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Word Stress – Why it matters and how to approach it in the classroom?

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Word Stress

*Why it matters and how to approach it
in the classroom*

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MASTER MEEF ANGLAIS

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Introduction

The question of how much time should be spent on pronunciation in the English as a foreign language classroom is one that has never had a clear answer. It is not obvious how important speaking with good pronunciation is, and it is even less obvious how much of an impact pronunciation instruction has on the learners. That being said, it is clear that some focus on pronunciation is helpful and necessary, and the question: “which elements of pronunciation are the most important when it comes to successful communication?” is an empirical one which researchers have sought to answer for some time now, and whose answer I will discuss in the following literature review. I chose to focus this paper on word stress for two main reasons. The first is the important role that it plays in English (which I knew about from previous foreign language teaching studies) compared to its rather minimal importance in French. It is unlikely that someone speaking French would be misunderstood (or not understood) as a result of accenting the incorrect syllable. This is because the typically stressed syllable (the final one) is barely accented more than the others in a multisyllabic word, and because the stressed syllable does not have the power to change the meaning of the word. In English, on the other hand, the stressed syllable is much more accented than the others in a multisyllabic word, and a change in its placement does have the power to change the meaning or class of the word. The second reason I chose to focus on word stress is the relative lack of instruction that it receives in the French school system when it comes to teaching English. I came to the conclusion that instruction around word stress was missing through my experience as an English assistant in several French middle and high schools, as well as through my experience as a Master MEEF student. As an assistant I saw that students were accustomed to working on the correct pronunciation of various vowels and consonants, especially in the form of minimal pairs, but I never once saw a teacher spend even a few minutes talking about word stress or reduced vowels. Additionally, I worked with several teachers who frequently misplaced word stress, or who had a strong enough accent that all the syllables in a multisyllabic word sounded roughly equal (like in French). As a master’s student, I was shocked to discover that many of my classmates were hearing about word stress and reduced syllables for the first time in their first year of a master’s degree, having studied English for at least ten years and even focusing on it in university. This lack of instruction gave way to pronouncing many words the way they are spelled (a strategy that seldom works in English, unfortunately), such as pronouncing “chocolate” /ʃʊkəʊleɪt/ or “mountain” /maʊnteɪn/. Anyone who has studied word stress for at least fifteen minutes should

know that a two-syllable word having each syllable pronounced with a diphthong (as in the second example) is extremely improbable because of reduced vowels. Along with my intrinsic interest in phonology and pronunciation, these were my motivations for choosing to write about word stress in English.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Definitions

The following paper looks at the role of prosody and word stress and their relative importance in English. In the discussion of pronunciation and phonology, a distinction is often made between two major categories: **segmental** and **suprasegmental**. The **segmental** aspects of language are its “inventory of sounds – that is its particular combination of consonants and vowels” (Celce-Murcia, 2010: 41). As the name suggests, “segmental phonology analyses the speech into distinctive units, or phonemes, which have a fairly direct correspondence with phonetic segments” (Crystal, 2008: 426). Much time has traditionally been devoted to the study of the segmental aspects of pronunciation in the language classroom, which makes sense given that no two languages share the same phonetic bank. In other words, any learner of a foreign language will need to learn to pronounce a series of new vowels and consonants, most of which do not exist in his or her mother tongue. **Suprasegmental** phonology “analyses those features of speech which extend over more than one segment” (Crystal, 2008: 426). These kinds of features include prosody, stress, rhythm, as well as adjustments in connected speech “such as assimilation and linking” (Celce-Murcia, 2010: 42).

The term “prosodic” is one that is often used as a synonym for suprasegmental, and both terms have definitions that vary according to the linguist or school of phonology in question. “We may define prosodic systems as sets of mutually defining phonological features which have an essentially variable relationship to the words selected” (Crystal, 1969: 5), as opposed to segmental features whose relationship to the words selected is “direct and identifying” (Crystal, 1969: 5). Traditionally, the term prosody “referred to the characteristics and analyses of verse structure” (Crystal, 2010: 393), and as a result the term ‘prosodic features’ is sometimes preferred in linguistics “to enable a distinction to be drawn with the traditional use” (Crystal, 2010: 393). In this paper, the prosodic features in focus will be those of pitch, loudness, and duration, “which have a primary (but not identifying) relationship with the physical dimensions of fundamental frequency, amplitude, and time respectively (Crystal, 1969: 5-6).

Within the scope of prosodic analysis, the present paper looks more specifically at word stress in English, which can be defined as “the relative position of the force peak or peaks in a word (or a lexical unit, a lexeme) opposed to other positions the force peak or peaks could occupy in a word in consideration of the number of its syllables” (Poldauf, 1984: 13). In other words, English multi-syllabic words always have one syllable that is stressed more than the others (though it can vary in different varieties of English, for examples the word ‘garage’ which tends to be pronounced /'gærɪdʒ/ in British English with the stress on the first syllable and /gə'ra:ʒ/ in American English with the stress on the second syllable). The characteristics of stressed syllables correspond to the previously mentioned prosodic features of pitch, loudness, and duration, meaning that stressed syllables tend to be higher, louder, and longer. These characteristics “contribute to the overall impression of prominence” (Crystal, 2008: 454).

Though it is not always the case, English words of three syllables or more can contain two stress peaks. In this case, one syllable has primary stress and the other has secondary stress (occasionally there can be a third peak but it is much less common). “As they follow each other, there is alternation between high peak and low peak (of three alternating peaks the middle one being the lowest)” (Poldauf, 1984: 15). In other words, stressed syllables always have at least (and most often) one unstressed syllable between them. “We mark the primary (or nuclear) stress peak by placing an elevated stroke before the syllable with that peak” (Poldauf, 1984:15), whereas the “secondary stress peak will be marked by an on-line stroke” (Poldauf, 1984:15). For example, the words “recommend” and “perpendicular”, both of which have primary and secondary stress, would be transcribed as /,rekə'mend/ and /,pɜ:rpən'dɪkjələɹ/ respectively.

One of the most important elements of English word stress patterns is the unstressed syllables that surround the stress peaks, whose vowels tend to be reduced to the sounds /ə/ or /ɪ/ (as can be seen in the unstressed syllables of the words transcribed above). “Syllabic *r*, *l*, *n*, *m*, are variants of the combination of ə and the respective consonant” (Poldauf, 1984:15). In these unstressed syllables, the written vowel often bears little resemblance to its spoken counterpart. In other words, the phonemes /ə/ or /ɪ/ can be represented by multiple different graphemes, which is a large part of the reason that English orthography is relatively complicated.

1.2. Why prosody is so important

1.2.1. Prosody as the first thing we hear

Part of the importance of prosody is explained by the point in our development at which we are first exposed to it. The hearing function of a fetus is active after roughly five months of gestation, and it hears the mother's voice (and prosody) resonating in her body. A synthesis by Heather Hilton of work by Angès Florin (University of Nantes) and Michael Tomasello (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and Duke University) suggests that our very first linguistic acquisitions as human beings are prosodic and pragmatic. After 18 weeks the fetus reacts to the mother's voice and around 22 weeks it can perceive other outside noises (Hilton, 2022: 85-86).

1.2.2. Particularities of English

No two human languages have the same prosodic features. Linguists classically distinguish between **stress-timed** languages and **syllable-timed** languages, as “this basic distinction characterizes most languages of the world” (Celce-Murcia, 2010: 208). “In stress-timed languages, the family to which English belongs, syllables are grouped into metrical feet” (Celce-Murcia, 2010: 208), each one of which contains one primarily stressed syllable and anywhere from some to many secondarily stressed and unstressed syllables. The intervals between these primarily stressed syllables or force peaks are relatively uniform, which gives stress-timed languages their rhythm. This is also part of what leads to the speed with which unstressed syllables are uttered, because they “are squeezed into the time available” (Roach, 2001: 36). By contrast, syllable-timed languages have fairly regular stress on each syllable (Celce-Murcia, 2010).

Despite this classic distinction, in any given language “some syllables sound stronger and more noticeable than others” (Roach, 2001: 31) if you listen closely; however, the prominence of the stronger syllable, its location, and its importance vary from language to language. In French, a syllable-timed language, the most prominent syllable in a word is usually the last one, but it is not as noticeably stronger as in some languages, nor does a change in accentuation change the meaning of the word. Similarly, in Polish (which is hard to classify as either stress- or syllable-

timed), the most prominent syllable tends to be the penultimate (Roach, 2001: 32). In Spanish on the other hand (another syllable-timed language), the stressed syllable *can* change the meaning of the word. In the following examples, the stressed syllables are underlined, and their respective meanings are given: término – ‘terminus’, termino – ‘I terminate’, termino – ‘I terminated’ (Roach, 2001: 32). Arabic, like English, is a language that is considered to be stress-timed, however the stressed vowels are not as lengthened as they are in English, and the unstressed vowels don’t tend to be as reduced as in English. “It is important to note that difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is greater in English than in most other languages – with the possible exception of German, its Germanic language cousin” (Celce-Murcia, 2010: 184). Furthermore, in Arabic, stress “is easily predictable and the rules that generate it are simple” (Benrabah, 1997: 159). English, on the other hand, does not have simple rules when it comes to the placement of stress in multi-syllabic words.

In languages where “the choice of the syllable which is to have the word-stress in a polysyllable can be stated in relation to the sequence of syllables and/or the phonemic structure” (Poldauf, 1984: 14), we can say that the function of word stress is delimitative, meaning it shows where one word begins and another ends. This is the case in French.

