Theory and Practice: Stress Usage among Postgraduate English Language Students

Adenike Akinjobi
&
Kehinde Olujobi

Abstract

Stress, a central feature of English prosody, functions as a marker of prominence, distinguishing words, conveying meaning, and organising rhythm in speech. In Standard British English (SBE), stress is realised through alternations of strong and weak syllables, influenced by factors such as vowel quality, pitch, and duration. However, this feature has been confirmed to be used idiosyncratically by Nigerian speakers of English. Given postgraduate students' extensive exposure to the English language and their advanced linguistic training, it was assumed that theoretical knowledge should be reflected in their performance. Therefore, this study investigated how theoretical knowledge, as reflected in the practical use of stress, was applied by selected postgraduate students of English at the University of Ibadan (UIPGSE). Fifty M.A. students were randomly selected as participants, given their academic background in phonology, which made them particularly suitable for the investigation. Six content words were elicited in natural speech contexts, and the participants' productions were recorded and analysed using descriptive statistics, including simple percentages and one-sample t-tests, as well as acoustic analysis with *Praat*. The results reveal a consistent deviation from SBE word stress norms. Out of an expected 300 SBE stress placements, only 122 (40.6%) were appropriately realised, while 178 (59.3%) aligned with the Nigerian English variant. These findings demonstrate that, even among Nigerian speakers with exposure to theoretical knowledge, accurate mastery of SBE word stress patterns remained limited, highlighting the challenges of achieving native-like stress application.

Key Words: Syllable, Word Stress, Pronunciation, Standard British English (SBE)

1. Introduction

Effective communication in spoken English is enhanced by accurate pronunciation and adherence to established phonological norms, which are essential for mutual intelligibility. Among the suprasegmental features of English, stress plays a central role in shaping rhythm, intonation, and prosodic

balance, thereby ensuring clarity in speech. Vowel reduction enables unstressed syllables to be pronounced more lightly, contributing to speech rhythm and preventing monotonous delivery. Together, stress placement (suprasegmental) and vowel reduction (segmental) enhance intelligibility and the natural flow of discourse, minimising the likelihood of misunderstanding in spoken interaction. Research has shown that Nigerian English (NE) exhibits notable divergences from Standard British English (SBE) in the realisation of suprasegmental features such as stress, intonation, and rhythm. These divergences are often attributed to the influence of over 400 indigenous Nigerian languages, giving rise to nativised varieties of English with distinct phonological patterns. The English language, owing to its historical evolution and global prominence, continues to attract sustained scholarly interest across various linguistic fields. Among its suprasegmental features, stress is significant, as it functions at the syllable, word, and sentence levels to influence rhythm, emphasis, and meaning in spoken communication. Correct stress placement not only serves a lexical role, for example, differentiating between 'record' (noun) and 'record' (verb), but also aids in the prosodic organisation of speech and the clear conveyance of communicative intent.

While native speakers usually acquire stress patterns unconsciously through natural exposure, the same cannot be assumed for non-native speakers, who often need explicit instruction and purposeful practice to master stress. This is particularly true in multilingual environments such as Nigeria, where the influence of indigenous language systems markedly shapes the phonological patterns of English speech. As a result, competence in word stress placement is widely regarded as essential for intelligibility, naturalness, and effective communication in spoken English.

Scholars such as Banjo (1971, 1996), Jowitt (1991) and Bamgbose (1995) have tried to classify these varieties along a continuum from strongly nativised to more standardised forms that resemble SBE. While such classifications acknowledge the validity of Nigerian English as a variety, they also emphasise ongoing difficulties in achieving consistency in stress placement and other prosodic features. This remains an important issue, especially in academic and professional settings where deviations from standard word stress patterns may impair intelligibility and communication effectiveness.

