The Effect of Explicit vs. Implicit Teaching of Stress Patterns on Pronunciation Improvement and the Establishment of Communication of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract: The present study investigates the stress patterns of Iranian English language learners' pronunciation. More precisely, this study was an attempt to investigate the effect of two approaches of teaching word stress patterns (implicit through listening to audio record by native Americans and explicit through focus on word stress patterns and instructing it) on the learners' pronunciation. For this purpose, 60 intermediate EFL learners studying in several English language institutes in Yasouj were selected, and assigned to two matched groups, on the basis of their language proficiency test scores. A pronunciation pretest was administered to all the participants. The experimental groups received explicit focus on word stress patterns through the book on pronunciation, and the comparison group received implicit focus on prosodic features with no obvious emphasis on word stress. A pronunciation posttest was then administered; the data gathered from the pretest and posttest included accuracy scores for the oral production of word stress, and the percentage of all accuracy scores. In this study, explicit teaching of word stress pattern turned out to cause more gains in pronunciation accuracy in comparison with implicit instruction. The results of the research demonstrates that the accuracy of pronouncing word stress obtained in posttest in the experimental group (i.e. explicit approach group) is higher than that of the comparison group.

Keywords: explicit instruction, implicit instruction, suprasegmental features, word stress patterns

1. Introduction

Speech perception, which affects speech production, is one of the key elements that leads to meaningful communication. In other words, a mutual relationship between speech perception and speech production eliminates plenty of problems in the negotiation of meanings. Pronunciation is used as a tool, assisting learners in speaking skill and oral communication. Some researchers (Chujo, 2010, 2012; Jenkins, 2000) believe that out of a list of 40

communicative breakdowns 27 are attributable to pronunciation. Therefore, the necessity of integrating prosodic (here word stress patterns) features into communication activities is clearly felt. This approach provides students with situations to develop their pronunciation ability through listening and speaking skills.

Suprasegmental features of pronunciation have always been a   difficult step to take in learning a second or foreign language, especially for adults. Learners may have acquired perfect reading and writing skills, while still being unable to communicate functionally in an L2. Problems in pronunciation can be traced to segmental as well as suprasegmental difficulties. Although most previous research has been conducted on the segmental level of pronunciation, recent studies show that suprasegmentals play a more important role than segmentals in the acquisition of a second language phonological system (Anderson, Johnson & Koehler, 1992; Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998).

1.1. Research Questions

Referring to the primary objectives of the study, two main research questions were raised here as follows:

a.   Does the explicit teaching of stress patterns lead to pronunciation improvement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

b.   Does the implicit teaching of stress patterns lead to pronunciation improvement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

c. Is there a significant difference between explicit and implicit teaching of stress patterns regarding the pronunciation improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

 1.2. Research Hypotheses

> a. Explicit teaching of stress patterns does not lead to pronunciation improvement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

> b. Implicit teaching of stress patterns does not lead to pronunciation improvement among Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

> c. There is no significant difference between explicit and implicit teaching of stress patterns regarding the pronunciation improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

 2. Review of Literature

Research and the current trend reversal in viewing pronunciation shows there is a consensus that a learner's pronunciation in a second language needs to be taught in

conjunction with prosody (stress, intonation, and tone) and communicative practices for the learner to be able to communicate effectively with native speakers (Otlowski, 1998).

Teaching pronunciation has to focus on intelligible pronunciation which is regarded as an internal component of communicative competence. Achieving this goal would be possible through pronunciation lessons centered on aspects such as sounds, syllables, stress, and intonation (Gilakjani, 2012).

Trofimovich and Baker (2007) carried out a research study investigating the relationship between suprasegmental accuracy and accentedness in an L2 to examine second language (L2) experience effects on children's acquisition of fluency- (speech rate, frequency, and duration of pausing) and prosody-based (stress timing, peak alignment) suprasegmentals. Results indicated that the children with 11 years of US residence, unlike those with 1 year of US residence, produced all but one (speech rate) suprasegmentals natively. Overall, findings revealed similarities between L2 segmental and suprasegmental learning.

