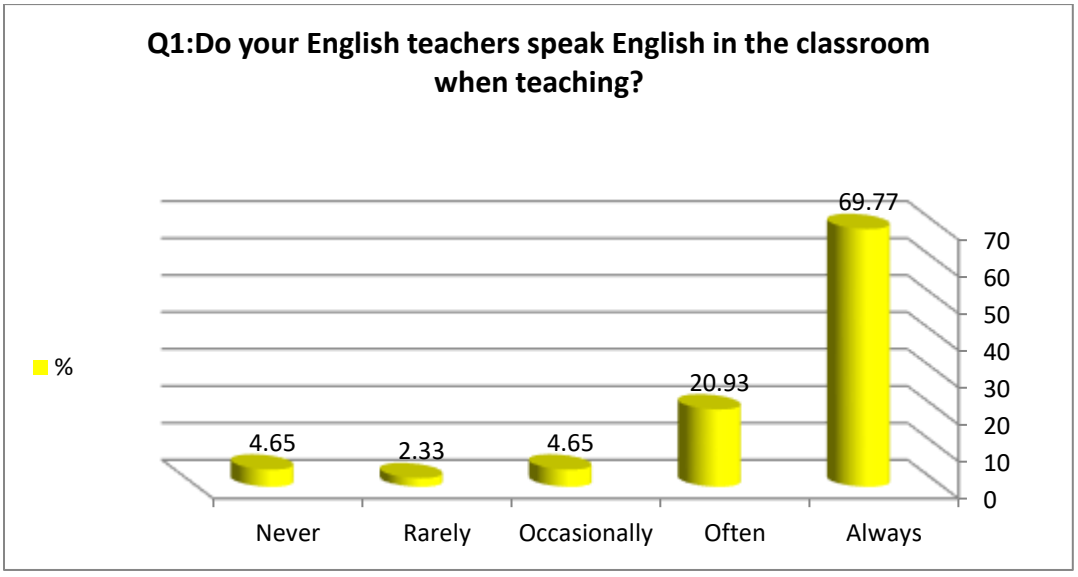


Figure 1. The percentages of question no.1

Figure 1. shows that the students' responses to this statement are high in percentage as the mean score is 4.45, and the standard deviation is 1.02. 69.7% of the students positively agreed that their teachers are using English as a medium of communication and instruction in the classrooms. However, 4.6% disagreed with the above statement. Using English as a medium of instruction implies that perception of word stress should be high, contrary to this, students as observed by the researchers, showed no application of stress assignment. This finding goes with Mahripah, (2013) and Liu (2017). Although students perceive oral skills essential in their English teaching, their misplacement of stress might be due to less importance that attached to the learning of word stress.

2. Do you have the opportunity of speaking English in classroom?

Students' responses to this question are high in rate as the mean score is 3.50, and the standard deviation is 1.11**.** 59% of the students' responses to this item show that students, to some

extent, speak English inside the class. This might go with Mahirpah's (2013) that students have positive attitudes towards improving their vocal performance. However, 23% occasionally speak English and 21% of students do not agree on the statement. The researchers thought that shyness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of exposure to the English language could be the reason behind the inability to speak English. This result corroborates with those of previous studies. Ahmad & Nazim (2014) find that the reason why they show negative response is because of the lack of motivation among the learners towards learning pronunciation.

3. **Do your teachers instruct you on how to assign the most important stress in sentences?**