Despite the established pattern for Nigerian speakers of English (Kujore, 1985; Jowitt, 1991, 2022; Banjo 1996; Akinjobi, 2004; Akindele 2017), there is a need to examine how postgraduate students, who have acquired a significant level of

theoretical knowledge, apply this theoretical knowledge in the practical application of word stress to determine whether their theoretical knowledge aligns with the Standard British English stress norm.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine patterns of word stress assignment in the spoken English of selected Master's degree students of English at the University of Ibadan, with a view to determining the extent to which their theoretical knowledge is reflected in their practical English word stress placement. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

i. to examine the extent to which the word stress patterns applied to English words by UIPGSE students conform to Standard British English norms in natural speech contexts;
ii. to consider the extent to which their word stress patterns align with the established patterns for Nigerian English;
iii. to evaluate the influence of prior theoretical knowledge on the students' ability to apply appropriate word stress in selected English words.

2. Literature Review

Syllables

A syllable plays an essential role in phonological organisation, articulation, and rhythmic patterning in a word (prosodic word and phonological word). A syllable is a unit of speech consisting of a centre that has little or no obstruction to airflow and that sounds comparatively loud; before and after this centre, there may be greater or lesser obstruction and less loud sound (Roach 2009). Das et al. (2009) note that a syllable minimally contains a vowel or vowel-like sound serving as its nucleus, around which consonants may occur as onset or coda. Thus, *red* constitutes one syllable, while *absent* comprises two, each built around its own vowel nucleus, and "a" in available is a syllable without any cluster of sounds. Early articulatory perspectives emphasised the physiological basis of the syllable. For instance, Stetson (1951) associated the syllable with a single chest pulse, linking its structure to respiratory activity. Pike (1947) similarly viewed the syllable as a product of a single chest pulse, grounding its definition in the biomechanics of speech. Abercrombie (1967) also expanded on this view by characterising the syllable as a muscular contraction followed by the release of air, thereby situating syllable formation within the broader context of articulatory and aerodynamic processes. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that the syllable is a linguistic unit that can be understood from both physiological and phonological standpoints, with each

approach contributing valuable insights into its structure, production, and role in speech organisation.

A key aspect of English syllable structure is the distinction between strong and weak syllables, which is central to English prosody. Strong syllables typically contain full vowels and often bear primary or secondary stress, whereas weak syllables commonly include reduced vowels such as schwa /ə/ and occur in unstressed positions (Roach, 2009). The alternation between strong and weak syllables forms the basis of the stress-timed rhythm traditionally associated with English. In stress-timed languages, the interval between stressed syllables tends to be perceived as relatively regular, irrespective of the number of unstressed syllables that occur between them (Abercrombie, 1967). To maintain this rhythmic pattern, unstressed syllables are often shortened, compressed, or weakened through vowel reduction. For example, the duration of the unstressed syllables in a phrase such as *'walk to the market'* is reduced so that the stressed syllables *walk* and *mar-* occur at approximately equal intervals. This process contributes to the characteristic rhythm of English and distinguishes it from syllable-timed languages, where each syllable is produced with a more equal duration. For second-language learners, accurate recognition of strong and weak syllables is crucial, as stress placement influences meaning, naturalness, and overall communicative effectiveness.

Standard English Stress

Stress is an important feature in phonology and phonetics, marking relative prominence among syllables within words and across larger prosodic units. Ladefoged (1975:224) defines stress as a composite of phonetic cues - pitch movement, duration, intensity, and vowel quality- that collectively heighten the perceptual salience of a syllable. Katamba (1989) similarly conceptualises stress as a phonological property that differentiates one syllable from another, thereby contributing to lexical identity and structural organisation. Beyond its phonetic realisation, stress fulfils critical phonological functions: it differentiates lexical items, signals grammatical distinctions, and shapes semantic interpretation within utterances.