Checklin (2012), working on teaching intonation patterns as a suprasegmental feature in pronunciation, considered L2 learners' knowledge and use of correct intonation patterns as essential to effective communication, since appropriate intonation can direct the listener's attention to the important information in the discourse, reflect or reinforce the interactional affective overtones, attitudes, or status of the interlocutors, and be as an assistance to establish reciprocal cultural harmony.

Watts and Huensch (2012) reviewed several existed books (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Suenobu, Kanzakei & Yamane, 1992; Zielinski, 2006; Hahn, 2004) which worked on pronunciation, suprasegmental and stress features. The finding of their survey shows that all of the books treated rhythmic alternations and intonation, ten books (91%) covered linking—a prevalent means of enhancing rhythm— and eight books (73%) included focal stress.

2.1. Explicit Teaching

Researchers such as DeKeyser (2003), Taylor (1981), Kenworthy (1987), Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) highlighted the role of explicit teaching through the assertion that complicated points have to be learnt explicitly and adults should be taught formal rules to draw on their explicit learning skills. They believe that due to the variance and less predictive patterns of word stress in English, it has been suggested to teach word stress rules.

The explicit teaching of suffix rules may assist in accessing the students' ability to learn stress patterns through the use of phonological similarity. Additionally, analogy

exercises; in which students categorize words with similar stress patterns or extract the odd one out (Field, 2005), rely on phonological similarity. It has been shown how early and late bilinguals both demonstrated ability for analogical extension and learning simple patterns (Guion, Flege,& Loftin 2008).

There are some other research studies endorsing the importance of teaching prosodic features explicitly. For example, Mirzai *et al.* (2012) concluded that according to SLA research, the use of planned instructional activities increases the perceptual salience of commonly ignored L2 input (or output) features, focuses the learners' attention, promotes their noticing the gaps within their own L2 knowledge, and thus engages them in repairing their faulty systemic structures or features. This, in turn, is argued to promote L2 learning and development (Doughty, 2001; Ellis and Monaghan, 2002; Ellis & Sagarra, 2011; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Schmidt, 1990; Soleimani, Ketabi, & Talebinejad, 2008; Swain, 1998). 'Noticing hypothesis' by Schmidt, specifically indicates that conscious awareness is necessary for SLA (1990). Yet, Robinson (1995), admitting the necessary role of awareness in converting input to intake, argues that "it is not sufficient and that some planned instructional activities are still needed to fill the gaps between what is produced by learners and what is produced by the speakers of the L2" (p. 285).

Fraser (2000) views teachers' isolated treatment of segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation in their teachings as an 'unfortunate' event and cautions that it is not appropriate from a communicative approach to teach pronunciation.

Otlowski (1998) and Purcell and Suter (1980) stated that the least amount of relationship exists between teaching pronunciation and obtained proficiency in pronunciation. They observed little effects of learners' pronunciation skills on their overall language proficiency.

Additionally, phonological intelligibility is extremely difficult to isolate and pin down (Adams-Goertel, 2013). Thus, Jenkins (2002) regarded identification of essential elements in teaching pronunciation as a complex process. Augmentation or modification of pedagogy is needed because scholarly work supports that repetition and drills are no longer a satisfactory tool for either the educator or the learner .

2.2. Implicit Teaching

Among those aforementioned experts who emphasized the effect of explicit approach toward learning pronunciation, Jenkins (2004) asserts that habit formation in language transfer figures more extensively at the phonological level than at either syntactic or lexical levels.

One study carried out by Siyyar (2005) tried to compare the effect of implicit focus on form with the effect of delayed and explicit form focus on the linguistic accuracy of the oral production of Iranian EFL learners. The scores of the participants demonstrated that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group in terms of the average accuracy gains. Finally, it was concluded that implicit focus on form through corrective recast can lead to higher accuracy in oral production in comparison to delayed, explicit focus on form.

Heidari and Moenzade (2012), in an experiment done on the effect of teaching prosodic features to learners, made students attentive to what she told them and they were expecting what it was coming next through singing songs and showed that this routine helped to internalize new utterances implicitly .

This study strives to confirm more evidence to support the claim of the study conducted by Mirzai et al. (2012) emphasizing that planned instructional activities increases the perceptual salience of commonly ignored L2 input (or output) features. Resting on this premise, the writer broached the subject of implicit vs. explicit way of teaching stress patterns as a suprasegmental feature in the realm of prosodic one.