In English, the placement of word stress often determines the grammatical category of semantically related words (Roach, 2001: 32). This is especially (but not exclusively) the case with nouns and verbs, for example import (noun) and import (verb), or progress (noun) and progress (verb). Slightly less common are words whose patterns change their grammatical category but aren’t obviously semantically related, such as subject (noun) and subject (verb) (Roach, 2001).

1.2.3. Difficulties for non-native speakers of English

The above-mentioned roles that word stress plays in English, as well as the lack of clear rules that help correctly identify its placement, are part of what can cause problems for learners of English. There are two main points of view on the question of rules around word stress in English. There are those who believe that the vast number of exceptions to the rules which dictate the placement of word stress, as well as the complexity of the rules themselves, are not reason to disregard the rules altogether. “A general rule with exceptions is more economical than listing every word with its own unique pattern” (Cruttenden, 1984: 15). On the other hand,

there are those who believe that foreign learners of English are better off or even “obliged to learn the stress of each word individually” (Jones, 1975: 248). Regardless of the differing points of view of certain experts when it comes to rules dictating word stress placement, there is general agreement that word stress is an important factor when it comes to intelligibility, and that it is something that causes problems for foreign learners of English (Benrabah, 1997).

1.2.4. Importance of word stress in listening

Perhaps the biggest argument as to why word stress is so important in the language classroom is the mountain of evidence that indicates that native speakers rely heavily on the stressed syllables for understanding. The way we understand words in general sheds some light on this fact. “New evidence suggests that when listening to speech, native English speakers do not decode the spoken stream one word at a time” (Benrabah, 1997: 160). Additionally, “there is no fixed sound wave pattern for each sound. A sound such as [k] differs depending on its neighbours, the person who said it, and the care with which it was pronounced” (Aitchison, 1994: 83). As a result, word recognition relies on “imposing expectations on to a sketchy outline” (Aitchison, 1994: 83). Listeners do this with the help of their knowledge of the language, cues, and simple reasoning of what does or doesn’t make sense in the given context. This has been shown through experiments such as the ‘ate’ experiment, in which an “indistinct sound followed by the sequence *ate* was presented to listeners in a variety of settings. In ‘paint the fence and the ?ate, listeners thought they heard *gate*; ‘check the calendar and the ?ate’ elicited *date*; and ‘here’s the fishing gear and the ?ate’ produced *bait*” (Garnes and Bond, 1980, as cited in Aitchison, 1994: 84).

In the process of imposing expectation as mentioned above, listeners pick the stressed syllable out of a speech stream and “use it to search the mental lexicon. Feasible candidates are selected from the mental lexicon on the basis of this syllable, and are judged by how well they fit with the unstressed syllables that appear to their left and right” (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994: 39). This process of using the stressed syllable to understand is shown once again in a series of productions by Indian, Nigerian, and Algerian speakers which were interpreted by British listeners. In these utterances, misplaced word stress was one of the main causes of miscomprehension on the part of the listeners. The data indicate that the native speakers were “relying heavily on the stress pattern produced and totally disregarding segmental information”

(Benrabah, 1997: 161). In most cases, the word that the native speakers understood followed the “same stress pattern as the one produced by the foreign speaker. For example, the intended and incorrectly stressed lexical items “suiTable”, “norMally” and “Forgot” were heard as “the level”, “no money” and “forelock” respectively” (Benrabah, 1997). This is a result of the listeners imposing expectation on a “sketchy outline” — as Aitchison (1994) put it.

1.2.5 Priorities

This information has potentially massive implications for the choices that need to be made in the English language-learning curriculum. Tough choices need to be made because there is not enough time to focus on everything that merits close attention. Therefore, it makes sense to develop clearer priorities as to what needs to be taught in the classroom. When it comes to pronunciation, certain “features are more important than others” (Benrabah, 1997: 159), and the literature suggests that suprasegmental elements are part of these more important features when it comes to intelligibility.

Clifford H. Prator (1971) laid out a four-level hierarchy of priorities in teaching pronunciation even before the previously mentioned studies had been carried out, which correspond to the priorities in this literature review as given so far:

1. Suprasegmental phonemes,
2. Segmental phonemes,
3. Allophones in complementary distribution,
4. Allophones in free alternation..

According to Prator (1971: 62) “phonetics can be defined as the science which attempts to describe all the distinguishable sounds that occur in the languages of the world. Phonemics, on the other hand, attempts to discover which of the differences among the sounds of given languages are meaningful”. The “allophone” is the name of the variant which is potentially not meaningful according to the above definition, which is why phonemes are above allophones in his definition. One of the primary reasons for the suprasegmental phonemes being at the top of this list of priorities is the fact that “with control of suprasegmentals, it is easier to learn to produce segmental accuracy: vowel quality depends on stress, falling and rising pitches facilitate diphthongization, etc.” (Prator, 1971: 68). We will see later that these priorities, which

were understood as early as 1971, are not respected in many EFL curricula in France even today.

If we know that suprasegmental information should be prioritized in pronunciation teaching, the next question is which suprasegmental elements should be prioritized. We have already looked at importance for comprehensibility as one of the dimensions which should dictate priorities. The other dimension we will look at is teachability. But there is a conundrum that emerges when looking at these two dimensions: there “seems to be an inverse relationship between communicative importance and teachability” (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994: 73), with intonation (for example) being very important but very difficult to teach and segments being easier to teach but relatively unimportant. “If we think in these terms, however, we can identify an area with maximum overlap of communicative importance and teachability. This is stress” (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994: 73). Thus, it stands to reason that word stress should be among the highest priorities when it comes to pronunciation teaching.

1.2.6. English as the global *lingua franca*

One final factor that adds to the importance of this topic is the current role of English in the global community and its status as a *lingua franca*, meaning the “common denominator for [communication in] all the communities of the world” (Benrabah, 1997: 158). Because of this status, there exists an increasingly common type of learner of English which does not exist as much for other languages: “the one who uses English only in his work, as a technical aid to communication, who will deal with mainly predictable concepts in a restricted situation (such as in air traffic control) and who can be expected to operate with more rudimentary forms of English syntax, lexis and pronunciation than exists in any natural model” (Gimson, A.C., 1978: 47). This being the case, it is even more important to find ways to make ourselves comprehensible for people from an enormous variety of linguistic backgrounds. This implies aiming at some kind of model that is both comfortably intelligible and socially acceptable. Needless to say, there cannot be one single universal model, but any model that is to be aimed at “would have to retain certain features of English pronunciation which may be regarded as essential, in the sense that they are particularly important as information carriers, e.g. the accentual patterning both of words and of extended utterances, with the obscuration of weak syllables” (Gimson, 1987: 47). This is because these features constitute “a prime characteristic

of spoken English, any distortion of which seriously diminishes efficiency of communication” (Gimson, 1987: 47).

1.3. History

1.3.1. Context

In order to understand the current state of pronunciation teaching and its flaws, we must first have a look at the historical context. One of the oldest works in this literature review is from 1969, by which time teaching pronunciation had already made massive headway during the late 19th and 20th centuries. David Crystal (1969) points out the general lack of work on suprasegmental or prosodic features of pronunciation up until the publication of his book. He says, “it is still rare to find a general guide to English speech which pays close and systematic attention to even the majority of variables within the ‘non-verbal’ or ‘suprasegmental’ aspects of spoken language, or a grammar which has a section on intonation and stress near the beginning—or anywhere” (Crystal, 1969: 2). He goes on to say that this is understandable given the problems of gathering information and data in these areas, but that the lack thereof has led to oversimplifications and generalizations, such as the idea that open questions tend to have a rising tone at the end whereas closed questions tend to have a falling tone at the end. This kind of statement is not overly helpful given that there are many contexts and situations that could render it false.

It is important to know that the time period leading up to the 1970s was one in which pronunciation teaching was taken seriously. Benrabah (1994) refers to the fifties and early sixties as the heyday of pronunciation. What followed (in the 1970s and especially the 1980s) was a massive over-correction, whose main goal was to get rid of useless drilling. In and of itself, this is a reasonable goal, but it was perhaps misguided. We see some of the disdain that some experts in the eighties had towards the practices in the aforementioned “heyday” of pronunciation in the fifties in Brown and Yule (1983), who write that “after years of rigorous attention to pronunciation during the fifties and early sixties, many teachers now accept that the aim of achieving native-like pronunciation is not only unattainable but unreasonable” (Brown & Yule, 1983: 26). They go on to point out that apart from students who plan to be English

teachers, it is not necessary to achieve a highly polished accent, and that they will not be going on to work as undercover agents. Though this last point is somewhat facetious, their point is not without merit. A perfect accent is not a reasonable goal for most students, and they are also perhaps correct in pointing out “that the minority of competent students who emerge from a course with good pronunciation seem to gain more spontaneously mimicking good models than from hours spent drilling vowels and consonants and words in isolation” (Brown & Yule, 1983: 27).

We see a similar point of view expressed by Prator (1971: 63) who says that “not many years ago methodologists, especially American methodologists, tended to insist that language teachers should not be satisfied until their students learned to approximate the pronunciation of a native speaker”, and that many textbooks had opening sections with days or weeks of pronunciation drilling before even touching some more fundamental aspects of language. It is true as Prator points out that students would be better off waiting to “put a fine polish on his pronunciation” (Prator, 1971: 63) after having mastered some of the basics of the English language. He goes on to point out that more recently (before the publication of his 1971 article) there had been a tendency in this direction, which was encouraged by the growing hesitation in the United States to push ‘Standard English’ on Black and Chicano students, as well as the growing argument that Indian and Nigerian English accents were perfectly legitimate models for learners of English.