English stress exhibits several defining attributes, notably its culminative, hierarchical, and rhythmic nature. As a culminative feature, stress is typically assigned to a single dominant syllable per word, creating a peak of prominence (Liberman & Prince, 1977). For example, in the word *teacher* /ˈ tiː tʃ ə/, the first syllable bears the primary stress, while the second syllable remains unstressed. This prominence is influenced by patterns of vowel quality, syllable

complexity, and pitch contour (Ladefoged, 1993). Thus, every content word contains at least one stressed syllable, while even monosyllabic grammatical words may bear stress when produced in isolation. Stress is also hierarchical, operating across word, phrase, and sentence levels. Chomsky and Halle (1968:34) describe this as an interactional system in which stress assignment at one level can condition patterns at adjacent levels, creating a layered structure of prominence relations. For instance, in the phrase *a beautiful garden*, the word *beautiful* has its own word stress, but within the phrase, the nucleus of prominence may shift to *garden*, depending on the communicative focus. Ladefoged (1975) notes that the most stressed syllable generally corresponds to the one with the greatest phonetic enhancement, reflecting the interaction between abstract prosodic rules and their physical realisation. English stress is further characterised by its rhythmic nature, whereby stressed and unstressed syllables alternate to produce the characteristic stress-timed rhythm of the language. In a sentence such as '*The students arrived on time'*, the stressed syllables (*stu-*, *rived*, *time*) occur at relatively regular intervals, while the intervening unstressed syllables are shortened or weakened. This alternation between strong and weak syllables contributes significantly to the rhythm and natural flow of English speech (Abercrombie, 1967; Roach, 2009).

Stress plays a crucial role as a primary distinguishing feature at the lexical level. The contrast between *record* /ˈ rekɔː d/ (noun) and *record* /rɪ ˈ kɔː d/ (verb) illustrates how stress placement also distinguishes word classes and meaning, a phenomenon widely discussed in English phonology (Crystal, 2008). Gimson (1964) also distinguishes between primary and secondary stress in Standard English, noting that the distribution of stress across syllables is governed by morphological structure and phonotactic constraints. For example, in the word *examination* /ɪ ɡˌ zæmɪ ˈ neɪ ʃ ən/, the syllable *-neɪ* - carries the primary stress (/ˈ /), while *-zæm-* bears secondary stress (/ˌ /). Similarly, in *organisation*/ˌ ɔː ɡ ənaɪ ˈ zeɪ ʃ ən/, the primary stress falls on *-zeɪ* -, whereas the initial syllable carries secondary stress. These examples illustrate how stress is distributed across syllables according to the structural composition of words.

Research on the acoustic correlates of stress confirms its complex realisation. Collins and Mees (2008) describe stress perception as a function of intensity, pitch variation, length, and vowel quality. Empirical studies by Fry (1955) and Lehiste (1970) establish pitch as the most significant cue to stress in English, followed by duration and loudness. Taken together, these findings position

stress as a core component of English phonology, operating through an interplay of phonetic and phonological factors that jointly determine syllabic prominence and contribute to lexical and phrasal meaning (Udofot, 2007). This establishes the theoretical basis for the present study by clarifying how stress is acoustically realised through measurable cues such as pitch, duration, intensity, and vowel quality. Thus, evaluating how UIPGSE students produce stress should not rely only on what is heard. It should also consider measurable features such as pitch, length, intensity, and vowel quality, since these can clearly indicate differences from Standard British English stress patterns.

Word Stress

The study of word stress focuses on identifying the prominent syllables in words and the rhythmic, positional, quantitative, and morphological factors that determine prominence patterns (Kager, 1995). The assignment of word stress in English cannot be determined solely by fixed positional rules, as stress placement varies depending on lexical and morphological factors. In contrast, in French, stress is generally predictable and tends to be fixed at the end of prosodic units rather than functioning as a contrastive lexical feature within words. Unlike English, which is a stress-timed language in which stress placement contributes to lexical distinction and rhythmic organisation, French does not employ word-level stress in the same contrastive manner, as prominence is typically realised at the phrase level. To address this unpredictability, some linguists argue for the use of systematic rules with exceptions, rather than treating stress as an inherent lexical property requiring memorisation (Cruttenden, 2014). Similarly, Chomsky and Halle (1968) propose that English stress becomes more systematically predictable when rules account for morphological information, such as suffixes and prefixes, alongside phonological structure, even though irregularities persist.

