

A Map Analogy for Stress in Spoken English - Sarah Darling

A concept that is often misunderstood in pronunciation is stressed syllables. If you're not sure what stress is, you can think of the difference in pronunciation between "dessert" and "desert", or the different ways we can say *kilometer* - "ki-LO-me-der" vs. "KIL-o-me-der". You can also watch the first 20 seconds of [this video](#) for a clear example of incorrect stress. Simply put, stressed syllables are louder and more clearly spoken than non-stressed syllables. The only words that receive stress in English are ones that carry meaning in a sentence, such as nouns and main verbs. The other little 'grammatical' words do not receive stress. For example, "booked" is a verb and "ticket" and "Turkey" are nouns, so they are stressed. Those are the words that carry meaning in this sentence: "They have **booked** a **ticket** to **Turkey**," so they are the words an English speaker would stress.

This concept of stress is important in English because it is one of the markers that listeners use to identify words. If the stress is incorrect or missing, it's often more difficult to understand the meaning than if an individual sound is mispronounced.

It's definitely tricky for some English learners if they don't speak any languages (yet) that have stress, and more so if they are new to Canada and have not yet 'noticed' that some words or syllables are louder and clearer in English. It can be an entirely new concept, and one that students often try to explain away as unimportant because it's non-existent in the language(s) they already speak.

In trying to come up with an analogy, I keep returning to the idea of a map. The important locations on the map could be analogous to the stressed syllables in a sentence, which are the words that carry meaning - similar to the places on a map that are highlighted as important.

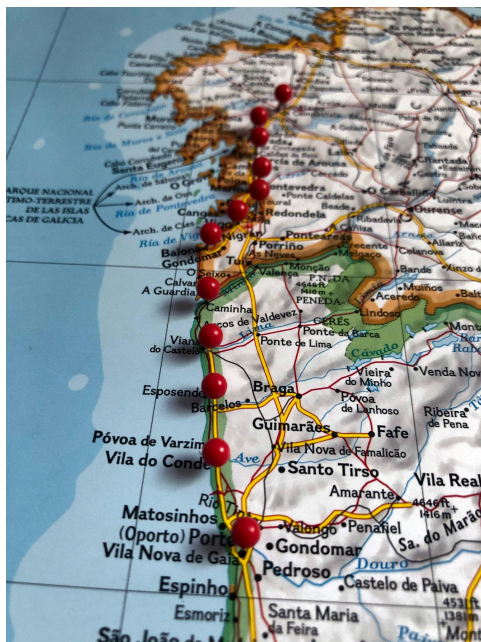


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People from most cultures are familiar with maps. The idea of a map showing many places might be a helpful analogy for my students, since all of the points on a map may be useful as a reference point, but only a few places are really relevant in a given journey. Similarly, in a sentence such as “She’s **not** going to **eat** the **dessert** you **baked**,” only four of the nine syllables are stressed, or important, in this sentence. We use the stressed syllables in a sentence to make the important information clear and hard to miss - just as highlighted locations on a map show us the places that we really can’t miss if we want to end up at our destination.