Despite the points of view put forward by Prator (1971) and Brown and Yule (1983), some later works took the position that this view of pronunciation instruction in the fifties and early sixties was perhaps exaggerated. Peter Roach critiques Brown and Yule directly saying that their “criticism was misguided” and that he found it “encouraging to see that in recent years there has been a significant growth of interest in the pronunciation teaching and many new publications on the subject” (Roach, 2009: 6). He says that the claim that learners were supposed to sound native was mixing up models with goals, and that the model could indeed be (for example) Received Pronunciation whereas the goal was simply for them to be comprehensible. Roach’s point of view is validated when we look back even further to David Abercrombie’s book which was first published in 1956 (which is precisely the era that Prator and Brown and Yule are critiquing). He states clearly that “the attainment of fluency should not be sacrificed to perfection of detail” (Abercrombie, 1963: 31).

Based on Benrabah (1997) and Roach (2009), it is clear that there was a period in the fifties and sixties when pronunciation teaching was taken very seriously, which was followed by a “swing of the pendulum in the mid-eighties” (Benrabah, 1997: 157), during which time it was seen as a low priority, and then it became fashionable once again at the end of eighties and into the nineties. If one thing is clear it is that pronunciation teaching is as susceptible to fashion trends as any other phenomenon in language teaching.

1.3.2. Shortcomings of the communicative approach

We now need to look at the results of the communicative approach specifically with regard to English teaching in the French school system. When looking at the official curricula from 2015 for elementary and middle school, we see that phonology is mentioned but does not seem to occupy a very important place in the curriculum. There are sentences about mobilizing the students’ phonological knowledge (Ministère de l'Education nationale, 2015: 127), but there is little explanation for teachers to understand just how to do this. Consequently, French secondary school teachers are probably poorly equipped to teach some of the most important knowledge and skills that their students need. There is an overall recognition that pronunciation and phonology are important, but there aren’t many tools provided to give teachers a more explicit idea of what they should be doing with their students in these domains.

Additionally, there is still a heavier focus on the segmental elements of pronunciation than there is on the suprasegmental elements (though the ratio is moving in the right direction). When looking at middle-school textbooks, specifically the widely used *e is for English* and *I bet you can* series from Didier and Magnard publishing houses respectively, each unit presents new vocabulary giving the phonetic symbols that correspond to the vowels in the given words. Sometimes there are exercises comparing similar sounds (like comparing the pronunciation of the letter ‘i’ as /i/ or /i:/). Word stress is also presented briefly, though not in a particularly helpful way. Towards the beginning of a textbook for 6ème students, for example, there is a subsection in which they explain that English words have word stress, and that it doesn’t always fall in the same place. A few examples are given of words with stress on the first syllable, and a few with stress on the second syllable (André et al, 2017: 28). In addition to this, each word of vocabulary in the book that has more than one syllable is given with the accented syllable in bold, which is a good way to present them.

What is missing in this approach to teaching English pronunciation is a decent explanation of the reduced vowels /i/ and /ə/ in English. This is an essential element in correctly understanding word stress in English (/ə/ is the most common vowel sound in the language) because francophone students' natural instinct is already to pronounce vowels to their full value (that is to rarely pronounce vowels as /i/ or /ə/). In other words, the difficult aspect of word stress for non-native speakers is not so much the stressed syllables themselves, but rather the reduced syllables around them. Therefore, despite the progress that has been made by presenting words with the accented syllables written in bold, there is a huge missing piece in the knowledge that is necessary to correctly produce word stress in English (for the students who don't do so correctly from imitation).

1.4. How word stress can be integrated into communicative language teaching

One problem that teachers faced as communicative language teaching became the norm, is that the pronunciation exercises from the past did not respect the new approach. Some of these techniques were listen and repeat, tongue twisters, minimal pairs in syntagmatic sentences, developmental approximation drills, and vowel shifts and stress shifts (like **b**ible to **b**iblical and **ph**otograph to **ph**otography). The problem is that none of these techniques are compatible with communicative language teaching or task-based teaching since the materials that they require are not authentic (Celce-Murcia, 1987: 6).

Celce-Murcia (1987) points out this problem, but she also gives the solution, which is quite simple. Communicative and task-based learning are based on tasks that have meaning, rather than simple drills. Therefore, one can use the same types of tasks that teachers use in other areas of communicative language teaching: role plays, problem solving, and games. In order to do this, Celce-Murcia proposes the following steps: Identify the students' problem areas, find lexical and grammatical contexts with natural occurrences of these problems, and develop communicative activities using these contexts. This may seem obvious, but at the time of the publication of her work, there was very little in the way of propositions for pronunciation and word stress exercises that were compatible with contemporary expectations of what a language class should be.

1.5. What our goals should be

Any language teacher has a huge number of objectives for his or her students, and even more smaller goals in order to achieve those larger objectives. But when it comes to pronunciation specifically – and all the shortcomings that have been addressed in this literature review – the question needs to be asked: what exactly should the goal be? especially for the students who do not have a natural aptitude for pronunciation, given that those who do will most likely learn decent pronunciation without being given specific tools. “Both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a threshold level of pronunciation for nonnative speakers of English; if they fall below this threshold level, they will have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of English grammar and vocabulary might be” (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996: 7). Given that most learners will never attain native-like pronunciation, it seems that the first goal should be this “threshold level of pronunciation” as referred to by Celce-Murcia. Attaining this level brings us back to the features of English which have the biggest impact on comprehensibility.

Celce-Murcia’s assertion that there is a threshold level of pronunciation is based on a study that examined the communication ability of foreign teaching assistants in American universities, specifically the University of California, Los Angeles. This study was born out of complaints from universities all over the United States from students that had to struggle to understand their foreign teaching assistants. Two separate groups of native speakers were asked to rate productions on the part of the foreign teaching assistants. One of the groups had experience with the world of foreign language teaching and one group did not. Two of the raters who did have a teaching background “pointed out that there seems to be a threshold of intelligibility in the subjects’ pronunciation” (Hinofotis and Bailey, 1980: 124). Though it is not obvious exactly where this threshold is, it is to this that Celce-Murcia referred. Furthermore, when asked to rate twelve items in terms of their contribution to difficulty in comprehension, both groups ranked pronunciation as number one.

The threshold level of pronunciation should be the (realistic) goal that all English as a foreign language teachers have for their students. After all, this is what truly matters. Past that, there should be more ambitious goals, especially for stronger students, but not if those more ambitious goals get in the way of the fundamentals.

1.6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The questions that I sought to answer in my study were the following:

- What is the best way to teach word stress to French learners of English?
- Why has word stress in English been ignored in the French education system lately?
- What are the difficulties that word stress causes for French learners of English?
- What attitude do 4ème students have towards pronunciation in English?

My working hypotheses were the following:

- Metalinguistic knowledge of word stress will help the 4ème students improve their pronunciation in English.
- The 4ème students will find this improvement motivating.

2. Study, Context, and Methodology

2.1. Description of context of study

2.1.1. Study setting

The context of the study was a private middle school in an urban setting. This is quite a nice neighborhood, and being that it is a private middle school, most of the students come from relatively privileged backgrounds, though there is a lot of diversity in the student body. The overall privilege is not necessarily visible in their academic performance, but it does speak to the types of problems that the teachers do and don't tend to encounter. In the school, each class has its own room, meaning that the teachers are the ones that move between classes. This allows for smoother passing periods, and it allows the students to leave their bags and other materials in the room during their recess or lunch period. On the other hand, it does not allow for teachers to have permanent resources such as posters on the walls as would be possible if there were an "English classroom" or a classroom for each teacher as is the case in some schools. The primary English teacher (and my tutor) of the classes that participated in the study was Ms. P, a delightful English teacher in her final year before retirement. Her years of experience were apparent as she had her classroom routines and was perfectly at ease with the students. She was quite well liked by most of the students as well which made the mood in class mostly positive, even though there were many students who struggled a lot in English, especially in one of the classes.

For most of the school year, I was at the middle school once a week. I observed five different classes: two classes of 3ème, two classes of 4ème, and one class of 5ème. As an observer, I took notes on the progression of the classes including instructions on the part of the teacher, productions of the students, as well as anything that I thought was noteworthy in the teacher's methodology. This was very helpful when it came time for me to give classes myself. Though my role was that of an observer, I spent a large part of the class periods circulating among the students while they did group work. This way I was able to act as a second teacher and answer their questions, which was also very helpful once I was in charge of classes because they already saw me as a teacher rather than a university student who was observing their classes. Aside

from the academic year of observing these classes, I participated in two weeks of “stage massé” (intensive internship), during which time I was responsible for teaching all of my tutor’s classes for the entire week rather than simply observing for the single day. These two intensive weeks of “stage massé” were my first experience with a class of 6ème, which was an age that I had never worked with before.

2.1.2. Profile of the two classes

The two classes that participated in the study were the two classes of 4ème. One I will refer to as the pseudonym 4ème A, a relatively small group (roughly 15), and the other I will refer to as the pseudonym 4ème B, which was a relatively large group (roughly 30). Both classes were quite easygoing, though they had very different levels, which made following the same program quite complicated. This difference in their academic level was not limited to English. The 4ème B class was composed of students who were relatively well suited to the academic system, whereas the 4ème A students were quite the opposite. That being said, their smaller class size and decent attitude made it nevertheless possible to be somewhat productive. However, while we could speak English all the time with the 4ème B and not worry about them understanding the majority of what we said, we had to switch to French regularly with the 4ème A, and even then, they struggled to understand basic instructions and explanations.