Nigerian English Stress

Research on Nigerian English stress consistently shows that its patterns diverge significantly from those of Standard British English. Todd (1980) argues that Nigerian English often reinterprets stress in tonal terms, proposing a conversion system in which primary stress corresponds to a high tone. In contrast, secondary and tertiary stress levels correspond to a low tone. This tonally oriented interpretation reflects the influence of indigenous Nigerian languages, many of which are tone languages and therefore shape the prosodic habits of Nigerian English speakers.

Building on this observation, Kujore (1985) reports that one of the most salient features of Nigerian English pronunciation is delayed primary stress, which he traces to the prosodic structures of local languages. Through extensive lexical analysis, he identifies stress-assignment tendencies characteristic of Nigerian English. For example, he notes that verbs ending in *-ass, -ate, -bit, -fy, -ise/-ize/-yse, -ish, -ment,* and *-ute* frequently receive stress on the final syllable, contrary to Standard English norms, as seen in *canvass, abbreviate, exhibit, amplify, advertise, distinguish, comment,* and *attribute*. Kujore also identifies instances of stress reversal in which words that ordinarily receive stress on the second syllable in Standard British English are assigned primary stress on the first syllable in Nigerian English. Examples include *acute* /əˈ kjuː t/ → /ˈ ækjuː t/, *cabal* /kəˈ bæl/ → /ˈ kæbæl/, *canoe* /kəˈ nuː / → /ˈ kænuː /, and *cassette* /kəˈ set/ → /ˈ kæset/. These examples illustrate the tendency for stress reassignment, which has been widely reported as a characteristic feature of Nigerian English pronunciation.

From a complementary perspective, Jowitt (1991) describes a systematic tendency in Nigerian English to shift primary stress. He notes that this shift is more pronounced with verbs than with nouns or adjectives, resulting in forms such as *appreciate* and *eradicate* receiving stress on the final syllable rather than the second. At the phrasal and sentence levels, this tendency persists: compound nouns and pre-modified noun phrases are frequently stressed on the rightmost element, and nuclear stress in sentences is often misplaced. Jowitt further observes that Nigerian English speakers rarely exploit contrastive stress for pragmatic emphasis, a feature central to Standard English discourse. Additionally, he notes that compound words are seldom distinguished by stress; both hyphenated and open compounds, such as *sitting room, eye hospital,* and *grammar school*, often receive stress on syllables that are different from Standard English preferences. This is a theoretical aspect of language study. Avoid presenting data or examples as if they were a literary study or mere descriptive research. Endeavour to show analysis separately and not in-text.

With a more analytical approach than Kujore (1985), Jowitt (1991) organises his data into clear structural categories. For disyllabic words and compounds, he observes a systematic rightward shift of stress: items that bear initial stress in Received Pronunciation (RP) are frequently assigned stress on the second syllable in Nigerian English. Illustrative examples include *challenge*, *ma'dam*, and *fire'wood*, where the normative RP stress pattern is reversed.

Single words of more than two syllables, which fall into several sub-groups:

i. verbs ending in the suffixes *-ate, -ize/-ise, -y*, or *-ish*, where in NEA the stress falls on the final syllable (e.g. *congratu / late, adver / tise, modi / fy, distin / guish*);
ii. -ism nouns, where in NEA the stress falls on the syllable preceding the suffix (e.g. *capi / talism*);
iii. 'medical trade names' (e.g. *aspi'rin*);
iv. 'other examples', including *agri / culture, An / thony, Eu / ropean, pre / ferable and;*
v. compounds of more than two syllables (e.g. *sitting- / room, grammar'school*)

Numerous studies (Akinjobi, 2004, 2009; Ilolo, 2013; Sunday & Ayinde, 2020; Akindele, 2021) affirm that NE stress patterns are shaped by the prosodic systems of indigenous Nigerian languages. A recurrent finding is the absence of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, particularly in the educated Yoruba, Isoko, and Edo varieties (Akinjobi, 2004; Ilolo, 2013; Akindele, 2017). Instead of weakening to schwa, syllables typically retain full vowel qualities, resulting in a predominance of strong syllables. Syncope is also infrequent, with speakers often inserting epenthetic vowels from their first languages, and syllabic nasals rarely occur.

