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Fifth-Grade Students' Accuracy in English Word Stress at SDs 117 Islam Terpadu Adnani

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ABSTRACT

Word stress is an important suprasegmental feature because inaccurate stress placement can reduce the clarity of spoken English. This study examined fifth-grade students' accuracy in pronouncing English word stress at SDs 117 Islam Terpadu Adnani and identified the factors associated with their performance. A descriptive qualitative design was employed with 25 students from one fifth-grade class. Data were obtained through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-video documentation, and a pronunciation task containing 20 words. Each production was categorized as accurate, inaccurate, or unclear and was interpreted through the distinction between pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility. The findings showed that familiar words with simpler stress patterns, including table, bottle, travel, window, garden, and pencil, were pronounced accurately by all students. In contrast, because, triangle, together, and between produced the greatest difficulty. Limited exposure to accurate models, complex stress patterns, first-language influence, confidence, and classroom engagement affected performance. The study implies that elementary pronunciation instruction should combine explicit stress practice, repeated modeling, contextualized production, and individualized feedback.
Keywords: accuracy, elementary school students, pronunciation, word stress

Introduction

English is widely used in education and international communication, making early language instruction increasingly important. At elementary level, learners begin to build

the phonological foundation that supports later speaking and listening development. Pronunciation is central to that foundation because a learner may know appropriate vocabulary and grammar but still experience communication problems when words are produced unclearly. One aspect that requires particular attention is word stress, or the relative prominence given to one syllable within a word. Stress placement contributes to the recognizable sound pattern of a word and can influence how easily a listener identifies the speaker's intended message.

The present study treats pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility as related but distinct outcomes. Accuracy concerns the extent to which a learner's production follows an accepted English pronunciation model, whereas intelligibility concerns whether the listener can understand the intended word or utterance. Derwing and Munro (2005) argue that pronunciation teaching should be informed by communicative priorities rather than by the unrealistic expectation that every learner must sound like a native speaker. In the context of word stress, correct placement is therefore important not simply as a formal rule, but because it provides an auditory cue that assists word recognition. Nevertheless, accurate stress in an isolated word does not automatically guarantee intelligible connected speech, since articulation, rhythm, intonation, fluency, and speaking volume also contribute to understanding.

For Indonesian learners, English word stress can be challenging because stress patterns are not always predictable and may differ from patterns familiar in Indonesian or local languages. Learners also receive unequal exposure to natural English models. Frequently encountered classroom words may become automatized through repetition, while less familiar or longer words demand more conscious attention. At elementary-school age, these challenges are intensified by limited metalinguistic knowledge and by affective factors such as fear of making mistakes. Consequently, examining both the products of pronunciation and the conditions in which students learn is necessary for understanding their accuracy.

Previous Indonesian studies have generally investigated older learners. Anggraeni (2024) found that eleventh-grade students continued to misplace stress, especially in polysyllabic words. Damayanti (2024), using a pronunciation test and acoustic analysis with tenth-grade students, reported a low overall accuracy level and identified linguistic interference and phonological complexity as important sources of difficulty. Karmita (2023) similarly found stress-placement errors among university students during reading aloud, while Dohu, Martora, and Sutrisno (2025) reported that first-language influence, limited exposure to authentic English, and insufficient focused instruction contributed to high-school students' errors. These studies demonstrate that word stress remains difficult across educational levels; however, they provide limited evidence about elementary learners, particularly fifth-grade students who are still developing basic pronunciation habits.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on 25 fifth-grade students at SDs 117 Islam Terpadu Adnani. It asks how accurately the students pronounce selected English words and what classroom, linguistic, and affective factors are associated with their performance. The study is significant because an early description of students' strengths and difficulties can help teachers design more focused pronunciation instruction before inaccurate patterns become habitual. The objective is not to rank students against an

idealized native-speaker accent, but to identify stress patterns that support clearer speech and areas in which learners require additional modeling, practice, and feedback.