2.2. Initial Protocol – What I would have liked to have done

2.2.1. Tools

The original goal of the study was to learn what kind of teaching technics enable French students to learn to properly understand and produce word stress in English. In order to do this, I wanted to give the two classes two pre and posttests in order to gauge attitude towards English pronunciation and their success in stressing the correct syllable in a series of words in context. To do this, I would use a questionnaire to test their attitude, and a short production test before and after my intervention in which they read a short paragraph with a handful of selected words designed see if they could produce the correct word-stress pattern in context. I would have

chosen a handful of student volunteers from each class to participate in this production test, because two full classes of audio data to analyze would have been unrealistic. The words selected to see if they correctly placed the word stress would have been words that we worked on in the interventions. It would have been too much to expect the students to master word stress enough in a few weeks to place it correctly on words that they had not practiced. Furthermore, the words selected would have been in the context of their current unit in order for there to be coherence with their normal class materials and the intervention and tests that I give them. These interventions were meant to take place during the “stage massé”, which was a week during which I was at the middle school full time. This way I would see the same classes multiple times in the week, allowing for some real continuity.

The questionnaire designed to test their attitude pre and post intervention was a modified version of a questionnaire made by Heather Hilton and Naouel Terrien, which was designed to test attitude towards learning words in English. The modified version was designed to test attitude towards English pronunciation. In order to avoid confusion, the document was in French and it had twenty-one affirmations regarding pronunciation and sounds in English, to which the students responded using a Likert scale with the options “pas du tout d’accord”, “pas d’accord”, “plutôt pas d’accord”, “plutôt d’accord”, “d’accord”, and “tout à fait d’accord” (“totally disagree”, “disagree”, “slightly disagree”, “slightly agree”, “agree”, and “totally agree”). A neutral option was not given so that students were forced to take a positive or negative position. The affirmations about pronunciation in English targeted four different constructs: description, attitude, confidence, and ability. There were also two affirmations which targeted their personal experience learning about pronunciation in English.

Anticipating that some students may simply want to give answers that please or displease the teacher, half of the affirmations had a positive valence such as “j’aime bien les sons de la langue anglaise” (“I like the sound of the English language”), and half had a negative valence such as “je n’aime pas la sonorité de la langue anglaise” (“I don’t like the sound of the English language”). When attributing scores to each answer on the Likert scale, the questions with a positive valence were associated with ascending numbers (totally disagree = 1 and totally agree = 7), whereas the questions with a negative valence were associated with descending numbers (totally disagree = 7 and totally agree = 1). In other words, regardless of the valence of the question, a higher number meant a more positive attitude towards the construct in question. Additionally, instead of simply associating the numbers one through six with the six possible

answers, the number four was skipped and the number seven added. This was done so that the scores reflected the more important difference between overall positivity and overall negativity than between different degrees of positivity or negativity. Finally, the students were informed that their answers were anonymous and that neither I nor their main teacher would know what their answers were. In order to protect their anonymity, each student was assigned a number that they put on their questionnaire instead of their name.

During the class session before they answered the questionnaire, the students were given a consent form that their parents signed, and that they returned to class before the pretest. This too was adapted from a consent form made by Hilton and Terrien. The document simply explained to the parents what kind of questionnaire the students would be answering and for what reason.

2.2.2. Interventions

Initially, the interventions in class (in which I taught the students about word stress) were supposed to take place during the “stages massés”, during which time I was at the middle school for two entire weeks full time in the role of the teacher, as opposed to my usual position of observing class only one day a week. These two weeks took place just before and just after the spring holidays. The advantage of using these two weeks for the interventions was that I would have been able to see the students three times per week per class for both weeks. This would have allowed for real continuity as there was less time between the lessons and they could have better remembered the content from the previous lesson. Additionally, it would have been more optimal for my interventions (roughly 15 minutes per class) to take place during the period in which I was actually in the role as their teacher rather than an observer, once again for the sake of better continuity.

2.3. Executed Protocol – What I actually did

2.3.1. Obstacles

Despite these goals and intentions, there were a couple obstacles that arose which changed the timing and duration of my interventions, as well as making the production pre and posttests too ambitious for the timing of this study. The first of these obstacles was related to some very unfortunate health problems that befell my thesis advisor. As a result, she was absent and unreachable for much of the Spring semester. At the time, I did not feel confident enough to design a questionnaire and production test without her help. This situation pushed back the dates during which time I planned to teach word stress to the two groups, as well as the pre and posttests.

My internship at the middle school was originally supposed to end after the second week of “stage massé” which was in the end of April. It started to become clear that I was not going to be ready to do my pretests and interventions, let alone the posttests, in this time, so my tutor at the middle school said I could come back during the month of May each Friday (as I had done during the rest of the year), to give my tests and lessons. This was enormously helpful as it took the pressure off and allowed me to consult with my advisor about the tools that I would use for the pre and posttest, instead of trying to throw the tools together alone right before the “stage massé”.

When she became available once again, I was able to meet virtually with my advisor, and talk about the tools that I would use to test the attitude of the students. At this point, given the limited amount of time, we decided that doing a production test was a little too ambitious, as well as being unnecessary for the scope of this research project. She showed me a questionnaire that she had used to test attitude towards learning English vocabulary, and I adapted the affirmations in order to test attitude towards English pronunciation targeting the four constructs: description, attitude, ability, and confidence. After this, I adapted a consent form from my advisor, so that the parents of the students who would partake in the study were aware of what their children were taking part in and why. I gave them the consent form at the beginning of the second week of the “stage massé” so that they would have time to have it signed by their parents and return it before taking the pretest.

The second obstacle I encountered in the process was that during the already postponed word stress teaching process, my tutor contracted Covid-19. I had originally planned to have four lessons in class during the month of May before giving the posttest at the end of the month.

As a result of her being absent for a week, I had to miss one of the lessons because I was not allowed to teach the class without her, due to my status as an intern. Despite the loss amounting to only one lesson, it was a relatively large proportion of the total time that I had with the students to talk about word stress. Therefore, this could have actually been quite significant, seeing as one lesson can be the difference between having been exposed to a particular phenomenon (but still confused), and understanding it (at least to some extent). Initially, the goal was to be able to spend some time on real production exercises, rather than just discrimination exercises with the students repeating after me. I believe that to really integrate the lesson, they needed to have the time practice individually and not just as a group, and most importantly to have the validation of hearing that they had produced word stress correctly in order to boost their confidence.

2.3.2. Reaction and adaptation

I gave the pretest on the final day of the “stage massé”. I spoke to the students only in French so that there was no confusion. I projected the list of their names, each of which had an associated number, and I asked them to write their project ID number on their questionnaire, explaining that I would delete the numbers and names after the posttest without looking at them in the meantime, and I would not know who was whom. I told them to simply read the statements and choose the response on the Likert scale that corresponded best to their feeling. I also told them that if they didn’t understand something it was ok, and that they should just respond as best they could. The goal was to not answer questions during the test to avoid potentially biasing any responses. This may have been an error, seeing as there is a strong possibility that their confusion as a result of the positive and negative valence questions outweighed the potential biasing that my answering their questions would have caused. I will develop further the reason for my saying this in the discussion that follows.

The following week, I returned to class to give the first intervention. At this point, their main teacher had once again taken the reins, and I simply gave a short lesson on word stress (ten to

fifteen minutes). In this first lesson, I put three words on the board that I knew they knew: hospital, energy, and beautiful. I chose these three words because they all have the same word stress pattern, and two of them are cognates. I asked them how many syllables the words have, which was quite easy for them to answer. Then I asked them to listen to me reciting the three words, and to pay attention to what I did with my voice. Seeing that my instructions were too vague, I asked them to pay attention to differences in my voice in the way I uttered the three syllables. The group of 4ème A struggled to identify what I was doing (putting stress on the first syllable and reducing the second two), whereas the 4ème B were able to identify rather quickly. Once they had noticed that the first syllable was different, I asked them to tell me precisely what was different. Both groups were able to arrive without too much trouble at the descriptors “higher”, “longer”, and “louder”.

Once they had identified these characteristics, I gave a short explanation of word stress in English (I did so in French with the 4ème A and in English with the 4ème B), saying that every multi-syllabic word in English has one syllable that is stressed more than the others. I also explained that the other syllables tend to be reduced. In order to keep the lesson simple, I did not explain the phenomenon of secondary stress. The main goal was for them to understand that the vowels in the unstressed syllables tend to be reduced and sometimes they disappear completely. To illustrate this, I used the example of my name: Jeremy. I explained that in French the name is pronounced /ʒɛʁɛmi/ with three clear syllables, whereas in English it is pronounced /'dʒɛrəmi/ and the middle syllable almost disappears to the point of the name being pronounced with two syllables orally. This explanation proved rather effective. Finally, I asked the students what they thought word stress was in French, and at least one in each group was able to answer “accent tonique”.

The following week, I returned to class and started by asking them what we had done the previous week. Given that they had had two English lessons without me during the week, working on their usual curriculum, they had a hard time remembering, but at least a couple students were able to say that it was about pronunciation. Once they remembered that we had spoken about word stress, I asked what the characteristics of the stressed syllables were. Once again, they struggled to remember, but ultimately both groups were able to give me the words “higher”, “longer”, and “louder”. At this point, I gave the students a short discrimination test. I made clear to them that the test was simply to see roughly how difficult it was for them to recognize the stress pattern of words and that it would not be graded. On the test, there were

three columns of four three-syllable words each. Each column represented a different stress pattern, and had put the numbers 1, 2, 3 above so that they could identify if the stress was on the first, second, or third syllable. As on the first day, I used only words that were cognates or that they knew well. I told the students that I would read each of the four words in the column and that they would highlight the number that corresponded to the syllable that they heard being stressed. I asked them to use one color for the initial discrimination test, and then to use a different color when we did the correction. The discrimination test can be seen below in figure 1:

1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
Eraser	Hospital	Silhouette
Example	President	Employee
Confusion	Holiday	Engineer
Tradition	Beautiful	Souvenir

Figure 1

I read each word in each column clearly, but without exaggerating the stress too much. With four words in each column, they had four chances to hear where the stress peak was. I thought that this would be quite easy for them, but surprisingly it was not. When we went over the test, I asked them to vote by a show of hands on the first, second, or third syllable for each column. In each case, the largest vote was on the correct syllable, but not by much. In other words, roughly half of the class of 4ème A and one third of the class of 4ème B were unable to hear where the stress peak was in three-syllable words. I asked them to highlight the correct number using a different color so that they could remember the correct answer.