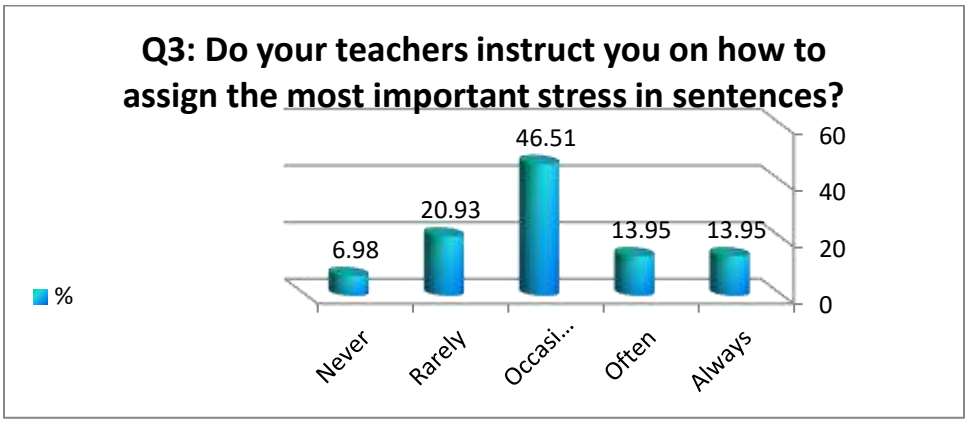


Figure 2. The percentages of question 3

The students' responses to this statement are high as the mean score for this item is 3.07, with a standard deviation of 1.09. This implies that the assigning of stress on a word or a sentence has been provided accidentally but not systematically. The result shows that the students, (46.5%), are aware of the problem. That is, they have cognitive knowledge; however, they lack the practical knowledge on how to practice the process correctly. The average between disagreement and agreement is equal. This result shows that the reason is purely pedagogical. Expositing the learners to the phonological rules is the responsibility of teachers of English. That is presenting stress patterns while teaching vocabulary, and the oral practice of new words should be included (Field, 2005 as cited in Checklin, 2012).

4. **Do you practice new words after class?**

The students' responses to this question are high as the mean score for this item is 2.75, with a standard deviation of 1.22. The result shows that the students do not highly agree with this statement. Nevertheless, they were satisfied with what they have taken the classrooms. They showed no desire to practice the language outside. 51% agreed that they rarely practice any new words after the classroom. The lack of exposure to new words after the classroom seems to be another factor that prevents the students from practicing word stress placement.

5. **Do you check the stress patterns of English words while looking up their meanings from a dictionary?**

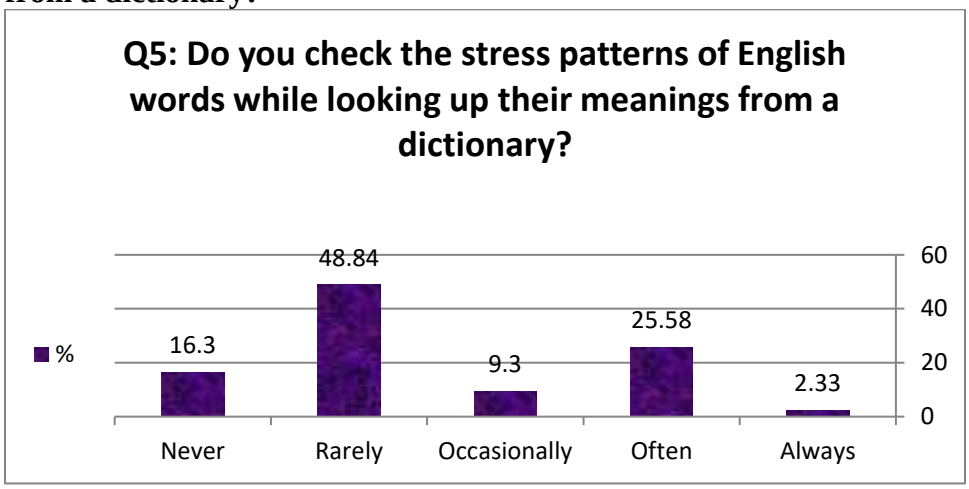


Figure 3 The percentages of question no. 5

The response of the students to this item is also high as the mean score for this statement is 2.50, and a standard deviation is 1.11. It seems that there is no matching between the different components of language. According to the response of the students, 48.8% rarely gave attention to the stress patterns when looking for the meaning in dictionaries, which might affect the student assignment of the word stress. When looking for the meaning of words in the dictionary, an accurate placement of stress on a particular syllable is the key for communicating the intended Purpose in English,

