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Strong and Weak Syllables

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1 .Introduction

In English, not all syllables are pronounced with equal stress. Some are strong (stressed), while others are weak (unstressed).

Understanding strong and weak syllables is crucial for:

- Correct word stress
- Natural connected speech
- Accurate vowel reduction
- Improving fluency and rhythm

This chapter covers:

- Definition of strong and weak syllables
- Features of stressed (strong) syllables
- Features of unstressed (weak) syllables
- Syllable patterns in words and phrases
- .5 Vowel reduction in weak syllables

2 .Strong (Stressed) Syllables

2.1 Definition

A strong syllable is one that is pronounced louder, longer, and higher in pitch.

2.2 Features

- Longer in duration
- Clear vowel quality
- Often carries primary word stress

2.3 Examples

- record (noun) → /'rek.ɔ:d/ – first syllable stressed
- banana → /bə'nɑ:.nə/ – second syllable stressed

Tip: Stressed syllables are more prominent in connected speech.

3 .Weak (Unstressed) Syllables

3.1 Definition

A weak syllable is one that is pronounced quickly, softly, and often with vowel reduction.

3.2 Features

- Shorter in duration
- Vowel often reduced to schwa /ə/
- Often occurs in unstressed words or syllables

3.3 Examples

- banana → /bə'nɑ:.nə/ – first and third syllables are weak
- photograph → /'fəʊ.tə.grɑ:f/ – second syllable weak

Tip: Weak syllables are less prominent, but still essential for rhythm.

4 .Vowel Reduction in Weak Syllables

Vowels in weak syllables often change to schwa /ə/ or /ɪ:/

- about → /ə'baʊt/ – first syllable weak, reduced to /ə/
- sofa → /'səʊ.fə/ – second syllable weak, reduced to /ə/

Tip: Teach students to listen for schwa and practice fast, natural speech.

5 .Syllable Patterns in Words

English words have typical stress patterns:

- Two-syllable nouns: stress usually on the first syllable → TAble /'teɪ.bəl/
- Two-syllable verbs: stress usually on the second syllable → reLAX /rɪ'læks/
- Multi-syllable words: primary stress + secondary stress → banana /bə'nɑ:.nə/

Exercise: Identify strong vs weak syllables in words:

- record → /'rek.ɔ:d/ → strong: first, weak: second
- photograph → /'fəʊ.tə.grɑ:f/ → strong: first, weak: second & third

6 .Syllable Stress in Connected Speech

- Content words (nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs) → stressed
- Function words (articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs) → usually weak

Example:

- The cat is sleeping on the mat.
 - stressed: cat, sleeping, mat
 - weak: the, is, on, the
- Weak syllables often reduce vowels: /ɪ/, /ə/, /ʊ/

7 .Teaching Tips

- Listening exercises: identify strong vs weak syllables
- Clapping or tapping: stress syllables physically for rhythm
- Minimal pairs: practice how stress affects meaning
- Connected speech practice: reduce weak syllables naturally
- Vowel reduction drills: /ə/ and /ɪ/ in unstressed syllables

8 .Summary

- Strong syllables – stressed, louder, longer, clear vowel
- Weak syllables – unstressed, shorter, often vowel reduced
- Vowel reduction is key for fluency
- Word stress and sentence stress create English rhythm
- Mastering strong vs weak syllables improves natural pronunciation and intelligibility