After this, I asked the students to repeat after me, reading each word on the discrimination test and exaggerating the stress pattern of each one. This too proved more difficult than I anticipated, most likely because they seemed to feel foolish in doing so. Finally, I asked them to do the same thing again, but this time to stand and put their hands in the air while pronouncing the stressed syllable. This proved very effective, and the students seemed more comfortable once the whole class (and I) had stood up and down once or twice, getting their blood moving and getting the embarrassment out in the open and therefore less imposing.

On the final day that I saw the students (because I had to miss a week due to my tutor being sick), I once again asked what we had done in the previous lesson. This time they were able to

tell me what we had done in the previous two lessons without needing to think about it for too long. I had them repeat a few of the words from the previous lesson, once again having them stand and raise their hands on the accented syllable, to get them back in the right frame of mind. This time, I explained that sometimes in English the category or even the meaning of a word can change according to the syllable that receives stress. The goal in doing so was for them to realize just how important the correct placement of stress is for native speakers. The three examples I gave were dessert vs desert, progress (noun) vs progress (verb), and produce (noun) vs produce (verb). The reason I chose to use dessert vs desert, despite them not having the same spelling like the other examples, is that this is also a minimal pair in French, however it is a segmental rather than a suprasegmental difference. I thought that this, once again, could draw their attention to the importance of word stress in English, given that both words have the phoneme /z/ in the middle (whereas in French, “dessert” is pronounced with /s/ in the middle and “desert” is pronounced with a /z/ in the middle).

As I had done in the previous lesson and at the beginning of this one, I asked the students to recite the words and stand and raise their hands while uttering the stressed syllable, as this seemed to be the most effective way of getting them to exaggerate the phenomenon. Finally, I explained to them in French that native speakers of English are more likely to misunderstand a word if the speaker misplaces word stress than they are if a speaker mispronounces a particular sound, and that this is something that makes English different than French (English being a stressed-timed language and French being a syllable-timed language). In order to illustrate this fact, I gave them an example that I had recently encountered, in which a French learner of English wanted to say the word “adjective”, but (mis)placed the stress on the second syllable instead of the first. As a result, the word that I heard was “objective”, because the stress pattern that the learner uttered matched the stress pattern of this word. (This misunderstanding was the same type as the ones described in Benrabah, 1997). I insisted on the fact that the learner had not really mispronounced any given sound, but that the misplacement of the stressed syllable was enough to make me misunderstand and hear a different word.

At this point I gave the learners the questionnaire again, completing my word stress intervention with them. Once again, I explained that the questionnaire was anonymous and that they should answer honestly and without thinking of what I or their main teacher would want to see.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Expectations

The initial expectation of this study was that the students' attitude towards pronunciation in English would improve after the lessons on word stress. This expectation was based on the idea that metalinguistic knowledge of this vital aspect of English prosody would help the learners to improve their pronunciation, and that they would find this improvement motivating, especially when confronted with the knowledge that word stress is more important than (for example) the correct pronunciation of /ð/ and /θ/ which they struggle with. Based on the relative ease of learning word stress, which was discussed in the literature review, I expected that this new metalinguistic knowledge could be seen as a path towards much better pronunciation (targeting one of the elements of English pronunciation that makes the greatest difference in terms of comprehensibility) with relatively minimal effort.

I did not expect that the students would initially place much importance on pronunciation outside of being able to speak in a comprehensible way. My overall experience in France, both with students and with people in general, has led me to the conclusion that people tend to think that getting one's point across is the most important part of speaking, and that if one does so with a strong accent, this is not a problem (which is quite a pragmatic view of L2 learning).

3.2. Findings

The findings of the pre and post questionnaires to which the students responded did not totally confirm these expectations, and I will discuss the possible reasons for this in the following section.

The first thing to note is that the affirmations on the questionnaire that scored the highest among the two groups (regardless of positive or negative valence), therefore reflecting the most enthusiastic positive attitude before the interventions, were the following:

- I prefer hearing English spoken with a French accent (negative valence targeting “attitude”)
- It gives me pleasure to pronounce an English sentence correctly (positive valence targeting “attitude”)
- I would like to speak English like an anglophone (positive valence targeting “description”)
- I don’t like the sound of the English language (negative valence targeting “attitude”)

This shows that both of these classes have positive feelings towards the English language and its native pronunciation, at least the pronunciations with which they have been confronted: Received Pronunciation (with a barely detectible French accent) from their teacher and Standard American from me. Interestingly, both classes had this positive attitude in spite of their very different levels and relative difficulties with language learning.

On the other hand, the lowest score in both the pre and posttests for the class of 4ème A, as well as being one of the lowest for the 4ème B, was for the affirmation “it’s not important to speak English with a good accent if I am able to communicate”. This most likely indicates that, despite their positive attitude towards English pronunciation, they see language as first and foremost a means of communication, which corresponds to the second expectation mentioned previously. That being said, the average score for this affirmation did increase significantly between the pretest and posttest for both groups of learners.

The lowest scoring elements were almost exactly the same in both groups of learners and in the pre and posttests. The four lowest scoring elements for the 4ème B group, both before and after the interventions in class, were the following:

- I’m afraid to speak English with a bad accent (negative valence targeting “confidence”)
- It’s not important to speak English with a good accent if I am able to communicate (negative valence targeting “description”)
- Pronouncing English words correctly is very difficult (negative valence targeting “ability”)
- I am able to speak English with a good accent (positive valence targeting “confidence”)

Although these remained the lowest-scoring elements in the pre and posttests for the class of the 4ème B, each individual score went up slightly except for the affirmation “Pronouncing English words correctly is very difficult”, which targeted the construct “ability”, whereas the others tested “confidence” and their “description”.

In the class of 4ème A, the lowest scoring elements changed slightly from the pretest to the posttest. In the pretest, the four lowest scoring items were the following:

- It’s not important to speak English with a good accent if I am able to communicate (negative valence targeting “description”)
- Pronouncing English words correctly is very difficult (negative valence targeting “ability”)
- I prefer keeping a French accent when I speak English (negative valence targeting “description”)
- I’m afraid to speak English with a bad accent (negative valence targeting “confidence”)

The only item that was no longer in the bottom four in the posttest was the affirmation about keeping a French accent, which was replaced with “I am not able to pronounce English words correctly” (negative valence targeting “ability”). From the pretest to the posttest, the items which increased in score were the two asking the learners’ “description”: “It’s not important to speak English with a good accent if I am able to communicate” and “I prefer keeping a French accent when I speak English”. The items that decreased in score were those targeting “ability” and “confidence”: “I’m afraid to speak English with a bad accent” and “I am not able to pronounce English words correctly”. The final item which targeted “ability” (“Pronouncing English words correctly is very difficult”) remained the same.

While there was noticeable change among some of the specific elements on the questionnaire in both groups, the average scores for the full questionnaire did not change significantly from the pretest to the posttest when looking at the two groups combined, according to statistical analysis. The same can be said for the 4ème A group alone. However, there was a statistically significant increase in the average scores of the pre and posttests with 4ème B learners alone. Overall, the average score of the class of 4ème A decreased (though not to the point of being

statistically relevant) whereas the average score of the class of 4ème B increased. These findings are represented with the numbers below:

Pre and post questionnaires – Wilcoxon test:

Groups combined: no difference between pre and post-test scores

$$Z = -1.42 (p = .156) \gg Z = -1.42 (p = .16^{ns})$$

4ème A: No difference between pre and post-test scores

$$Z = -1.18 (p = .239)$$

4ème B: **Difference** between pre and post-test scores

$$Z = -2.86 (p = .004^{**})$$

The average and median scores for the combined classes at the pre and posttest are shown below:

Average pretest score = 108.32

Median pretest score = 110

Average posttest score = 112.44

Median posttest score = 113

The distribution of scores of individual learners in the separate groups for the pretests and posttests is shown below. We can see that most of the scores fall in the same range with some outliers in Figure 2:

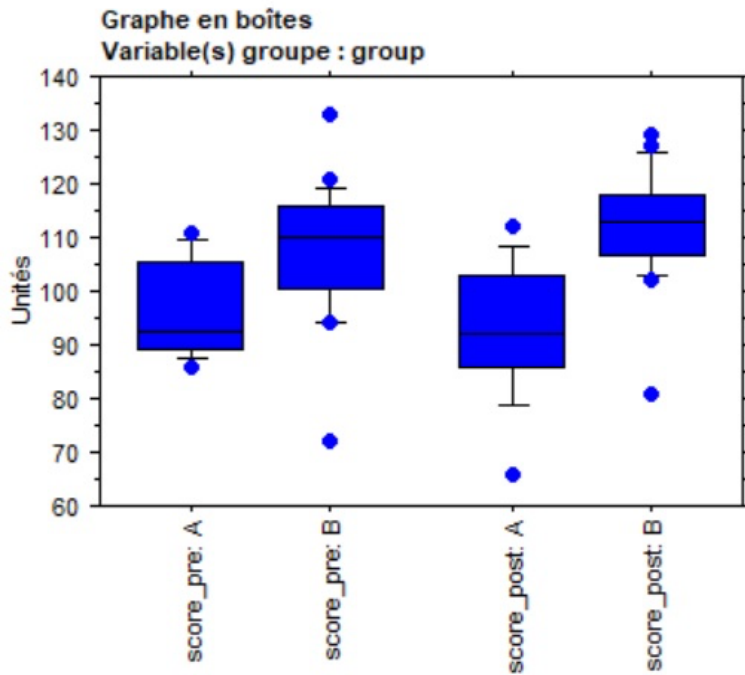


Figure 2

When looking at the responses to the different items, we can also see that there was a statistically significant difference between the average answers of the items with a positive valence and those with a negative valence. These findings are shown with the numbers below and summarized in figure 3:

Items – Mann-Whitney test:

Groups combined pretest: **difference** in answers to + and - items

$$u(407, 370) = 66433 (p = .004^*)$$

average for + items = 410.8 points vs average for - items = 365.0

Groups combined posttest: **difference** in answers to + and - items

$$u(407,370) = 56572 (p < .0001^{***})$$

average for + items = 435 points vs average for - items = 338.4

This shows that there was an even stronger manifestation in the posttest of the effect that was seen in the pretest.