Methods

The study used a descriptive qualitative design to portray fifth-grade students' English word-stress accuracy in its classroom context. The site was SDs 117 Islam Terpadu Adnani, located in Panyabungan, Mandailing Natal. The participants were all 25 students in the Ar Razzaaq fifth-grade class, consisting of 12 boys and 13 girls. Total sampling was used because the class population was limited and all students were relevant to the research objective.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and a pronunciation task. Classroom observations focused on students' production during reading aloud, answering questions, and other speaking activities, as well as on their attention, participation, and responses to teacher feedback. Interviews explored students' understanding of word stress, perceived difficulties, learning strategies, exposure to English pronunciation, and confidence when speaking. Audio and video recordings documented the students' productions and supported repeated examination of stress placement.

The pronunciation task contained 20 words selected from vocabulary familiar or potentially accessible to elementary learners: color, table, bottle, travel, window, picture, teacher, surprise, answer, between, family, triangle, around, because, adventure, garden, pencil, together, circle, and oval. Each production was classified as accurate when stress was placed on the expected syllable, inaccurate when stress was placed on a different syllable, and unclear when the recording did not permit a reliable judgment. Standard phonetic transcriptions were used as the reference for the expected stress position.

Analysis followed the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Recordings and field notes were reviewed, relevant events were coded, and the pronunciation results were organized in a descriptive table. Interview and observation data were grouped around recurring themes, including exposure, phonological complexity, first-language influence, confidence, engagement, and feedback. Trustworthiness was strengthened by comparing pronunciation-task results with observations and interviews, checking interpretations across data sources, retaining a systematic record of analytical decisions, and discussing preliminary interpretations with participants and knowledgeable reviewers.

Findings and Discussion

The pronunciation task revealed substantial variation across the 20 words. The distribution was not random: words that were frequent, short, and familiar tended to receive higher accuracy, whereas several words with less familiar or more complex stress patterns produced considerably more errors. Table 1 summarizes the results for all 25 students.

Table 1. Students' Accuracy in Pronouncing English Word Stress (n = 25)

No.	Word	Pronunciation	Accurate	Inaccurate	Unclear
1	Color	/ˈkʌlər/	24	1	0
2	Table	/ˈteɪbəl/	25	0	0
3	Bottle	/ˈbɒtəl/	25	0	0
4	Travel	/ˈtrævəl/	25	0	0
5	Window	/ˈwɪndoʊ/	25	0	0
6	Picture	/ˈpɪktʃər/	23	2	0
7	Teacher	/ˈtiːtʃər/	24	1	0
8	Surprise	/sərˈpraɪz/	22	3	0
9	Answer	/ˈænsər/	24	1	0
10	Between	/bɪˈtwiːn/	17	8	0
11	Family	/ˈfæməli/	23	2	0
12	Triangle	/ˈtraɪæŋgəl/	14	11	0
13	Around	/əˈraʊnd/	22	2	1
14	Because	/bɪˈkɒz/	10	14	1
15	Adventure	/ədˈventʃər/	21	4	0
16	Garden	/ˈgɑːrdən/	25	0	0
17	Pencil	/ˈpensəl/	25	0	0
18	Together	/təˈgeðər/	15	9	1
19	Circle	/ˈsɜːrkl/	24	1	0
20	Oval	/ˈoʊvəl/	24	1	0

Note. Accurate = expected stress placement; inaccurate = stress placed on another syllable; unclear = stress placement could not be determined reliably.

The strongest performance occurred on table, bottle, travel, window, garden, and pencil, which were pronounced accurately by all 25 students. Color, teacher, answer, circle, and oval were also highly successful, with 24 accurate productions each, while picture and family were accurate for 23 students. These items were generally common classroom words with relatively familiar sound patterns. Repeated exposure in lessons and everyday vocabulary appears to have supported stable phonological representations, allowing students to produce the expected stress without extensive conscious analysis. The finding supports the source study's observation that frequency and familiarity are closely connected with pronunciation performance.

A second group showed moderate difficulty. Surprise and around were accurate for 22 students, adventure for 21, and between for 17. Although most students retained the expected stress in these items, the increase in inaccurate responses suggests that second-

syllable stress and less familiar phonological forms required greater attention. The students' interview responses indicated that several could explain that one syllable should sound stronger but could not consistently hear or reproduce the distinction. This gap between conceptual awareness and performance is important: knowing that word stress exists does not necessarily mean that a learner has developed the perceptual sensitivity and motor control needed to produce it automatically.

