Word stress in English two-syllable words among poesis seminary students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates word stress errors in English two-syllable words produced by Poesis Seminary students and examines how these errors affect experiential meaning within Halliday's experiential metafunction framework. Employing a descriptive qualitative design supported by simple quantitative analysis, the study involved 15 twelfth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through a pronunciation task consisting of ten English two-syllable words and semi-structured interviews. Students' pronunciations were audio-recorded, transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet, and analysed to identify error types, frequency, and meaning distortion. The findings reveal that 65.3% of the pronunciations contained word stress errors, with misplaced stress emerging as the most dominant type. Stress-contrast noun–verb pairs generated more errors than fixed-stress words. Linguistic factors such as Indonesian stress patterns, complex English stress rules, and limited phonological awareness, as well as pedagogical factors including lack of explicit instruction and limited exposure to spoken English, contributed to these errors. From an experiential metafunction perspective, incorrect stress placement frequently altered grammatical roles and distorted intended meaning. The study concludes that word stress should be taught as a meaning-related feature to enhance communicative clarity in EFL contexts.

Keyword: word stress; two-syllable words; experiential metafunction; pronunciation errors

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stress refers to the relative emphasis placed on a particular syllable within a word. It is manifested through variations in loudness, pitch, and vowel quality, and it can affect both the grammatical class and the semantic interpretation of a word. For instance, the noun REcord and the verb reCORD differ only in stress placement, yet they perform different experiential roles within a clause. The noun functions as a participant in the experiential structure (e.g., *He kept a REcord of names*), whereas the verb functions as a process (e.g., *He reCORDed the names*). Thus, incorrect stress placement may distort the intended experiential meaning and affect the listener's comprehension.

For Indonesian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering English word stress presents a significant challenge. The Indonesian language does not employ contrastive stress to differentiate lexical meaning; stress is relatively weak and predictable, typically falling near the final syllable without altering the lexical identity of a word. Consequently, Indonesian learners often transfer first-language prosodic patterns into English. This phonological interference leads to frequent stress misplacement, particularly in two-syllable words where stress contrast carries grammatical or semantic functions (Sukarni, 2018; Roach, 2009). As a result, their spoken English may sound unnatural or ambiguous, especially when stress shifts change a word's grammatical category.

In the context of word stress pronunciation, particularly in an intermediate seminary school where English is taught as a foreign language, pronunciation plays a vital communicative and academic role. Seminary students are expected to read, speak, and present religious or academic materials in English, such as sermons, prayers, or biblical readings. Correct pronunciation, therefore, is not merely a matter of linguistic

performance but also a crucial tool for effective meaning delivery. Despite possessing adequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, many students continue to struggle with suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Their speech often reflects stress transfer from the mother tongue, which interferes with clarity of meaning in spoken communication.

Previous research on EFL pronunciation has predominantly focused on segmental features, such as vowels and consonants, while suprasegmental features like stress and intonation have received comparatively less attention. Studies by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) and Dauer (2005) emphasize the pedagogical importance of stress; however, few studies have examined stress from a functional linguistic perspective by linking stress errors to meaning construction as conceptualized in the experiential metafunction. Therefore, there is a need for an analytical framework that interprets stress errors not merely as mechanical inaccuracies, but as phenomena that affect meaning in discourse.

The target words in this study consist of both stress-contrast pairs and fixed-stress words commonly used in everyday communication, such as REcord/reCORD, PREsent/preSENT, PERmit/perMIT, OBject/obJECT, PROduce/proDUCE, CONtract/conTRACT, ABOUT, HOTEL, and DOCTOR. These words were selected because they represent frequent stress-related difficulties among EFL learners and exhibit clear relationships between stress placement and grammatical function.

Through this analysis, the study aims to answer two main research questions:

1. What types of stress errors occur when Poesis Seminary students pronounce selected two-syllable English words?
2. What linguistic or pedagogical factors contribute to these stress misplacements?