	Positive items	Negative items	Statistic	P value
Pretest (average)	410.8 points	365.0 points	$u(407,370)=66433$	$P = .004$
Posttest (average)	435 points	338.4 points	$u(407,370)=56572$	$P < .0001$

Figure 3

Moving on to the different constructs that were targeted in the questionnaire, a **Chi-square analysis** showed that there was no significant difference between the proportions of the scores reflecting “ability”, “attitude”, “confidence”, and “description” in the two groups. In other words, the two groups of learners responded with similar scores towards the relative constructs in both the pre and posttests. The average scores of the different constructs across the different groups are reflected in the Figure 4 below:

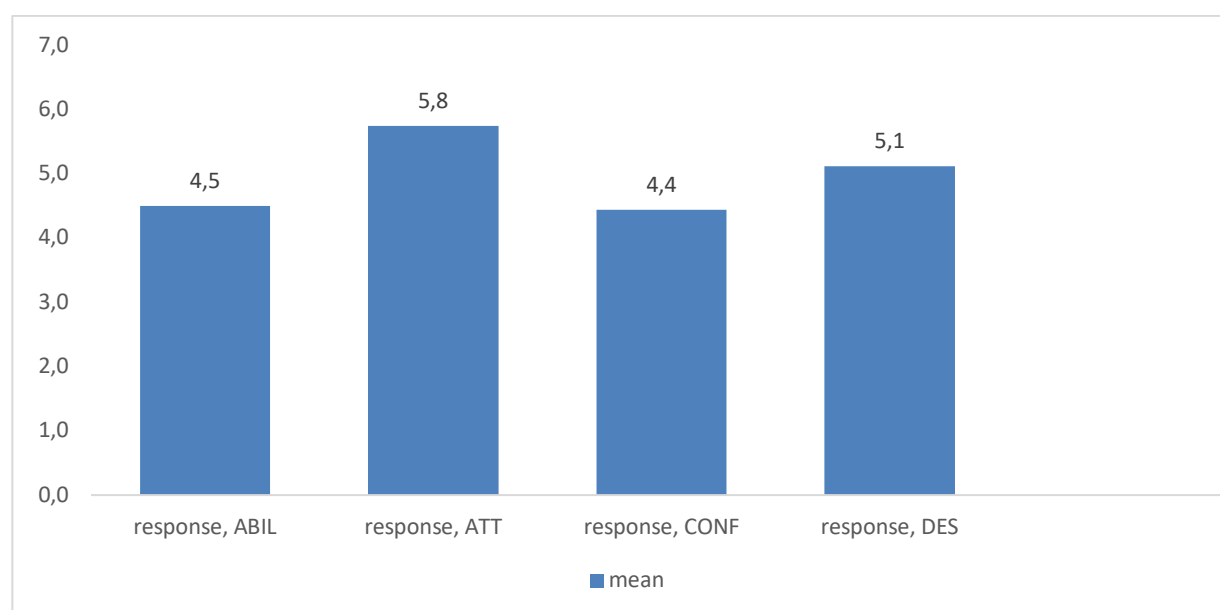


Figure 4

A final finding to take away from the data, which is important to mention, is a certain amount of incoherence in the responses. For example, learner 101 “totally agreed” with the statement “I like the sound of the English language” and also “totally agreed” with the statement “I don’t like the sound of English language”. The same learner answered “disagree” to the statement “I

have already worked on word stress in English” in the posttest despite the fact that we had just spent three weeks working explicitly on word stress.

3.3. What it could mean – hypotheses

This is evidence that at least some learners did not understand what we had worked on and were thrown off by the combination of questions with a positive and negative valence. These few examples are only present in the class of 4ème A, which was the group that struggles more academically. Therefore, it stands to reason that the responses from these learners are slightly less reliable than those from the group of 4ème B. That being said, there were not many answers of this nature, so it is still worth taking the 4ème A learners’ responses into consideration.

The relatively high scores of the questions targeting “attitude” and “description” show that these two groups of learners both have relatively positive attitudes towards English pronunciation. Given that this was true across the two classes despite their vastly different levels, it is likely that their positive attitude comes from a good relationship with their English teacher, and therefore the English classroom. I also noticed that the learners tended to have a romanticized view of American culture, which could contribute to their positive attitudes as well. As was mentioned in the description of the context of the study, both of these groups of learners were quite easygoing and did not tend to cause problems. Clearly this cannot be said for all groups of 4ème learners. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that the results reflecting positive attitude towards English pronunciation (both pre and post) would not necessarily be replicated to the same extent in the majority of 4ème English classes in France.

The lowest scores increasing slightly in the group of 4ème B, except for the affirmation about the difficulty of pronouncing English words correctly, could be the result of an overall improvement in attitude while simultaneously being introduced to a new element of English pronunciation which adds a complication in their minds. In the class of 4ème A, the change in the bottom scoring items from the pretest to the posttest could reflect a better understanding of the importance of pronunciation but a loss in confidence. The affirmation “I prefer keeping a French accent when I speak English” scored slightly higher in the posttest, but the affirmation “I am not able to pronounce English words correctly” decreased by 24% (the biggest change in

the group from the pretest to the posttest). This suggests that learning about word stress for this brief period made the weaker learners question their own ability to pronounce correctly, and perhaps rightly so.

The overall scores of the different constructs, which are shown in Figure 4 and discussed above, show once again that the learners recognize and understand that decent pronunciation in English is important, but that they do not feel particularly confident or rate their own ability very well (higher attitude and description scores and lower confidence and ability scores). Additionally, the fact that a chi-square analysis showed no significant difference in the proportion of scores between the two groups for the various constructs suggests that this pattern is not just a one-off result. It is worth noting that the four constructs targeted in the questionnaire can really be simplified into these two groups. Asking learners to rate their own ability measures confidence, and asking students to describe English pronunciation measures their attitude; therefore, we could say that the questionnaire was especially targeting the two constructs confidence and attitude. This is also reflected by relative the similarity in the scores of the affirmations targeting confidence and ability respectively, and those targeting description and attitude respectively.

The main difference between the results of 4ème A and 4ème B was the fact that the scores of the 4ème B learners increased from the pretest to the posttest, as was expected, whereas the scores of the 4ème A decreased slightly. Given the large difference in the English (and overall academic) level of the two classes, it is reasonable to imagine that this is the source of the difference. For learners who feel relatively confident in English already and for whom the subject is one of their preferred in school, the lessons on word stress could be seen as a way to improve their level even further. On the other hand, for students who already feel as though they are bad at English and who have a less favorable relationship with school, the lessons on word stress could just represent one more difficulty of English that they struggle to master (or that they will never master).

After all, the way that we experience new information depends greatly on our state of mind at the time of being exposed to the information in question. Someone who is in their comfort zone at the time of being exposed to new information will likely feel intellectually stimulated or excited, whereas someone who is already outside of their comfort zone at the time of being exposed to new information will likely feel overwhelmed. If we think about this through the lens of Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), it is likely that the stronger

students in the class of 4ème B were pushed into the ZPD by the lessons on word stress, whereas the weaker students in the class of 4ème A were pushed past the ZPD and into that which is out of reach.

All this being said, the decrease in average score for the 4ème A learners was not statistically relevant according to the Wilcoxon test. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the same decrease would reoccur with a similar group of learners. Nevertheless, the statistical relevance of the increase in scores for the 4ème B learners shows a marked difference between the effect of the interventions on the two different classes, most likely due to their very different levels in English.

The final major difference that the data show is between the questions with a positive valence and those with a negative valence. A Mann-Whitney test of the combined groups showed that the positive valence items received significantly more enthusiastic “agree” responses than did the negative valence items. In other words, the learners were more likely give enthusiastic “totally agree” responses to the items with a positive valence, while they were more wary about giving “totally agree” responses to the items with a negative valence. This difference was statically relevant in the pretest and even more so in the posttest (pretest – $P = .004$, posttest – $P < .0001$). This too suggests an overall positive attitude on the part of the learners, especially after the lessons.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The first conclusion to take away is that more lessons in word stress with more learners with more evaluation tools would be necessary to really learn about what helps French learners learn to correctly understand and produce word stress in English. Even with these two groups of learners, more time would be necessary to see what effect the lessons really had. As mentioned above, the three lessons on word stress seemed to improve the attitude of the 4ème B learners while not doing the same for the 4ème A learners, likely due to their differing levels in English. The lessons were visibly more accessible for the 4ème B learners, especially in the short time frame of the study. More lessons could have leveled this playing field so to speak. The amount of time spent learning something can be the difference between being stressed by the new, unknown material, and being motivated by learning. It is possible that more time studying word stress would have resulted in this very difference.