Investigations into stress shift further highlight deviations from SBE norms. Studies by Akinjobi (2004) and Akindele (2017) reveal that educated Edo English speakers show limited proficiency in reassigning stress when suffixes that require stress shift are added to stems. The studies report reduced durational distinctions between stressed and unstressed syllables, indicating a prosodic system less dependent on temporal cues than SBE. These findings are reinforced by Sunday and Ayinde (2020), who argue that stress in NE is strongly influenced by tonal patterns from indigenous languages, particularly the placement and interaction of high tones. Their study establishes NE not as a canonical stress or tonal language, but as a hybrid pitch-accent system in which tone significantly shapes perceived stress.

At the phrasal and compound level, Sunday (2011) documents a consistent rightward pitch movement in NE. Compound nouns typically exhibit a rise–fall pitch contour, whereas compound verbs do not, though stress placement generally favours the first element. NE appears to adhere to a Compound Prominence Rule, assigning primary stress to the initial node unless branching occurs at the word level. Phrasal stress, especially in noun and verb phrases, is

largely predictable, with premodifiers frequently receiving prominence, an outcome attributed to local language influence. These findings contribute to a clearer understanding of NE prosody and its systematic yet distinctive patterns.

The geo-ethnic variability of NE stress has also attracted attention. Anyagwa (2020) shows that Igbo English (IE) and Yoruba English (YE) exhibit distinct stress patterns, challenging the notion of a homogeneous NE accent. Differences in the stress assignment of items such as PROtein/proTEIN, UMbrella/umBRELla, and CEremony/ceREmony underscore the importance of a regional approach to defining NE phonology. This underscores that suprasegmental distinctions in NE, like segmental ones, reflect broader linguistic diversity.

Supporting these findings, Akinola and Oladipupo (2021) highlight that NE stress is heavily influenced by the prosodic structures of Nigerian languages, leading to variability among speakers and making consistent categorisation difficult. Similarly, Jowitt (2022) emphasises the uniqueness of NE stress, pointing out a tendency for primary stress to occur either early or late, a limited use of emphatic or contrastive stress, and the almost complete absence of post-nuclear stress. He explains that the frequent presence of secondary or tertiary prominence results from the lack of vowel reduction.

3. Methodology

The study employed a random sampling technique to select fifty M.A. postgraduate students as participants. The selection of this group was informed by their prior exposure to the theoretical aspects of phonology at the undergraduate level. This implies that they had undergone courses on phonology and passed them, making them suitable participants for the study.

Each participant was required to produce six selected English words in natural speech contexts, resulting in a total of 300 word tokens from the 50 participants. The speech samples were recorded using the voice-recording application of a smartphone. To ensure the quality and reliability of the recordings, data collection was conducted in a quiet environment with minimal external noise and other potential sources of interference. Adequate precautions were taken throughout the recording process to minimise factors that could affect the participants' speech production or compromise the quality of the data. The recorded samples were subsequently subjected to acoustic analysis using Praat, a computer-based speech analysis software.

4. Analysis

Word Stress Application in the Spoken English of UIPGSE

Each appropriate production of the underlisted words was allotted one mark, while all the participants' scores for each item were subsequently converted to percentages.

Table 1: Stress Placement in the Pronunciations of UIPGSE

Tested items	Expected score	Approximation to SBE	Pronunciation of Nigerian English Variant
Gardener /ˈ ɡ ɑ ː dnə/	50	20	30
Success /səkˈ sɛ s/	50	17	33
Professor /prəˈ fɛ sə/	50	16	34
Campus /ˈ kæmpəs/	50	21	29
Pronounce /prəˈ naʊ ns/	50	25	25
Corner /ˈ kɔ ː nə/	50	23	27
Total	**300 (100%)**	**122 (40.6)**	**178 (59.3)**

