

# 4

## Syllables and Individual Words

Chapter 3 established a landscape for pronunciation teaching. Its primary feature is the process of thought grouping, a topic tied to the roles of prominence and featured words in the pronunciation of English. Building upon these relatively broad components, this chapter describes how characteristics of individual words interact with thought groups and prominence. These characteristics include a prominent word's total number of syllables, the location of its primary stressed syllable, and patterns of word stress. Just as discussions of prominence are meaningless until an appreciation for the process of thought grouping has first been established, the characteristics of individual words discussed in this chapter are better appreciated once the construct of prominence has been established.

### Number of Syllables Within a Word

To know how to pronounce a word in English, the speaker needs to get its number of syllables right. One reason is that listeners anticipate hearing the right number of syllables arranged in a particular pattern of word-level stress (Field, 2005). Another reason is that getting the number of syllables right lays a necessary foundation for the speaker to also be able to (a) stress the word's primary syllable, (b) produce the vowel sound of that particular syllable with at least a threshold level of precision, and (c) leave the word's remaining syllables unstressed or only lightly stressed, as appropriate. For example, in the unusually long word *overgeneralization*, there are eight syllables. Its seventh syllable is

primary stressed, and that is the particular syllable English language listeners expect to hear most clearly.

o	ver	gen	er	al	i	/	tion
1	2	3	4	5	6	<b>7</b>	8

When learning to pronounce a new word, students need to be aware of its number of syllables. Being able to figure out a word's syllable count is especially important for prominent words because those are the ones listeners depend upon most. To foster such awareness, the teacher needs to define what syllables are, provide examples, and illustrate that there is usually one vowel for each syllable of an English word. Although these are relatively easy ideas for students to understand conceptually, it takes focused practice before understanding begins to make a difference in pronunciation. As the next steps in working with the core language sample, some learning tasks for students include focusing on the prominent words they have already identified and figuring out the number of syllables for at least 12 of them.

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What are some tips and strategies you would share with students for learning to identify the number of syllables in a word?

Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), Goodwin (2014), and Grant (2007) provide many classroom activities designed to focus learners' attention on figuring out the number of syllables in English words. Working with such resources, I usually ask students to create a list of prominent words with their number of syllables indicated. During rehearsal activities, students can be asked to practice saying prominent words aloud while focusing on getting their number of syllables right.

## Primary Stressed Syllables

Along with identifying the number of syllables in a word, an equally important step is to locate the word's primary stressed syllable. As before, the priority should be prominent words within thought groups. In preparation, the teacher might consult resources such as Dauer (1983, pp. 67–69) and Celce-Murcia et al. (2010, pp. 187–194), which provide accessible rules for determining primary stressed syllable locations. For example, the primary stressed syllable for words ending in the suffixes *-tion*, *-sion*, *-ic*, *-ical*, *-ity*, and *-graphy* is almost always the syllable immediate before the suffix (e.g., *electricity*, *education*). Also, two-syllable words such as *permit* and *conduct*, which can function as either nouns or verbs, carry primary stress on their first syllable when functioning as nouns and on their second syllable when functioning as verbs.

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What are some other rules for identifying a word's primary stressed syllable?
- In your experience, do learners find such rules helpful?

To introduce the topic, teachers need to define what primary stressed syllables are while demonstrating that these particular syllables are a bit louder and take a bit longer to pronounce. This provides an opportunity to make connections with several of the concepts featured in Chapter 3. Just as there may be both prominent words and featured words within a single thought group, there may be both primary stressed and secondary stressed syllables within a single word. Revisiting our earlier example, *overgeneralization* receives primary stress on its seventh syllable while both its first and third syllables receive secondary stress.

\		\				/	
<b>o</b>	ver	<b>gen</b>	er	al	i	<b>za</b>	tion
<b>1</b>	2	<b>3</b>	4	5	6	<b>7</b>	8

## REFLECTIVE BREAK

- How might you explain the following analogies to students? What concepts are they intended to convey?
  - a. Prominent words are to featured words as primary stressed syllables are to secondary stressed syllables.*
  - b. Prominent words are to thought groups as primary stressed syllables are to individual words.*

What students need to realize is that speakers who consistently get primary stressed syllables right are easier for listeners to understand. When students are ready, their next task in working with the core language sample is to insert an accent mark (e.g., /) precisely above the primary stressed syllable of each prominent word. In pairs or small groups, learners can be asked to compare their efforts and to continue rehearsing the language sample aloud while focusing on primary stressed syllables. To make these prominent syllables clear, the pronunciation features students should be applying are increased volume and vowel lengthening.

## Word Stress Patterns

Once learners begin to see that primary stressed syllables distinguish the prominent words within thought groups, there needs to be an easy way to talk about primary stressed syllables in class. This stage is important because stress patterns of particular words will be easier to notice, talk about, and remember if everyone has shared conventions for talking about them. Students have already identified the number of syllables of prominent words, and they have located the words' primary stressed syllables. The next task is to teach learners to assign an easy-to-remember label for the stress pattern of prominent words. To accomplish this, I introduce an uncomplicated two-digit numbering system (see Murphy, 2004). For example, the word *communication* is a 5-4 word. This label means that *communication* is a 5-syllable word with primary stress on its 4th syllable. On the other hand, the word *father* is a 2-1 word, a 2-syllable word with primary stress on its 1st syllable.

The system provides a convenient shorthand for identifying both the number of syllables in a word and the location of its primary stressed syllable. I find that students pick the system up quickly.

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Why might it be useful to use such a numeric system when teaching the pronunciation of individual words?
- How might we modify the system to make it applicable to words such as ***e**conomic*, *method**o**logy*, and *educ**a**tion*, which have a secondary stressed syllable as well as a primary stressed syllable?

When learners return to the core language sample, they can begin to assign numeric labels for each of the sample's prominent words. Once established as a set of shared conventions, the labeling system is a useful tool for classroom discussion whenever questions about patterns of word stress arise.

### Conclusion

This chapter built upon the broader focus of Chapters 1–3 by focusing on syllables and patterns of word stress of prominent words. By this point, students' oral rehearsals of the core language sample have expanded to include five essential features of English pronunciation: thought groups, prominence, featured words, syllable counts, and the location of primary stressed syllables. This chapter also introduced a handy two-digit numbering system intended to make it easier for students and teachers to discuss word stress patterns in class. Parallels were drawn between the operation of prominent words within thought groups and how primary stressed syllables operate within individual words. Although the topics featured in Chapter 4 may not be as broadly applicable in ESL/EFL classrooms as were the topics treated in earlier chapters, any course featuring attention to vocabulary learning might benefit from students having access to shared conventions for talking about the stress patterns of individual words. Chapter 5 continues to build upon these themes.