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From Recognition to Production: Exploring the Knowledge–Performance Gap in Efl University Students' Use of Contrastive Stress

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Abstract:

Pronunciation is an important component of communicative competence, yet EFL learners may devote considerably more attention to grammar, vocabulary, and idea development than to suprasegmental features of speech. This classroom-based exploratory study investigated first-year university EFL students' ability to use contrastive stress in a meaning-focused speaking task following explicit classroom instruction. Assessment records from nine intact groups were reviewed, with **60 complete student records from six groups** meeting the criteria for quantitative analysis. Students responded to randomly selected statements by agreeing, disagreeing, correcting, or extending the ideas while using contrastive stress to communicate their intended meaning. Performance was assessed in three areas: Contrastive Stress, Idea Handling, and Fluency, each scored out of five. Contrastive Stress produced the lowest mean score (**M = 2.49, SD = 1.11**), compared with Idea Handling (**M = 3.03, SD = 1.46**) and Fluency (**M = 2.79, SD = 1.35**). In addition, **63.3% of students performed better in Idea Handling than in Contrastive Stress**. Classroom observations indicated recurring difficulties involving inappropriate placement of prominence, excessive stressing of multiple words, and reliance primarily on loudness rather than other prosodic cues such as pitch. The findings suggest an apparent gap between learners' recognition of the communicative function of contrastive stress and their ability to employ it during meaning-focused production. The study

highlights the need for pronunciation instruction that extends beyond theoretical explanation and recognition to repeated, contextualized, and communicatively integrated production practice.

Keywords: contrastive stress, EFL pronunciation, suprasegmentals, prominence, speaking assessment, pronunciation instruction, communicative competence

1. Introduction

Speaking competence in a second or foreign language involves considerably more than grammatical accuracy and lexical knowledge. Speakers also use phonological resources to organize information, signal communicative intention, highlight important information, and create contrasts. Among these resources, prominence and contrastive stress can play an important role in helping listeners interpret what a speaker intends to emphasize or correct. Despite this communicative function, pronunciation may receive less attention than grammar and vocabulary in EFL classrooms. Learners themselves may similarly conceptualize successful speaking primarily in terms of producing grammatically correct sentences, using appropriate vocabulary, and generating relevant ideas. Pronunciation can consequently be treated as an additional feature of speech rather than as a resource for constructing meaning.

Research into second-language pronunciation has increasingly emphasized intelligibility, comprehensibility, and communicative effectiveness rather than imitation of native-speaker accents. Derwing and Munro (2015), for example, argue for evidence-based pronunciation instruction linked to successful communication and highlight the importance of assessment and appropriate instructional focus. Contrastive stress is particularly relevant from this perspective because prominence can alter the interpretation of an otherwise identical sequence of words. Research has also suggested that contrastive stress can be explicitly taught. Levis and Muller Levis (2018) investigated contrastive stress with intermediate learners and describe it as a potentially high-value pronunciation feature. Their study also notes previous evidence that learners can acquire the identification of contrastive stress and that explicit instruction can support its production. More recently, Levis (2023) has drawn attention to the instructional decisions required when teaching contrastive stress to lower-proficiency learners, particularly when learners must simultaneously process meaning and pronunciation.

The present study emerged from classroom observation rather than from a predetermined experimental intervention. While teaching first-year university EFL students, the teacher-researcher repeatedly observed that learners devoted considerable attention to grammatical and lexical aspects of speaking while making relatively limited use of pronunciation to communicate meaning. Contrastive stress was therefore introduced explicitly during the Integrated English Skills module. An important classroom observation emerged during the initial instruction. When learners were presented with identical sentences in which different words were visually highlighted, they were generally able to discuss how the highlighted element changed the intended meaning. However, this receptive awareness did not appear to transfer readily to their own speech. When required to produce contrastive stress while communicating an original response, many learners experienced considerable difficulty.

This observation motivated the present retrospective exploration of students' assessment performance. Rather than attempting to establish a causal effect of pronunciation instruction, the study examines the apparent gap between learners' explicit awareness of contrastive meaning and their ability to realize that meaning through prominence during a communicative speaking task.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent were first-year EFL university students able to transfer their explicit understanding of contrastive stress to its production in a meaning-focused speaking task?

2. How did learners' performance in Contrastive Stress compare with their performance in Idea Handling and Fluency?

3. What recurrent production difficulties observed during the assessment help explain the apparent gap between awareness of contrastive stress and its communicative use?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pronunciation as a component of communicative competence

Pronunciation teaching has historically undergone changes in both its goals and pedagogical status. Contemporary approaches increasingly distinguish successful communication from the pursuit of native-like pronunciation. Derwing and Munro (2015) emphasize an evidence-based approach in which pronunciation instruction is evaluated according to its contribution to intelligibility and comprehensibility. Their account also highlights the importance of understanding which pronunciation difficulties have meaningful consequences for communication. This perspective has particular relevance to suprasegmental features. Pronunciation does not consist only of producing individual consonants and vowels accurately. Stress, rhythm, prominence, and intonation contribute to how listeners interpret spoken discourse. A learner may therefore construct a grammatically accurate sentence while failing to communicate the intended informational relationship effectively if prominence is misplaced. For EFL learners, this creates an instructional challenge. Grammar and vocabulary are highly visible components of language courses and assessment. Prosodic features can be less visible and may consequently receive less conscious attention from learners. Explicit instruction can make such features noticeable, but noticing alone cannot be assumed to guarantee their successful production.