Table I presents the results, indicating the extent to which the spoken English of some University of Ibadan postgraduate students of English (UIPGSE) approximates SBE or confirmed Nigerian stress patterns. The assignment of stress to the six lexical items reveals significant deviations from Standard British English (SBE) norms, aligning with Nigerian English stress patterns. For instance, *gardener* /ˈ ɡ ɑ ː dnə/, which requires a strong–weak pattern, only 20 participants (40%) made the first syllable more prominent using the Standard British English pattern, while 30 (60%) assigned equal prominence to both syllables. In *success* /səkˈ ses/ (weak–strong), 17 participants (34%) assigned stress to the second syllable following the SBE pattern, whereas 33 (66%) did not, reflecting the Nigerian word stress pattern.

With *professor* /prəˈ fesə/ (weak–strong–weak), just 16 participants (32%) followed the SBE stress pattern by stressing 'fe' while 34 (68%) assigned near-equal prominence to the three syllables, reflecting the Nigerian English stress pattern. For *campus* /ˈ kæmpəs/ (strong–weak), 21 participants (42%) used the SBE stress pattern relatively, while 29 (58%) assigned equal prominence to both

syllables. *In the production of pronounce* /prəˈ naʊ ns/ (weak–strong), 25 participants (50%) approximated SBE, but 25 (50%) did not. With*corner* /ˈ kɔ ː nə/ (strong–weak), 23 participants (46%) approximated the SBE stress pattern, while 27 (54%) did not make a distinction in speech prominence between the first and second syllable.

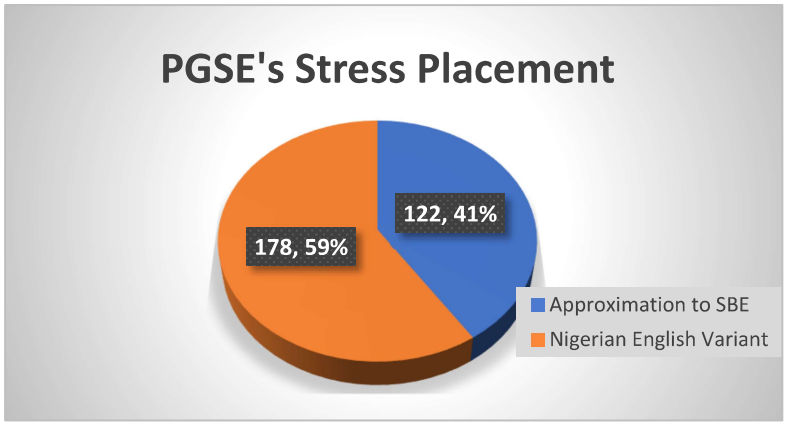

Figure 1: A pie chart of approximation to SBE and Nigerian English Variant

Overall, only 122 instances of approximation to SBE word stress patterns (40.6%) were observed out of an expected 300, with 178 Nigerian English variants (59.3%), indicating a tendency toward equal syllable prominence, a feature strongly influenced by patterns in Nigerian indigenous languages.

Praat Image Showing Stress Assignment to "Gardener"