A larger pool of learners to work with would also give a much better idea of what works. With the two classes combined, less than fifty learners took part in the study, all with the same teacher and all in the same school. As was mentioned in the above discussion, it is likely that the overall positive attitude (despite the lack of confidence) would not have been found with other groups of learners with different social and family backgrounds, in a different school, and with a different teacher. Potentially, the lessons could have a bigger effect on the learners who start out with a more negative attitude towards English pronunciation, though changing an attitude like this is never easy.

It would also be telling to be able to test the students' productions (as was originally the plan) before and after the interventions in word stress. That being said, this would require a much larger time frame, because it takes a long time to integrate the lessons to the point of producing word stress (correctly or even incorrectly) without needing to actively think about it, assuming that the learners in question were not doing so before the lessons. The risk of taking a posttest before mastering the phenomenon is that the students would be so focused on what they had learned that they would be unable to speak with a natural rhythm (I have seen this take place with university students who filmed themselves reciting a paragraph before and after watching several videos on word stress, and their second productions were noticeably worse).

Comparing the effects of word stress lessons on groups of young learners to groups of adult learners could also be telling. Metalinguistic knowledge tends to be more accessible and therefore more easily put into use for adult learners than for young learners. We saw in the literature review that there are those who believe that learning rules as to the placement of word stress is useful, and there are those who believe that it makes more sense to learn word by word. I believe that the answer to this question greatly depends on the age at which the learner is first exposed to lessons about word stress. I think a student in 6ème would not benefit in the slightest from learning that certain word endings elicit different stress patterns and what those word endings are, whereas I think an adult learner could benefit from learning the more common endings and suffixes that predictably lead to certain stress patterns. But this hypothesis would need to be tested with many more learners over a much longer time period.

I think that the ideal scenario for students of English to master word stress would be for them to learn about this fundamental characteristic of the language towards the beginning of their English learning career. If they are aware of the fact that one syllable is accented in a multisyllabic word and the others tend to be reduced, they can take this into consideration and listen for it with every new word of vocabulary, therefore making it unnecessary for them to learn the rules about word stress placement. This assumption would be very difficult to test, however, because it would take years and would require giving (what I believe to be) suboptimal English instruction to a control group of learners to see if learning about word stress at a young age made a difference.

Though there are many questions that need answers, it is clear that word stress deserves more attention in the English language classroom in France.

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Annex

4ème B

pre test																																					
Column1	Column2	Column3	Column4	Column5	201	202	203	205	206	207	208	209	211	212	213	214	215	216	218	219	220	221	222	223	225	226	227	228	229	Item total	ABIL tot	ATT tot	CONF tot	DES tot	P.E tota	Order	
4	13	Je n'arrive pas à prononcer correctement les mots en anglais.	-	ABIL	6	7	5	3	3	6	5	6	6	2	6	5	6	3	5	3	7	5	7	2	5	6	3	7	6	125	ABIL tot	605				3	
10	12	J'arrive mieux à comprendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ABIL	6	3	6	5	1	5	6	7	5	2	6	6	7	2	5	3	7	3	7	7	3	5	2	5	6	120	ATT tot	774				1	
14	14	J'arrive à prononcer comme un anglophone si je connais bien la phrase.	+	ABIL	5	6	5	5	6	5	6	3	7	7	6	6	5	5	3	3	6	5	7	7	7	3	7	5	6	7	136	CONF tot	441				4
17	15	Bien prononcer en anglais est très difficile.	-	ABIL	5	5	3	5	1	2	3	6	3	5	5	5	2	5	3	3	6	2	3	1	2	3	5	7	5	95	DES tot	656				2	
20	11	J'arrive bien à entendre et comprendre tous les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ABIL	5	6	7	6	5	5	5	6	5	6	6	5	2	3	2	6	5	3	5	7	5	6	5	7	6	129	P.E tota	232					
3	1	J'aime bien les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ATT	6	7	5	7	5	6	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	6	7	7	6	6	5	7	3	7	7	156							
5	3	Je préfère entendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ATT	7	7	6	7	3	5	6	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7	6	5	7	7	5	7	156							
7	4	Je n'aime pas la sonorité de la langue anglaise.	-	ATT	7	7	5	7	6	5	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	7	6	5	7	7	164							
8	5	Cela me fait plaisir quand je prononce bien une phrase en anglais.	+	ATT	6	6	6	7	5	5	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	6	5	7	2	6	7	5	7	7	6	6	5	152							
11	2	J'aime bien entendre parler les anglophones.	+	ATT	6	7	5	6	3	5	7	7	6	7	6	6	6	7	6	5	5	7	7	6	5	7	6	5	6	146							
6	18	J'arrive bien à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	CONF	5	5	5	6	2	5	5	2	5	6	5	3	3	5	3	3	1	3	6	5	1	6	2	6	6	104							
9	19	Je n'arrive pas à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	-	CONF	6	5	5	6	3	5	5	2	6	5	6	5	6	5	3	3	7	2	6	5	3	5	2	6	6	118							
12	17	J'ai peur d'être stigmatisé par mes copains si je parle avec un bon accent en classe d'anglais.	-	CONF	3	5	7	5	2	5	7	7	7	6	2	7	6	2	5	7	7	7	7	2	7	7	5	7	2	134							
19	16	J'ai peur de parler anglais avec un mauvais accent.	-	CONF	5	5	5	2	3	3	2	1	3	3	1	2	2	5	2	6	2	5	1	5	6	2	5	6	85								
1	10	Je pense que l'on me prend plus au sérieux si je parle anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	5	5	6	6	7	6	6	5	7	7	5	7	6	5	5	5	6	6	7	5	6	5	5	5	5	6	144						
2	9	Il n'est pas important de parler anglais avec un bon accent si on arrive à communiquer.	-	DES	3	2	5	5	2	3	2	6	1	3	5	1	1	5	3	5	3	3	5	1	3	3	5	5	5	85							
13	6	J'aimerais parler anglais comme un anglophone.	+	DES	5	7	6	7	6	5	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	6	7	6	6	7	6	7	7	7	5	7	7	6	161						
15	7	Je préfère garder un accent français quand je parle anglais.	-	DES	5	6	6	7	1	5	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	3	6	6	6	7	6	6	6	6	3	5	7	145							
18	8	Il est important de parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	3	5	5	5	1	5	6	7	3	5	1	2	5	5	6	5	5	6	7	7	5	6	5	6	5	121							
16	20	J'ai déjà travaillé sur la prononciation en anglais.	+	P.E	5	7	5	6	6	5	6	3	7	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	2	7	6	5	6	5	2	7	138						
21	21	J'ai déjà travaillé l'accent tonique en anglais.	+	P.E	5	5	5	5	1	3	3	2	7	5	3	5	6	2	2	5	1	3	6	3	3	3	3	5	1	94							
learner total					109	118	113	118	72	99	115	112	118	114	110	109	109	98	98	102	115	94	133	102	101	115	94	121	119	2708							

post test																																						
Item NB	Item Orig	Question	Valence	Construct	201	202	203	205	206	207	208	209	211	212	213	214	215	216	218	219	220	221	222	223	225	226	227	228	229	Item total	ABIL tot	ATT tot	CONF tot	DES tot	P.E tota	Order		
4	13	Je n'arrive pas à prononcer correctement les mots en anglais.	-	ABIL	3	5	5	5	2	6	6	6	5	3	5	5	5	7	3	5	6	3	6	5	5	5	3	6	6	121	ABIL tot	583					3	
10	12	J'arrive mieux à comprendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ABIL	5	5	6	5	2	3	5	5	5	5	5	6	7	2	3	5	7	3	6	6	1	5	3	5	6	116	ATT tot	768					1	
14	14	J'arrive à prononcer comme un anglophone si je connais bien la phrase.	+	ABIL	5	5	5	5	6	5	6	3	7	5	5	7	6	5	3	6	6	6	7	7	3	6	5	7	6	137	CONF tot	457					4	
17	15	Bien prononcer en anglais est très difficile.	-	ABIL	3	3	3	5	3	1	2	5	5	3	5	5	2	2	3	3	6	2	3	1	3	6	2	5	3	84	DES tot	700					2	
20	11	J'arrive bien à entendre et comprendre tous les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ABIL	5	6	6	6	2	7	5	6	5	3	5	5	3	2	3	5	7	5	6	7	2	5	6	7	6	125	P.E tota	303						
3	1	J'aime bien les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ATT	6	7	6	6	6	5	7	7	5	6	6	5	6	7	5	7	5	5	6	5	7	5	7	7	5	149								
5	3	Je préfère entendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ATT	7	7	6	7	2	7	1	7	7	7	5	5	6	7	6	7	7	6	7	5	7	7	5	7	7	152								
7	4	Je n'aime pas la sonorité de la langue anglaise.	-	ATT	7	7	6	7	7	5	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	6	6	7	7	7	3	7	6	162								
8	5	Cela me fait plaisir quand je prononce bien une phrase en anglais.	+	ATT	6	6	6	6	6	5	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	6	6	7	5	6	7	7	5	7	6	6	155								
11	2	J'aime bien entendre parler les anglophones.	+	ATT	6	7	6	6	5	6	7	7	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	6	3	6	6	6	6	5	5	6	6	150								
6	18	J'arrive bien à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	CONF	3	5	5	5	3	3	5	7	5	5	5	3	5	5	3	3	6	3	6	3	6	5	1	6	3	6	112							
9	19	Je n'arrive pas à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	-	CONF	3	6	5	6	2	5	6	2	6	5	3	5	5	3	5	5	3	6	3	6	5	5	6	2	6	5	116							
12	17	J'ai peur d'être stigmatisé par mes copains si je parle avec un bon accent en classe d'anglais.	-	CONF	3	7	7	5	2	6	6	5	7	5	2	5	6	3	5	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	2	138							
19	16	J'ai peur de parler anglais avec un mauvais accent.	-	CONF	3	3	5	3	3	1	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	5	5	2	6	5	3	7	5	3	1	7	5	91								
1	10	Je pense que l'on me prend plus au sérieux si je parle anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	5	7	6	5	5	7	7	6	6	6	5	7	6	7	6	5	5	6	7	2	6	6	6	7	6	147								
2	9	Il n'est pas important de parler anglais avec un bon accent si on arrive à communiquer.	-	DES	5	3	5	3	2	5	1	7	2	5	6	3	5	5	2	6	6	5	6	1	2	6	5	1	3	100								
13	6	J'aimerais parler anglais comme un anglophone.	+	DES	6	7	3	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	165								
15	7	Je préfère garder un accent français quand je parle anglais.	-	DES	6	6	6	7	2	6	6	6	6	6	7	5	7	2	6	7	7	6	7	6	7	6	3	6	5	144								
18	8	Il est important de parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	6	7	6	5	3	6	7	7	5	6	7	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	3	5	7	5	6	5	144							
16	20	J'ai déjà travaillé sur la prononciation en anglais.	+	P.E	5	6	5	6	6	5	7	7	6	6	6	5	6	5	6	5	7	6	6	6														