6. **Do you practice word stress at home?**

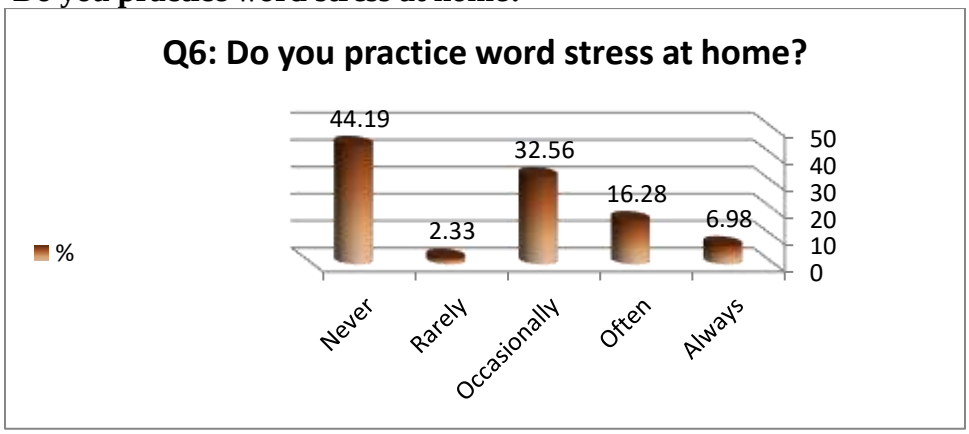


Figure 4. The percentages of question no.6

The students' responses to this item are high as the mean score for this statement is 2.41, and the standard deviation is 1.37. The students negatively responded to this item implies that there is no enough evidence for the students to practice language at home. To accept this fact, a complete separation between school and home is revealed by answering this item. 44% profoundly disagreed with assigning stress on word or sentence when speaking English outside the class. It is convenient

that lack of practicing phonological rules, consciously or unconsciously influence word stress assignment.

7. Do your teachers assess your use of word stress while you are speaking?

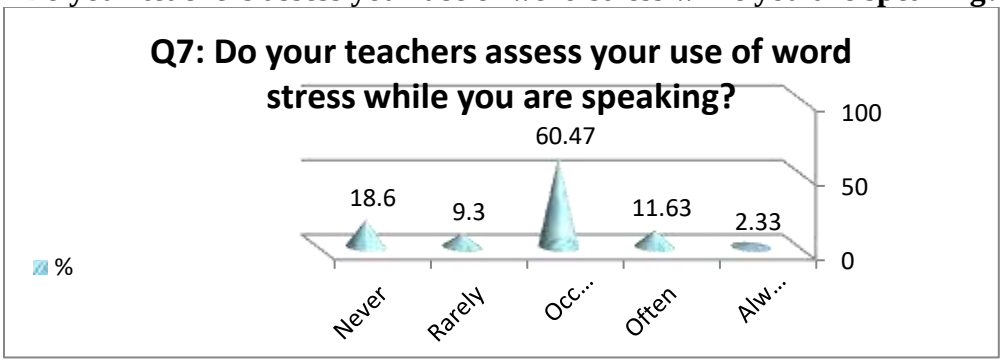


Figure 5. The percentages of question no.7.

The students' responses to this item are high as the mean score for this item is 2.70, with the standard deviation of 0.98. 60% of the participants agreed that they occasionally receive an assessment from teachers, whereas, 9.% of students explained that the frequency of teachers' assessment was somewhat rare. Teacher's role as a guide in the teaching-learning process seems to be invisible. Generally speaking, teachers should follow up their students. Following up the students is a source of improving the students' use of language. Nguyen and Tran (2015), claims that teacher's feedback during speaking activities improves students' speaking performance.

8. Are you highly motivated to apply word stress?

The students' responses to this question are high as the mean score for this item is 3.16, with a standard deviation of 1.08t. The majority of the students agreed to have the motivation to learn how to apply stress. Such result contrasts the result indicated by Ahmad & Nazim (2014). They find that the reason why the students in their paper show negative response is because they lack motivation for learning pronunciation. Interestingly, students in this research know the rules of stress placement and have the motivation to learn these rules. Nevertheless, it proves that knowing the rules is not a sufficient factor for assigning stress. The finding here contradicts the result indicated by Liu (2014) who finds that students lack of knowledge of word stress rules is the main reason of the inability to assign stress on words correctly.

9. Do teachers use Labs when they are teaching stress to you?

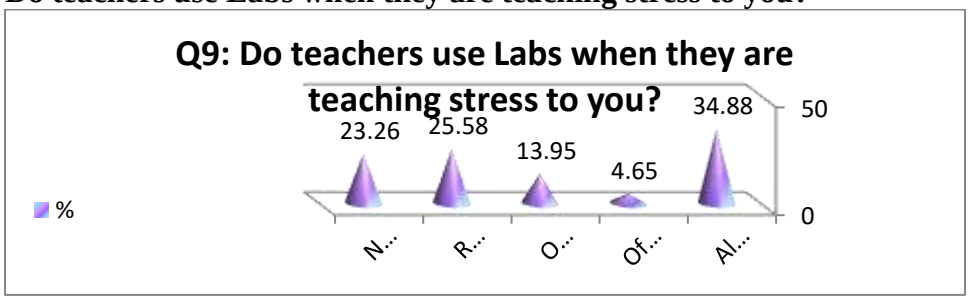


Figure 6. The percentages of question no.9.