Thus, the current study, following previous researches like Checklin (2012) and focusing the same amount of interest and importance, is an attempt to teach word stress pattern in two different approaches of implicit and explicit to clarify the best one.

Putting related studies into a nutshell, this would be concluded that the effects of approaches in instructing pronunciation, word stress pattern, in specific, needs to be clarified. Activities that are inherently repetitive yet genuinely communicative (Canale & Swain, 1980; Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988; Trofimovich & Gatbonton, 2006) compared explicit and communicative way of pronunciation instruction and agreed that implementing these two at the same time would have positive results on learning. Explicit focus on form in pronunciation instruction is useful (Gordon & Darcy, 2012). On the other hand, the influential effects of implicit teaching is noticeable. Among these studies, lack of paying enough attention to explicit way of teaching directly stands out especially when the focus is just on stress pattern realm. The influential extend of these two approaches is the scope of this study.

Therefore, the review of the literature on the issues of L2 pronunciation, implicit teaching, and explicit teaching made it clear that few study, to the researchers' knowledge, have been conducted to compare the effectiveness of the implicit vs. explicit methods of instruction in improving the pronunciation skills of Iranian L2 learners in terms of using correct stress patterns. Thus, the present study aimed to fill the existing gap by exposing Iranian EFL learners to implicit and explicit instruction of English stress patterns to see which one was more fruitful.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study benefited from the contribution of 60 participants: 33 female and 27 male participants who were intermediate EFL learners. In an attempt to achieve a more representative sample, the data were collected from two different language institutes in Yasouj: Nokhbegan and Andishe Language Learning Institutes.

The homogeneous participants were selected and then assigned into two groups: experimental (i.e. explicit) and control (i.e. implicit) group. The experimental group received direct treatment whereas the control group received indirect treatment of word stress patterns. Participants in the control group were given awareness about stressed words in sentences and in isolation in explicit approach of teaching. In the experimental group, the participants were exposed to audio tracks of the text and teacher had them listen to the audios repeatedly and imitate their voices without focusing on stress and explicit awareness on word stress patterns

.Table : 3.1

The Participants' Information

Language Institute	Number	Group
Nokhbegan	30	Experimental group (explicit)
Andishe	30	Control group (implicit)

As shown in Table 1, an equal number of participants were selected from two different institutes in Yasouj. The participants from each institute served as one group of the study.

In order to ensure the homogeneity of participants, Nelson English Language Tests (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was administered as a proficiency test, and students with 1 SD above and below the mean were selected as the sample of the study. They were almost similar in their socioeconomic background and none of them had received explicit instruction on word stress assignment in English in the previous courses according to the questionnaire they filled before the experiment.

Table: 3.2.

Participant's Demographic Background

Number of Participants	60
Age	15- 25
Gender	Both
Years of Studying English	3-5
Language proficiency	Intermediate
Proficiency Score	43-72
Mother Tongue	Persian

Table 3. 1 represents demographic information of participants in current study. Sixty EFL learners were selected. They had been studying English for 3-5 years, but they had not seriously been taught word stress patterns in their previous English courses. A questionnaire was used to elicit the learners' demographic information. Instrumentation

A questionnaire, an English Language proficiency test, as well as pronunciation pretest and posttests were the data elicitation instruments employed for the purpose of this study. In addition, *Study Guide of Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* by Clare Fletcher (1990), two extracted text of *In Charge 2,* and *Expanded Tactics for Listening* accompanying as well as their audio tracks on CD were the materials which were used by the researcher in this study. What follows contains a description of these tools.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

In order to find answers to the research questions, the study started with those learners who agreed to participate. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their demographic information. After selecting the participants, they were randomly divided into two equal groups of experimental and control groups. The pretest was administered on two days. The course consisted of five sessions, and participants received 10 hours of instructions. For experimental group (explicit method of teaching), instructions were followed according to the second part of *The Study Guide to Pronunciation of Longman Dictionary*. For the implicit way of teaching (control group), the class was just conducted with listening to audio of several tracks with American pronunciation. The course was conducted separately for the two groups during 5 sessions, each taking 2 hours. Finally, the posttest (which was a parallel version of the pretest) was also administered to the two groups.