In addressing these questions, the study views stress as an integral component of meaning-making within the experiential metafunction. Misplacing stress does not merely result in phonetic inaccuracy; it alters how experiences are construed in communication. For example, when a student says *I will REcord the song* instead of *I will reCORD the song*, the stress misplacement shifts the process element into a participant, thereby obscuring the intended meaning. From the experiential metafunction perspective, this phenomenon demonstrates how phonological realization directly interacts with semantic function.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both linguistic theory and EFL pedagogy. Theoretically, it expands the scope of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis into the phonological domain by illustrating that meaning is constructed not only through grammar and vocabulary, but also through prosodic features such as stress. Pedagogically, it highlights the importance of teaching stress not merely as pronunciation training, but as a meaning-preserving mechanism. Understanding the functional impact of stress can help EFL learners—particularly in seminary contexts—improve clarity, confidence, and communicative effectiveness in English.

Furthermore, examining Poesis Seminary students provides a unique sociolinguistic context. These students frequently engage in oral activities such as speeches, storytelling, and scriptural readings, where stress patterns directly influence the delivery of theological and experiential meanings. By identifying their stress errors, teachers can design pronunciation instruction that integrates phonological awareness with meaning expression, aligning with Halliday's view of language as a resource for making meaning.

In conclusion, this study explores the relationship between word stress and experiential meaning in the speech of Poesis Seminary students. By applying the experiential metafunction framework to the analysis of stress errors in selected two-syllable words, it demonstrates that pronunciation is not merely a surface-level skill, but a central element in how speakers construct and communicate experience. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on phonological realization in SFL and provide practical insights for improving English pronunciation instruction in EFL and seminary education contexts.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design supported by simple quantitative description. The study aimed to describe and interpret word stress errors produced by Poesis Seminary students and to explain how these errors influence experiential meaning in spoken English. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows in-depth observation of language behaviour and meaning realization rather than numerical generalization, while quantitative data were used only to show the frequency of stress errors.

The participants of this study were 12th-grade students from Poesis Seminary. They belonged to Poesis 1, which was the highest-level class in the seminary school and served as the final stage of the language learning track. Poesis 1 was positioned above two preceding levels, namely Grammar (10th grade) and Syntax (11th grade). At the Grammar level, students were introduced to foundational English structures, while the Syntax level emphasized more complex grammatical knowledge. Poesis 1, therefore, was designed to integrate and refine the linguistic competencies developed in the earlier stages. At this advanced level, students were guided to analyse more complex texts, apply critical thinking, and use their language skills in academic and

reflective contexts. Poesis 1 was selected as the participant group because the students had reached the highest level of language instruction in the seminary school and were considered suitable for this study.

Participation was voluntary, and all students provided consent for their voices to be recorded for academic purposes. The audio recordings were captured using an iPhone 14, which ensured clear sound quality and supported accurate transcription and analysis during the research process.

The instruments used in this study consisted of a word-list pronunciation task containing ten two-syllable English words commonly mispronounced by EFL learners. The word list included six noun–verb stress contrast pairs, namely REcord/reCORD, PREsent/preSENT, PERmit/perMIT, OBject/obJECT, PROduce/proDUCE, and CONtract/conTRACT, as well as four words with fixed stress patterns that are frequently mispronounced, namely ABOUT, HOTEL, DOCTOR, and BEfore. A recording device was used to capture students' pronunciation, while observation sheets and transcription tables were used to record stress placement and categorize errors. In addition, a semi-structured interview guide was employed to collect supporting data regarding the causes of stress misplacement, such as mother-tongue interference, limited exposure to spoken English, and lack of awareness of English stress rules.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. In the preparation stage, the researcher selected the target words, prepared research instruments, and informed participants about the purpose and procedures of the study. In the data collection stage, each student was asked to read the same printed word list aloud individually in a quiet classroom, and their voices were recorded without providing any model pronunciation to avoid imitation. Each session lasted approximately two minutes. After the pronunciation task, five students who demonstrated frequent stress errors were interviewed to explore their difficulties and awareness of English word stress. In the transcription and verification stage, all recordings were transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) using the stress marker [ˈ], and the transcriptions were verified by another English phonology lecturer to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis followed several steps. First, each student's pronunciation was compared with standard English stress patterns as presented in Roach (2009) and the Cambridge Pronouncing Dictionary (2011), which were used to verify the correct placement of word stress and identify stress errors. Second, the errors were classified into three types: misplaced stress, lack of stress, and overstress. Third, the frequency and percentage of each error type were calculated to identify the most problematic words. Fourth, using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, the researcher analysed how stress misplacement affected experiential meaning, for instance when incorrect stress altered a word's grammatical function from a process to a participant. Finally, interview data were analysed thematically to identify factors contributing to stress errors.