The greatest challenges occurred with because, triangle, and together. Only 10 students pronounced because accurately, while 14 were inaccurate and one was unclear. Triangle was accurate for 14 students and inaccurate for 11, whereas together was accurate for 15, inaccurate for nine, and unclear for one. These words differ in their syllable structures and stress positions, but all require learners to coordinate an unfamiliar sequence while maintaining the expected prominence pattern. The results are consistent with Anggraeni's (2024) finding that polysyllabic words are especially difficult and with Damayanti's (2024) report that linguistic complexity and second-language interference contribute to stress errors. They also resemble Dohu et al.'s (2025) conclusion that limited exposure and first-language influence affect Indonesian learners' word-stress pronunciation.

From the perspective of accuracy and intelligibility, correct stress placement functioned as an important cue for recognizing the intended word. Highly accurate items were generally understood quickly, even when minor segmental differences remained. However, observation showed that stress accuracy in isolated words did not always transfer directly to clear connected speech. Some students produced the target stress correctly during the task but spoke too softly, hesitated, or reduced articulation during classroom interaction. This supports the distinction proposed by Derwing and Munro (2005): accuracy contributes to successful communication, but intelligibility also depends on the listener's ability to recover the message from the complete speech signal. Pronunciation instruction should therefore retain explicit standards for stress placement while evaluating whether students can communicate clearly in meaningful contexts.

The qualitative data identified four interrelated factors. First, students had limited exposure to stable and accurate pronunciation models outside the classroom. Words that appeared often in textbooks or teacher talk were easier than vocabulary encountered less frequently. Second, students struggled to internalize complex stress patterns and sometimes mapped English words onto familiar Indonesian pronunciation habits. Third, affective conditions influenced performance. Students who feared being corrected in front of classmates tended to speak quietly, hesitate, or avoid longer words, which made both accuracy and intelligibility more difficult to judge. Fourth, classroom engagement mattered. Students who listened carefully, imitated the teacher, asked questions, and joined repetition activities generally performed better than students who were distracted or reluctant to participate.

Teacher feedback helped reduce these difficulties when it was immediate, specific, and supportive. Students who initially misplaced stress often improved after the teacher separated the syllables, modeled the word, marked the stressed syllable, and asked them to repeat the item in a short phrase. This indicates that elementary learners benefit from multisensory pronunciation work rather than verbal explanation alone. Teachers can combine visual stress marks, clapping or tapping, choral repetition, individual practice, short dialogues, and audio models. Difficult words such as because, triangle, together, and

between should receive repeated practice across several lessons rather than a single correction. Pair and group activities may also lower anxiety while increasing opportunities for production.

The study extends previous Indonesian research by showing that word-stress difficulty is already visible at elementary level, not only among secondary-school or university learners. At the same time, the high accuracy on familiar words demonstrates that fifth-grade students are capable of mastering stress patterns when they receive sufficient exposure and practice. The pedagogical issue is therefore not simply whether learners can pronounce English word stress, but how instruction can help them transfer success from familiar isolated words to less familiar vocabulary and connected speech. A balanced approach should develop perceptual awareness, accurate production, confidence, and communicative clarity together.

Conclusion

The fifth-grade students at SDs 117 Islam Terpadu Adnani demonstrated uneven but generally promising word-stress accuracy. All students accurately pronounced several familiar words with simple and frequently encountered patterns, whereas because, triangle, together, and between generated the most errors. The findings show that word familiarity, syllable complexity, exposure to accurate models, first-language influence, confidence, engagement, and the quality of feedback jointly shaped performance. Correct stress placement supported word recognition, but intelligibility also depended on articulation, fluency, volume, and the ability to use pronunciation patterns in connected speech.

English teachers at elementary level should provide systematic and repeated word-stress instruction through clear modeling, visual and rhythmic cues, contextualized speaking practice, and individualized feedback. Particular attention should be given to less familiar and polysyllabic words, while classroom activities should reduce fear of error and encourage active participation. Because this study involved one class and a limited set of 20 words, its results describe a specific learning context rather than all elementary learners. Future research should include more schools, broader vocabulary, listener-based measures of intelligibility, and follow-up assessment to determine whether targeted instruction produces lasting improvement in spontaneous speaking.

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