4.Analyses and Discussion

In order to find an answer to the first research question (i.e. to see whether explicit instruction improved the pronunciation skills of the learners in terms of word stress patterns), the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group learners were compared via a paired-samples *t*-test. The same statistical test was used to compare the pretest and posttest scores of the learners in the control group, and thus to answer the second research question of the study.

Finally, in order to answer the last research question, the researcher had to make sure the two groups did not differ significantly on the pretest, and then compare their posttest scores. Hence, independent-samples *t*-test was once used to compare the pretest scores of the two groups, and this statistical procedure was once again employed to compare the posttest scores of the two groups.

To answer the second research question, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group to find out whether the learners' mastery over stress patterns improved as a result of being exposed to explicit instruction or not. The results of the *t*-test analyses are presented below.

Table: 4.1.

Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Learners in the Experimental Group

	N	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean
Pretest	30	57.53	9.34	2.08
Posttest	30	85.96	5.67	1.26

Such descriptive statistics as mean and standard deviation are shown for both pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group learners in Table 4.1. The mean score of the posttest ($M = 85.96$) was greater than the mean score of the pretest ($M = 57.53$). This difference seems to be a significant one, but to ascertain whether it is or not, one needs to look down the *Sig* (2-tailed) column in the *t* test table below.

Table: 4.2

Results of the Paired Samples t Test for Comparing Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Learners in the Experimental Group

| | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean	Lower	Upper	*t*	*df*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)
Pretest-Posttest	-28.43	7.81	2.36	-21.86	-29.53	-33.92	29	.000

Since the *Sig.* (2-tailed) value was smaller than the alpha level (.000 < .05), it could be argued that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest scores of the learners in the experimental group (*M* = 57.53, *SD* = 9.34) and their posttest scores (*M* = 85.96, *SD* = 5.67), *t* (29) = -33.92. The conclusion could be that the explicit instruction of English word stress patterns significantly improved the learners' mastery over word stress patterns. The bar chart below shows the considerable difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group learners.
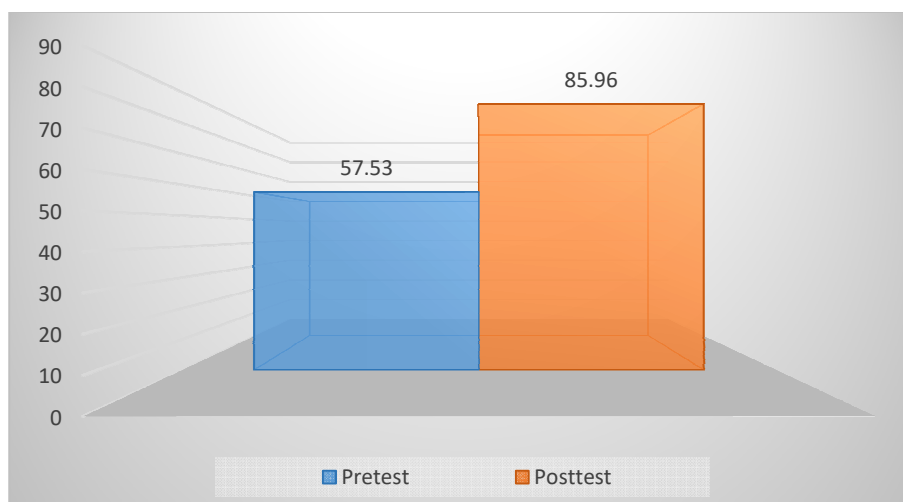

Figure: 4.1

The Mean Scores of the Experimental Group Learners on the Pretest and Posttest

The bar chart shows that the performance of the learners in the experimental group on the posttest was substantially better than their performance on the pretest, indicating the effectiveness of explicit instruction for teaching/learning word stress patterns.

In order to ascertain the approximate similarity of the learners in the two groups before instruction, and clarifying the third research question, their pretest scores were compared via an independent-samples *t*-test. Also the same statistical test was used to compare the posttest scores of the two groups after the experiment ended. Table 4.5 shows the descriptive statistics related to these analyses.