To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by combining data from recordings, transcriptions, and interviews, while peer debriefing was conducted with another lecturer to validate phonetic judgments. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study by informing participants about the research, anonymizing their identities, and using the recordings solely for research purposes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the research based on the pronunciation test, phonetic transcription, and frequency analysis. The results outline the types and frequencies of word stress errors made by Poesis Seminary students when pronouncing selected two-syllable English words. To address the first research question, the analysis shows that the students produced several distinct types of word stress errors in their pronunciation of the target words.

A. Overall Performance

All 15 participants completed the pronunciation task involving 10 English two-syllable words. From a total of 150 tokens (15 students × 10 words), 98 instances (65.3%) contained stress errors, while 52 instances (34.7%) were pronounced with correct stress. This finding indicates that more than half of the pronunciations demonstrated incorrect stress placement.

B. Frequency of Stress Errors per Word

The table below presents the number and percentage of incorrect pronunciations for each target word.

Table 1. Frequency of Stress Errors per Word

No	Word	Correct Stress Pattern	Incorrect Pronunciations (n=15)	Percentage (%)
1	REcord / reCORD	1st (noun) / 2nd (verb)	11	73.3
2	PREsent / preSENT	1st / 2nd	12	80.0

No	Word	Correct Stress Pattern	Incorrect Pronunciations (n=15)	Percentage (%)
3	PERmit / perMIT	1st / 2nd	10	66.7
4	OBject / obJECT	1st / 2nd	9	60.0
5	PROduce / proDUCE	1st / 2nd	8	53.3
6	CONtract / contract	1st / 2nd	9	60.0
7	ABOUT	2nd	7	46.7
8	HOTEL	2nd	6	40.0
9	DOCTOR	1st	8	53.3
10	BEFORE	2nd	8	53.3

The highest number of stress errors occurred with PREsent/preSENT (80%), followed by REcord/reCORD (73.3%). The lowest error rate was found in HOTEL (40%), suggesting that students were relatively more familiar with this commonly used word.

C. Types of Stress Errors

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 2. Types of Stress Errors

Type of Error	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Misplaced stress	Stress placed on wrong syllable (e.g., reCORD → REcord)	69	70.4
Lack of stress	Both syllables produced with equal prominence	19	19.4
Overstress	Excessive emphasis on both syllables	10	10.2

The most dominant error type was misplaced stress (70.4%), followed by lack of stress (19.4%), while overstress (10.2%) occurred least frequently.

D. Error Patterns in Stress-Contrast and Fixed-Stress Words

When the target words were grouped by category, the analysis revealed that stress-contrast words (noun–verb pairs) generated slightly more errors than fixed-stress words, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Error Patterns by Word Category

Category	No. of Words	Total Tokens (n=15)	Incorrect Tokens	Error Rate (%)
Stress-contrast (REcord, PREsent, PERmit, OBject, PROduce, CONtract)	6	90	59	65.6
Fixed-stress (ABOUT, HOTEL, DOCTOR, BEFORE)	4	60	39	65.0

Although both categories showed similarly high error rates, stress-contrast words posed slightly greater difficulty, likely due to their dual grammatical functions and shifting stress patterns.

E. Individual Student Performance

Individual analysis revealed that only two students (13%) pronounced all target words with correct stress. Most students produced between five and eight stress errors, while three students mis-stressed more than 80% of the words. Students with fewer errors generally reported greater exposure to spoken English through media consumption or participation in English club activities. In contrast, students with higher error rates reported limited listening practice and stronger first-language (L1) influence on their pronunciation.