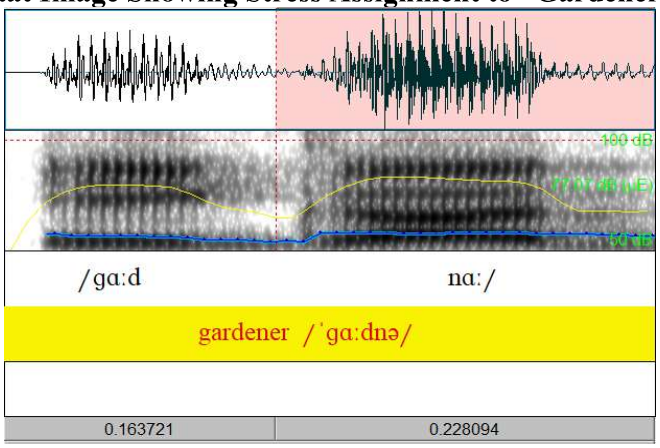

Figure 2: Acoustic presentation of the word *'gardener'*

The spectrogram above reveals near-equal pitch prominence in the UIPGSE production of the word "gardener" rather than the first syllable being made more prominent than the second. In the same vein, the first syllable (/ˈ ɡ ɑ ː /) is articulated over a duration of 0.163721 seconds, whereas the second syllable (/næ/) is pronounced with a longer duration of 0.228094 seconds. Assigning more duration to the second syllable gives undue prominence to a syllable that should be weakened by unstressing. This misplacement of stress deviates from the expected pattern in standard pronunciation, where the second syllable should be weakened. The spectrogram further indicates increased acoustic intensity during the articulation of the second syllable, as indicated by the elevated yellow line, suggesting greater effort and force in its production.

Praat Image Showing Stress Assignment to "Success"

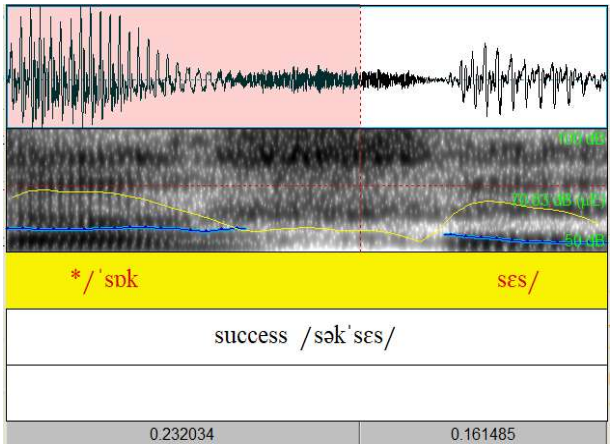

Figure 3: Acoustic presentation of the word *success*

In the PGSE production of '*success'*, the first syllable was given more prominence than the second syllable. The participant produced the first syllable with a longer duration of 0.232034 and produced the second syllable with a shorter duration of 0.161485. The intensity and the speech contour lines in the above PGSE's spectrogram corroborate this, as the lines are raised higher in the articulation of the first syllable and gradually become lowered towards the articulation of the second syllable. Therefore, it can be observed that there is a contradictory assignment of word stress in the pronunciation of the word *success*: while the second syllable /ˈ sɛ s/ is stressed in SBE, the PGSE stressed the first syllable /sək/, aligning with the Nigerian word stress pattern.

Praat Image Showing Stress Assignment to "Professor"

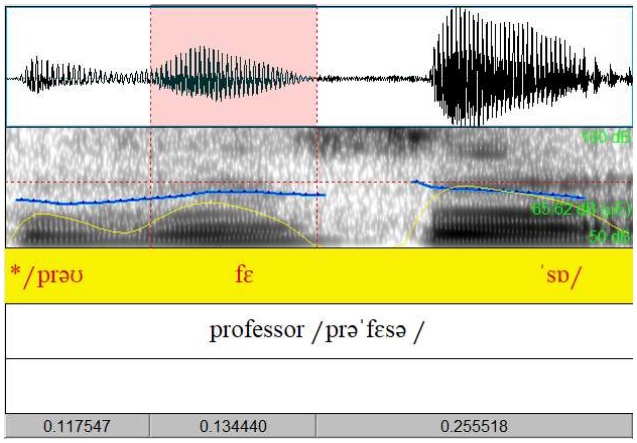

Figure 4: Acoustic presentation of the word *success*

In relation to the above acoustic production of the word "professor" by the UIPGSE, the final syllable is produced with a prolonged duration of 0.255518 seconds. It is articulated with greater force, resulting in its unintended prominence and stress. This observed Nigerian English stress pattern is attributed to the participant's failure to reduce the vowels in the first and third syllables to the schwa /ə/, as required in Standard English pronunciation. As a result, the final syllable is realised as /sɒ / instead of the expected /sə/.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this study examines the extent to which the word stress patterns produced by the selected University of Ibadan postgraduate students of English conform to Standard British English (SBE) norms in natural speech. The findings reveal substantial deviations from SBE stress patterns across the six lexical items analysed. In *gardener, campus*, and *corner*, fewer than half of the participants assigned primary stress to the first syllable, despite these being canonical strong–weak structures in SBE. Similarly, in *success* and *professor*, the majority failed to assign stress to the second syllable, with 66% and 68%, respectively, producing different stress patterns which align with Nigerian English word stress. These results illustrate a systemic difficulty in identifying and applying SBE stress cues, particularly in polysyllabic items such as *professor,* where prominence must be hierarchically distributed.