Table: 4.3

Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Experimental and Control Group Learners' Scores on the Pretest and Posttest

	Groups	*N*	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental	30	57.53	9.34	2.08
	Control	30	58.39	8.74	2.08
Posttest	Experimental	30	85.96	5.67	1.26
	Control	30	76.62	12.10	2.70

On the pretest, the mean score of the experimental group learners ($M = 57.53$) was slightly less than the mean score of the control group learners ($M = 58.39$). However, on the posttest, the experimental group learners' mean score ($M = 85.96$) turned out to be greater than that of the control group learners ($M = 76.62$). To check the statistical (in-) significance of these differences between the pretest scores of the two group and between their posttest scores, one needs to consult the *Sig*. (2-tailed) column in the *t* test table which follows:

Table :4.4

Results of the Independent-Samples t-Test for Comparing the Experimental and Control Group Learners on Their Pretests and Posttests

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | *t* test for Equality of Means | | | | |
	F.	Sig.	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Pretest	1.23	.39	.67	58	.53	-.86	1.35
Posttest	1.86	.26	2.17	58	.000	9.34	1.54

According to Table 4.6, there was not a statistically significant difference in pretest scores for experimental group learners ($M = 57.53$, $SD = 9.34$) and CG ($M = 58.39$, $SD = 8.74$), $t(58) = .67$, $p = .53$ (two-tailed). This is so because the p value was greater than the specified level of significance (i.e. .05). On the other hand, the p value was less than the alpha level (.000 < .05) for the posttest analysis, and thus the difference between the experimental group learners ($M = 85.96$, $SD = 5.67$) and control group learners ($M = 76.62$, $SD = 12.10$) was statistically significant. The conclusion to be drawn from this part would be that the two groups were at roughly the same level of knowledge in terms of word stress patterns prior to the experiment, but after the experiment, the experimental (explicit) group learners succeeded to show a significantly better performance. The results of these analyses are graphically shown in Figure 4.2.
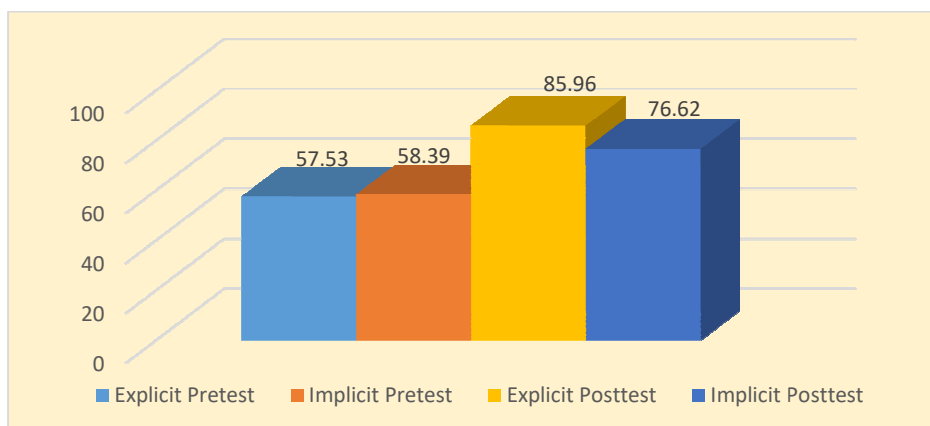

Figure: 4.2

The Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Group Learners on the Pretest and Posttest

As it could be seen in Figure 4.2, the explicit and implicit groups' pretest scores were not drastically different, yet the explicit group learners managed to gain significantly higher scores on the posttest, which indicates that explicit instruction was more effective in helping EFL learners improve their knowledge of English word stress patterns.

5. Conclusion

All the statistical procedures in this study were run using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 21. To find the answer to the research questions and in order to test the null hypotheses of this study, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to see whether there was any statistically significant difference between teaching word stress implicitly and explicitly. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were utilized to present a profile of accuracy gained separately by each group in posttest scores, and also inferential statistical analyses were run. Paired-samples *t*-test was used to examine the effectiveness of the explicit and implicit instructional approaches, and independent-samples *t*-test was employed to compare the explicit and implicit approaches to teaching word stress.