F. Interview Findings (Supporting Data)

Follow-up interviews revealed several recurring patterns related to the possible causes of students' word stress errors:

- Most students reported uncertainty about English word stress rules and admitted that they often relied on guessing.
- Several students indicated strong influence from Indonesian stress patterns, in which stress is relatively weak and commonly realized near the final syllable.
- Some students stated that they had never received explicit instruction on English word stress rules during classroom learning.
- Students who frequently listened to English songs, sermons, or other spoken materials demonstrated relatively better awareness of correct stress placement.

Based on the results of the pronunciation test, phonetic transcription, frequency analysis, and interview data, a number of linguistic and pedagogical factors were identified as contributing to the frequent stress misplacements produced by the Poesis Seminary students. To address the second research question, these factors are discussed in detail below.

1) Linguistic Factors

a) L1 Influence (Indonesian Stress System)

Interview findings indicated that many students transferred Indonesian prosodic patterns into English pronunciation. Indonesian is characterized by relatively weak stress that does not function contrastively to distinguish lexical meaning. Stress is often realized with minimal prominence and tends to fall toward the final syllable. This transfer led students to either place stress incorrectly or produce both syllables with equal prominence. This phenomenon explains the high proportion of misplaced stress (70.4%) and lack of stress (19.4%) identified in the data.

b) Complexity of English Stress Rules

English word stress, particularly in two-syllable noun–verb stress contrast pairs (e.g., *REcord* vs. *reCORD*), requires learners to distinguish stress placement based on grammatical category. The findings showed that stress-contrast words produced slightly more errors (65.6%) than fixed-stress words (65.0%). This suggests that students struggled with the irregular and less predictable nature of English stress rules, especially when stress placement carries grammatical and semantic consequences.

c) Limited Phonological Awareness

The high number of incorrect tokens (98 out of 150) indicates that many students lacked sufficient awareness of how stress functions in English to signal syllable prominence, vowel quality, and rhythmic patterning. The presence of overstress errors (10.2%) further suggests difficulty in perceiving which syllable should receive primary prominence, leading students to overemphasize multiple syllables simultaneously.

2) Pedagogical Factors

a) Lack of Explicit Instruction on Word Stress

Interview data confirmed that several students had never received direct or systematic instruction on English word stress rules. As a result, learners relied heavily on intuition or guessing strategies when pronouncing unfamiliar words. This pedagogical gap contributed significantly to the dominance of misplaced stress errors in the pronunciation data.

b) Limited Exposure to Spoken English

Students who demonstrated fewer stress errors generally reported greater exposure to authentic spoken English through songs, sermons, and participation in English club activities. In contrast, students with higher error rates reported minimal listening practice outside the classroom. This finding suggests that limited exposure to natural spoken input hindered learners' ability to internalize English stress patterns.

c) Teaching Emphasis on Segmental Features

Students' responses implied that classroom instruction tended to focus primarily on segmental pronunciation features, such as individual vowels and consonants, rather than suprasegmental features like stress, rhythm, and intonation. Consequently, learners were not sufficiently trained to notice or produce differences in syllable prominence, which are crucial for accurate stress realization.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that Poesis Seminary students still experienced a relatively high level of word stress errors when pronouncing two-syllable English words. The most prevalent type of error was misplaced stress, particularly in words that differed in stress placement between noun and verb forms. These errors frequently occurred due to mother-tongue influence, limited understanding of English stress rules, and minimal exposure to and practice in listening and pronunciation.

The interview data reinforced these findings by highlighting several sources of difficulty. Linguistically, strong influence from Indonesian prosodic patterns, the complexity of English stress rules, and limited phonological awareness contributed to the high rate of stress misplacement. Pedagogically, the lack of explicit instruction on word stress, limited exposure to spoken English, and teaching practices that focused primarily on segmental features further hindered students' mastery of English word stress.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that word stress errors not only affected pronunciation accuracy but also influenced the experiential meaning of clauses. Incorrect stress placement could alter the grammatical function of words and cause distortion of meaning in communication. Therefore, teaching word stress in an EFL context needs to be understood as an essential component of meaning construction, rather than merely a technical aspect of pronunciation, in order to improve students' communicative effectiveness.

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