The mean score is 3.02, and the standard deviation is 1.62. The extensive use of labs as a tool of learning by teachers is a profound means to learn word stress. Students negatively responded to this item. 23.% responded negatively and explained that teachers never use labs for teaching while 25.5% of them responded that rarely do teachers use labs. The negative response of the students shows that teachers do not use labs frequently. Consequently, lectures were given in classrooms. For a profound learning, classes should be provided with more training equipment to facilitate pronunciation, and to cope with teaching work (Liu, 2014).

10. **Does the large number in the classroom and time limitation prevent you from participating efficiently in oral tasks?**
11.

The students' responses to this statement are high as the mean score for this item is 3.20, with the standard deviation of 1.47. 54% (i,e.23.26 "always", and 30.23% "often"). The vast number of students in a classroom prevents them from acquiring the rules sensitively. So, classes should be divided into amounts where each class should consist of no more than twenty students to avoid large classrooms, and to achieve the flexibility to teach and learn English word stress effectively.

Discussion

According to the results, participants did not show any evidence of rule application. This result supports the finding presented in Walch (1972), as cited in (Guion, Clark, Harada & Wayland, 2003). The study reveals that even though they know the rules of word stress placement, they make errors. Making errors implies that they are not being able to achieve the expected proficiency. Reasons for the students' inability of achieving proficiency in assigning stress are because of many factors; lack of exposing the students practically to stress placement rules. The result confirms Ahmed & Nazim (2014) findings in their study, "Saudi EFL learners' views on English Pronunciation". Certainly, practicing along with the accomplished application of word stress rules helps EFL learners master the language in question. Lack of rule application may cause problems in English pronunciation among Saudi EFL learners.

Besides, the lack of the use of Labs when learning English word stress is another reason. To Crystal (2001), new technology provides EFL learners opportunities to learn English effectively more than before. Moreover, it is indicated that students' practice of stress assignment on words at school and home is rare. The paper shows that teachers do not give the students the opportunity to practice English in and out of the classrooms. Besides, the result extends Leong & Ahmadi (2017) findings that motivation can influence the components of language learning. Though the students have had the motivation to learn the rules, teachers' assessment was rarely estimated. Teachers did not show up any feedback to assess the students' improvement in word stress placement. To this, teachers should Present stress patterns while teaching vocabulary and during the oral practice of new words (Checklin, 2012). Students' positive attitudes towards the improvement of their English speaking performance serve as a foundation for the success of the English language learning, which is consistent with Mahripah (2013). No doubt, then, exposing the learners to the phonological rules is the responsibility of all teachers of English. Further, the study shows that learning environment and the performance conditions such as time limitations, absence of oral exam and a large number of the students in the classroom is also another reason for the insufficient command of EFL learners' language. To Mahripah (2013) finding, "without

supportive curricular and learning environment, this potency is likely to diminish gradually and at worse can be detrimental to the learners' language learning process"(p. 298).

Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up, the results support the researchers' hypothesis that the inapplicability of using the rules of stress placement practically and adequately is evident. This is, for instance, encountered as a problem, however, such a problem, as the researchers found, will be resolved by:

- First, overexposing the students excessively to the target pronunciation and the phonological rules of word stress placement.
- Second, under the guidance of their teachers, students should practice vocally, till their ability to pronounce the correct word stress is effective and accurate. The more proficient are the teachers in using the English language in their teaching classes, the more impact they impart upon the students.
- Third, students should be motivated and encouraged by the teachers to use the language they learn in the same way native speakers do.

Recommendations

There are many factors that affect students' inability to apply word stress correctly. To overcome this problem, the researchers suggest the following:

1. Students' oral production of language has to be given more attention while assessing their learning progress.
2. Students need assistance to overcome negative feelings toward learning of the target language.
3. Teachers have to urge their students to speak in English classes.
4. Teachers should choose practical techniques that keep the students involved in speaking.
5. Teachers should focus on supra-segmental features of the target language.

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