In this regard, Akinjobi (2024), in a paper presented, provides a comprehensive synthesis of convergent findings from observational and empirical studies on stress patterns in Nigerian English. Situated within this broader scholarly

context, the high rates of deviation observed in the present study suggest limited sensitivity to reduced vowels and weak syllables, features that are central to SBE prosody. This observation aligns with convergent empirical evidence indicating that Nigerian English speakers rarely reduce unstressed vowels (Akinjobi 2004, 2009; Ilolo 2013; Jowitt 2022), resulting in near-equal prominence across syllables.

The tendency to interpret stress primarily in terms of pitch rather than vowel quality or duration further corroborates earlier claims that many Nigerian speakers process English stress through tonal patterns (Udofot, 2003). Consequently, the participants' performance demonstrates a marked divergence from SBE stress norms, reinforcing long-established descriptions of Nigerian English as prosodically distinct, characterised by delayed stress placement, weak vowel non-reduction, and a reduced contrast between strong and weak syllables (Kujore 1985; Jowitt 1991, 2022).

The second objective was to determine the extent to which the stress patterns exhibited by participants align with recognised Nigerian English stress norms. The distribution of stress across the six lexical items corresponds with established Nigerian English tendencies. Most participants produced levelled or right-shifted stress, consistent with the documented preference for delayed primary stress (Kujore 1985; Jowitt 1991) and the general avoidance of weakening functionally unstressed syllables. The high proportion of speakers who assigned greater or equal prominence to the second syllable in *corner, campus,* and *gardener* reflects the rightward stress shift observed in the educated Yoruba, Edo, and Isoko varieties (Akinjobi 2004; Ilolo 2013; Akindele 2017). Additionally, the participants' difficulty with polysyllabic stress redistribution in *professor* corresponds with prior findings that Nigerian English exhibits minimal stress shift in derivation and syllable restructuring (Akindele, 2013). These alignments confirm that the students' productions were more representative of Nigerian English norms than of SBE prosodic organisation.
The third objective evaluates the influence of prior theoretical knowledge on the students' ability to apply appropriate English word stress. The findings indicate that theoretical exposure alone does not translate into accurate practical performance. Despite being postgraduate students of English, presumably having received formal instruction in phonology, more than half of the participants produced different stress patterns on four of the six test items. This suggests a persistent gap between theoretical competence and applied phonological skill, consistent with earlier claims that stress assignment in

Nigerian English is largely governed by L1 prosodic transfer rather than pedagogical intervention (Jowitt, 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that selected Master's degree students of English continue to face notable challenges in accurately applying Standard British English (SBE) word-stress patterns in speech. Whereas SBE relies on stress as a central lexical and rhythmic cue for intelligibility, the participants frequently assigned prominence indiscriminately, producing syllables with nearly equal force, thereby weakening the contrast between strong and weak syllables. This pattern indicates that, despite extensive theoretical training in phonology from the undergraduate to the postgraduate levels, linguistic performance in SBE stress placement remains limited. Crucially, these findings are consistent with the convergent observations. As outlined in that synthesis of findings on Nigerian suprasegmentals, Nigerian English is marked by delayed stress, weak vowel non-reduction, and a tendency to realise stress primarily through pitch rather than vowel quality or duration. Hence, the overall results indicate that the stress productions of the UIPGSE students were more frequently aligned with established descriptions of Nigerian English stress than with Standard British English norms, although evidence of conformity to SBE was also observed.

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