It was found in this study that both explicit and implicit instructional approaches led to the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of word stress patterns, but explicit instruction yielded more fruitful results than did implicit instruction.

The results of this study asserted that teaching explicit rules of word stress and teaching word stress implicitly both had beneficial effects on learners' accuracy in pronouncing the stressed syllables of English words. In addition, it was found that explicit instruction was more successful than implicit instruction for the purposes of this study.

This line of argument does not find support in researches such as Otlowski (1998), or Purcell and Suter (1980), who stated that there are the least amount of relationship between teaching pronunciation and obtained proficiency in pronunciation. They regarded little effects of instruction on learners' pronunciation skills, while in this study both explicit and implicit approaches toward teaching word stress patterns were found to affect the accuracy of pronunciation of EFL learners.

The results of the present study reject Fraser's (2000) claim in which teachers' isolated treatment of segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation in their teachings are viewed as an 'unfortunate' event. Fraster (2000) cautions that it is not appropriate from a communicative approach to teach pronunciation.

The findings of the present study lend partial support to the assertion of Jenkins (2004). He stated that habit formation in language transfer figures more extensively at the phonological level than at either syntactic or lexical levels.

The findings of this study lend support to Mirzai et al.'s (2012) study, in which they examined the role of noticing in L2 learners' production of intonation patterns, and concluded that according to SLA research, the use of planned instructional activities increases the perceptual salience of commonly ignored L2 input (or output) features, focuses the learners' attention, promotes their noticing the gaps within their own L2 knowledge, and thus engages them in repairing their faulty systemic structures or features.

In this study, explicit teaching of word stress patterns turned out to have cause more gains in accuracy in comparison with implicit (which entailed just listening to podcasts in native speakers' voice as well as imitation).

As the analysis above demonstrated, the accuracy of pronouncing word stress obtained in posttest in the experimental group (i.e. explicit approach group) was higher than that of the implicit group. To avoid ineffective approaches to teaching speaking ability, findings of this research can shed light on the necessity of applying the two approaches of implicit and explicit teaching word stress pattern to teaching speaking skills.

Moreover, teachers need be familiarized with both approaches in order to keep the communicative nature of the language classes. So, it would be reasonable to allocate some time to the training of teachers in this regard. Since one of the responsibilities of curriculum developers is to provide and sequence the content of teaching materials, especially designing communicative tasks to provide opportunities for teaching word stress pattern in one of the recommended approaches, especially explicit one, or even both, seems very much advisable.

One of the main limitations of the current study is its focus on accuracy and not dealing with fluency. Utilizing equipment and software of analysing sounds and voices may eliminate this shortage in further research studies. Regarding the limitations of the study, it is important to mention that accuracy and fluency seem to be a very hard task to achieve without precise equipment. In order to achieve more precise details and richer data, using acoustic analysis software tools (such as wave-surfer) for waveform editing, and spectral analysis are recommended. Furthermore, using electronic equipment and software eliminates the probable errors and make the study more reliable.

Another limitation of this study concerns the number of participations. A further study can be organized with a larger sample of participants in order to get more reliable results. Because of limitations of participants, opportunities for taking another group and

class for blended teaching of both explicit and implicit word stress patterns was not provided and it is thus handed over to further research.

It is also recommended to investigate this study in different cities of Iran in order to examine the effects of accent background on word stress patterns. Since Trofimovich and Baker (2007) have suggested that both fluency-based (speech rate, frequency, and duration of pausing) and prosody-based (stress timing) suprasegmentals determine the perception of foreign accent in a learners' speech, future research needs to clarify the precise contribution of prosody and fluency based suprasegmentals to foreign accent in L2 speech.

As the above mentioned findings indicated, instruction of sentence stress patterns and giving awareness and practice on changing pronunciation of words in sentences has a significant effect on EFL learners listening ability. Finding the effects of both implicit and explicit instruction can lead teachers to implementing both approaches in order to make more progress on learners' pronunciation level.

It is hoped that this study will shed light on the scope ELT and brighten a new path in leading teachers and syllabus designers into preparing more compressible materials and learning environment, giving rise to having better students with better pronunciation skills.

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