ENGLISH SPEECH RHYTHM—SENTENCE STRESS / SCHWA

English is a stress-timed language. Spanish is a syllable-timed language.

... A stress-timed language is a language where the stressed syllables are said at approximately regular intervals, and unstressed syllables shorten to fit this rhythm.

... Syllable-timed languages are those where each syllable takes approximately the same amount of time.

Listen and then practice.

1	2	3	4
1 and	2 and	3 and	4
1 and a	2 and a	3 and a	4
1 and then a	2 and then a	3 and then a	4

						syllables
	CATS		CHASE		MICE.	3
The	CATS		CHASE		MICE.	4
The	CATS		CHASE	the	MICE.	5
The	CATS	will	CHASE	the	MICE.	6
The	CATS	are	CHASing	the	MICE.	7
The	CATS	will be	CHASing	the	MICE.	8
The	CATS	have been	CHASing	the	MICE.	8
The	CATS	will have been	CHASing	the	MICE.	9

Content words are stressed.

- nouns
- main verbs
- adjectives
- adverbs
- quantifiers
- interrogatives
- negatives

Function words are NOT stressed.

- articles
- conjunctions
- pronouns
- the *be* verbs
- prepositions
- auxiliary verbs
- possessive adjectives

Identify (underline or circle) the content words—and thus the stress—in these sentences.

What are you doing tonight?

What do you want to do?

He said he has a dog, not a cat.

Four people are waiting in the car.

We're going to Italy on holiday in June.

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It is important to not only recognize sentence stress when you hear it, but also to be able to produce it. How do you produce stress-timed rhythm? The answer is the **schwa**.

The **schwa** is like the short u sound, but even shorter and weaker. In the dictionary, it is represented as **/ə/**.

Stressed syllables are pronounced with greater volume and length AND they also maintain the full vowel sound, the clear vowel sound. (This is referred to as the strong form of a word.) The schwa is the how we "unstress" words. The normal, full sound of a syllable is replaced by the schwa. (This is the weak form of words.)

The schwa is used so that unstressed syllables can be pronounced quickly—so that the multiple unstressed syllables can fit between the stressed syllables.

To repeat, **the schwa is only found in unstressed syllables**. In fact, most unstressed vowels are pronounced as a schwa. For example, you hear the schwa (a muffled /uh/ sound) in the first syllable of *amaze* / ə ˈmāz / and in the second syllable of *gallon* / ˈga lən /. The schwa is a very brief sound; in fact, in some words, the schwa may seem to disappear completely. For example, when we say *chocolate*, the second syllable is often reduced to the point that it disappears / ˈchoc lət /. The same occurs in the words *camera, interest*, and *several*.

All English vowels may have a schwa sound. Look at the chart below.

a:	*pleasant*	*again*	*balloon*
e:	*problem*	*celebrate*	*enemy*
i:	*duplicate*	*president*	*family*
o:	*parrot*	*bottom*	*freedom*
u:	*support*	*circumstance*	*album*
y:	*syringe*	*analysis*	*Pennsylvania*

It is essential that you learn to use the schwa. Students who expect to hear the full pronunciation of all vowel sounds may fail to recognize even words that they know. They often will fail to notice unstressed auxiliaries, for example, which would lead to misunderstandings about time and tense. And students must learn to produce the schwa. When they do not—when all words in a sentence receive the same stress—native speakers may, at minimum, become frustrated or, in the worst case, fail to understand.

I will warn you. This may be difficult. It will take time. The syllable-timed rhythm of Spanish is so natural to you that stress-timed speech will feel awkward. Keep trying. Here are some tips...

- **Listen to English as often as possible.** I don't care if you don't understand what is said. I want you to expose yourself to the rhythm of English frequently.
- **When you have a conversation in English, don't try to understand every word. Try to understand all the important words.** Accept that some words will be unclear, and try to use the context to antipate/complete the message.
- **Read poetry, especially limericks.**
- **Practice unstressing function words.**

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Let's practice.

Limericks / Poetry. Reading poetry, especially limericks because of their more obvious rhythm, is a good way to increase familiarity with English stress patterns. Always read them out loud.

There was a young lady from Niger,
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.
After the ride
She was inside,
And the smile was on the face of the tiger.

There once was a lady named Lynn
Who was so uncommonly thin,
that when she essayed
to drink lemonade,
she slipped through the straw and fell in!

Echo Activity. This activity works well with a partner but you can do it alone, too. This activity uses rhyming patterns to help you become familiar with word stress within a sentence. First, I will read a word with a stressed syllable. (If you are practicing alone, emphasize the stressed syllable as much as possible. Make sure the stressed syllable is loud, with a higher tone.) Then, you will "echo" the word with a sentence that has a similar sound and a similar stress pattern.

Word	**Echo**
inter**rup**tion	Let's have **lunch** now.
inter**rup**tion	He's my **un**cle.
inter**rup**tion	I said, "**un**der."
inter**act**	It's a **fact**.
inter**act**	Here's your **hat**.
inter**act**	Where's my **snack**?
com**mit**tee	She's **pre**tty.
com**mit**tee	It's **tri**cky.
com**mit**tee	He's **wit**ty.
enter**tain**	I've been **paid**.
enter**tain**	That's in**sane**!
enter**tain**	Let me ex**plain**.

Remember that, because the two columns have the same stress pattern, they should take roughly the same amount of time to pronounce. Try to say the sentences as quickly as you say the words.

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Unstressed Function Words. Read the following strings of content words with an even rhythm. Then supply function words to turn them into full sentences, and read them again with the same rhythm. Be sure to use weak forms (the schwa) where appropriate for your added function words. (You can invent many sentences. I have offered an example to get you started.)

1. think like dress	I think she likes your new dress.
2. wait John hour	She will wait for John for an hour.
3. sublet house month summer	They are subletting their house for a month in the summer.
4. take children school morning	He takes the children to school in the morning.
5. make date Pat week	I will make a date with Pat next week.
6. arrive Spain weekend	They can arrive in Spain by the weekend.
7. want left alone	The dogs want to be left alone.
8. possible go bike	It's possible to go on your bike.
9. know behave well	I know they behave very well.
10. meet 10 o'clock Tuesday	We will meet around 10 o'clock on Tuesday.

Increasingly complex sentences. Each of the following sentences has two stresses, even though the number of unstressed syllables varies. As you say each sentence tap a table twice on the stressed syllable, keeping the strokes at a regular beat.

The cat is big.	The tiger is big.	The elephant is big.	
The cat is big.	The cat is happy.	The cat is happier.	
The cat is big.	The tiger is happy.	The elephant is happier.	
Peter talks.	Peter would talk.	Peter would have talked.	
Mary studies.	Mary is studying.	Mary will be studying.	Mary should have been studying.

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Activity

Mark the stressed words in the following sentences. After you have found the stressed words, practice reading the sentences aloud. I will ask you to read them aloud during our next class.

John is coming over tonight. We are going to work on our homework together.

Ecstasy is an extremely dangerous drug.

We should have visited some more castles while we were traveling through the back roads of France.

Jack bought a new car last Friday.

They are looking forward to your visiting them next January.

Exciting discoveries lie in Tom's future.

Would you like to come over and play a game of chess?

They have been having to work hard these last few months on their challenging experiment.

Shakespeare wrote passionate, moving poetry.

As you might have expected, he has just thought of a new approach to the problem.

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