4ème A

pre test																				
Item NB	Item Orig	Question	Valence	Construct	101	102	103	104	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	item_total		Order	
4	13	Je n'arrive pas à prononcer correctement les mots en anglais.	-	ABIL	3	3	6	5	5	2	3	5	3	6	6	7	54	ABIL tot	262	2
10	12	J'arrive mieux à comprendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ABIL	5	7	3	2	5	3	6	7	7	3	1	3	52	ATT tot	324	1
14	14	J'arrive à prononcer comme un anglophone si je connais bien la phrase.	+	ABIL	3	6	7	3	5	5	2	6	7	5	5	3	57	CONF tot	208	4
17	15	Bien prononcer en anglais est très difficile.	-	ABIL	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	6	3	5	5	5	43	DES tot	254	3
20	11	J'arrive bien à entendre et comprendre tous les sons de la langue anglaise	+	ABIL	3	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	5	2	7	56	P.E tota	109	
3	1	J'aime bien les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ATT	7	6	7	5	6	5	6	3	5	7	3	6	66			
5	3	Je préfère entendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ATT	6	7	7	3	5	6	3	7	7	7	7	5	70			
7	4	Je n'aime pas la sonorité de la langue anglaise.	-	ATT	1	6	7	6	5	6	7	7	7	7	5	2	66			
8	5	Cela me fait plaisir quand je prononce bien une phrase en anglais.	+	ATT	7	6	5	6	7	7	7	5	6	5	6	3	70			
11	2	J'aime bien entendre parler les anglophones.	+	ATT	5	2	6	5	3	5	6	6	5	5	3	1	52			
6	18	J'arrive bien à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	CONF	2	5	5	5	3	3	3	2	5	6	6	5	50			
9	19	Je n'arrive pas à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	-	CONF	6	3	3	3	3	5	3	7	5	5	5	7	55			
12	17	J'ai peur d'être stigmatisé par mes copains si je parle avec un bon accent en classe d'anglais.	-	CONF	2	2	7	6	2	6	6	6	2	7	1	7	54			
19	16	J'ai peur de parler anglais avec un mauvais accent.	-	CONF	5	3	3	5	1	5	3	6	6	3	2	7	49			
1	10	Je pense que l'on me prend plus au sérieux si je parle anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	5	7	5	5	5	2	1	5	1	5	5	5	51			
2	9	Il n'est pas important de parler anglais avec un bon accent si on arrive à communiquer.	-	DES	7	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	30			
13	6	J'aimerais parler anglais comme un anglophone.	+	DES	3	3	7	5	6	7	7	7	7	7	6	5	70			
15	7	Je préfère garder un accent français quand je parle anglais.	-	DES	6	1	7	5	2	3	1	1	7	7	1	3	44			
18	8	Il est important de parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	3	6	7	5	5	1	5	3	6	5	7	6	59			
16	20	J'ai déjà travaillé sur la prononciation en anglais	+	P.E	5	6	6	6	6	7	6	5	6	6	5	5	69			
21	21	J'ai déjà travaillé l'accent tonique en anglais.	+	P.E	3	6	3	1	6	1	1	1	6	1	6	5	40			
				learner total	88	94	111	91	91	89	86	102	109	109	89	98	1157			
post test																				
Item NB	Item Orig	Question	Valence	Construct	101	102	103	104	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	item_total		Order	
4	13	Je n'arrive pas à prononcer correctement les mots en anglais.	-	ABIL	3	2	5	5	3	3	1	2	5	6	3	3	41	ABIL tot	250	2
10	12	J'arrive mieux à comprendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ABIL	5	6	7	6	3	5	2	6	2	6	2	3	53	ATT tot	296	1
14	14	J'arrive à prononcer comme un anglophone si je connais bien la phrase.	+	ABIL	6	1	3	5	3	5	3	6	6	5	6	6	55	CONF tot	201	4
17	15	Bien prononcer en anglais est très difficile.	-	ABIL	2	6	1	3	5	5	2	6	3	3	2	5	43	DES tot	247	3
20	11	J'arrive bien à entendre et comprendre tous les sons de la langue anglaise	+	ABIL	6	5	3	5	3	5	1	5	7	5	6	7	58	P.E tota	123	
3	1	J'aime bien les sons de la langue anglaise.	+	ATT	5	5	5	5	5	6	1	5	5	3	7	5	57			
5	3	Je préfère entendre l'anglais parlé avec un accent français.	-	ATT	2	3	7	6	3	5	6	7	5	7	2	5	58			
7	4	Je n'aime pas la sonorité de la langue anglaise.	-	ATT	1	6	6	6	5	6	3	3	6	6	6	5	59			
8	5	Cela me fait plaisir quand je prononce bien une phrase en anglais.	+	ATT	5	7	5	6	5	7	5	7	6	5	5	5	68			
11	2	J'aime bien entendre parler les anglophones.	+	ATT	3	3	6	6	6	5	3	3	3	7	7	2	54			
6	18	J'arrive bien à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	CONF	5	6	5	5	3	3	1	7	5	5	2	5	52			
9	19	Je n'arrive pas à parler anglais avec un bon accent.	-	CONF	6	5	6	5	3	5	3	5	6	5	3	5	57			
12	17	J'ai peur d'être stigmatisé par mes copains si je parle avec un bon accent en classe d'anglais.	-	CONF	2	2	5	2	3	6	2	7	7	6	3	3	48			
19	16	J'ai peur de parler anglais avec un mauvais accent.	-	CONF	5	2	1	3	3	6	2	7	6	3	3	3	44			
1	10	Je pense que l'on me prend plus au sérieux si je parle anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	5	7	6	6	3	3	1	2	1	6	3	3	46			
2	9	Il n'est pas important de parler anglais avec un bon accent si on arrive à communiquer.	-	DES	2	7	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	5	3	5	40			
13	6	J'aimerais parler anglais comme un anglophone.	+	DES	5	2	3	6	6	5	7	7	7	6	3	3	60			
15	7	Je préfère garder un accent français quand je parle anglais.	-	DES	5	3	3	5	3	5	5	3	5	7	2	3	49			
18	8	Il est important de parler anglais avec un bon accent.	+	DES	5	5	1	6	3	3	7	1	5	6	7	3	52			
16	20	J'ai déjà travaillé sur la prononciation en anglais	+	P.E	5	6	2	6	7	7	5	5	2	5	5	3	58			
21	21	J'ai déjà travaillé l'accent tonique en anglais.	+	P.E	2	7	5	7	7	7	3	2	7	5	7	6	65			
				learner total	85	96	88	107	84	105	66	98	101	112	87	88	1117			

Summary

This thesis examines the phenomenon of word stress in English, looking at what it is, why it is so important in English, and its place in the history of teaching English as a foreign language. It discusses the historical tendencies and cycles in teaching pronunciation, and more importantly explores how teaching word stress can be better integrated into our current language teaching approach which is based on communication and task-based learning. The study seeks to understand the effect that teaching word stress explicitly to two groups of 4ème learners has on their attitude towards English pronunciation, and therefore how to better help them learn this critical aspect of phonology in English. Though we cannot draw any firm conclusions from the findings of the study, the data do suggest that there is a relationship between the English level of the learners in question, and the effect that the word stress lessons have on attitude and confidence.

Résumé

Ce mémoire porte sur l'accent tonique et cherche à le définir, à montrer pourquoi il est aussi fondamental en anglais, et à explorer sa place dans l'enseignement d'anglais en tant que langue étrangère dans le système académique français. Il aborde les tendances et les cycles dans l'enseignement de la prononciation, et il explore des possibilités pour mieux intégrer l'accent tonique dans l'enseignement de la prononciation en anglais dans l'approche actionnelle. L'étude cherche à mieux comprendre l'effet que quelques leçons sur l'accent tonique en anglais peuvent avoir sur l'attitude de deux classes de 4èmes par rapport à la prononciation en anglais, et ainsi comment mieux apprendre cet aspect crucial de la phonétique en anglais. On ne peut pas tirer de conclusion ferme de l'étude, cependant les données indiquent qu'il y a un lien entre le niveau d'anglais des élèves en question et l'effet des leçons sur l'attitude et la confiance.