2.2 Contrastive stress and meaning

Contrastive stress refers to the use of prominence to highlight an element that is contrasted, corrected, selected, or otherwise made particularly salient in discourse. Changing the prominent element can change the pragmatic interpretation of a sentence even when its lexical and grammatical structure remains unchanged. This characteristic makes contrastive stress especially suitable for meaning-focused pronunciation instruction. Instead of treating stress merely as a matter of sounding natural, learners can be shown that prominence performs a communicative function. Levis and Muller Levis (2018) examined the teaching of contrastive stress to intermediate learners and argued for considering pronunciation features according to their communicative value. Their instructional study investigated whether contrastive-stress teaching could influence comprehensibility and fluency in spontaneous speech.

Levis (2023) subsequently discussed the particular instructional problems associated with lower-proficiency learners. One challenge is that learners may have to process written or spoken meaning while simultaneously identifying and producing the relevant prosodic pattern. This issue is directly relevant to the present classroom context, in which less proficient students sometimes required additional explanation of the communicative task itself before they could focus successfully on pronunciation.

2.3 From recognition to production

An important distinction in pronunciation learning is the difference between recognizing a feature and using it during spontaneous or semi-spontaneous speech. A learner may correctly explain

which word should receive prominence when the contrast has already been established, but producing that prominence while simultaneously generating ideas, selecting vocabulary, constructing grammar, and monitoring fluency creates a substantially greater processing demand. The present study conceptualizes this difference as a possible **knowledge–performance gap**. The term is used cautiously: the study did not administer a formal receptive knowledge test before the speaking assessment. Rather, students' recognition of contrastive meaning was observed during classroom instruction, while their subsequent production was evaluated through the formal speaking task. The study therefore explores, rather than experimentally establishes, this relationship.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopted a retrospective exploratory classroom-based design. The original teaching and assessment were conducted as part of normal instruction rather than as a controlled research experiment. Existing assessment records from nine first-year university EFL groups were subsequently examined in relation to the teacher-researcher's contemporaneous classroom observations.

This design was selected because the principal purpose was not to demonstrate that a particular intervention caused improvement. Instead, the analysis sought to understand a recurrent pedagogical phenomenon: students who appeared able to understand contrastive meaning during instruction nevertheless frequently experienced difficulty producing appropriate prominence when speaking independently.

3.2 Participants and instructional context

The study involved first-year university EFL students enrolled in an Integrated English Skills module. Assessment records from nine intact groups were available for retrospective review. The classes were mixed in proficiency, with most students estimated to be between approximately B1 and B2 levels, although individual differences existed both within and across groups. Because the original assessment records included absences, incomplete performances, re-attempts, and some ambiguous or overwritten scores, not all available records were suitable for quantitative analysis. Following a valid-case procedure, **60 students from six groups whose records contained clearly identifiable scores for all three assessment criteria were included in the final quantitative analysis**. Records that could not be interpreted with sufficient confidence were excluded rather than estimated.

3.3 Instruction in contrastive stress

Contrastive stress was introduced in late April in response to the teacher's previous observations of students' speaking. Learners appeared to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and idea generation while demonstrating limited awareness of pronunciation patterns as resources for communicating meaning.

The instructional input was delivered during one class session using presentation slides. Students were initially shown pairs of lexically identical sentences in which different words were visually highlighted. They were asked to discuss why different elements had been highlighted and how the intended meaning changed. Students were generally able to interpret these differences. However, classroom discussion suggested that many had not previously considered using contrastive prominence deliberately in their own speaking. Following the initial input, learners completed guided production activities. They read examples aloud, constructed dialogues collaboratively, performed

dialogues in pairs, and practised correcting information through prominence. These activities were intended to move learners progressively from recognition toward production.

3.4 Meaning-focused assessment task

Before the individual assessment, students were instructed to review a TED Talk related to minimalism and take notes on its main ideas. The topic provided a shared conceptual background for the subsequent speaking task. The teacher prepared 25 paper slips containing propositions related to the topic. Examples included statements such as "Our things own us," "Less stuff means more freedom," "We buy things we don't need," "We confuse wants with needs," "Happiness is not about having more," and "We should focus on experiences, not things." The complete stimulus set progressed from general statements about possessions to propositions concerning consumerism, space, stress, experience, and quality of life.

During the assessment, each student approached the designated assessment area and selected up to three slips. The learner read the proposition and was given approximately 30 seconds to prepare a response. The student then expressed agreement, disagreement, correction, or modification of the proposition while attempting to use contrastive stress to communicate the intended relationship. For example, in response to a proposition such as *A big house means more maintenance efforts*, a learner could agree while extending the contrast:

A big house means not only more MAINTENANCE effort but also more FINANCIAL effort.

Alternatively, the learner could disagree:

A big house DOES NOT mean more maintenance effort; it means MORE FREEDOM.

The capitalized elements illustrate intended prominence rather than prescribed responses. Students were expected to formulate their own ideas. While individual students were being assessed, the remaining students could see the proposition and practise possible responses before their own turns. Because the assessment was individual and learners sometimes experienced difficulty realizing contrastive stress despite being able to formulate appropriate sentences, assessment continued across two class sessions.

3.5 Assessment instrument

Performance was evaluated using an analytic rubric with a maximum score of 15 points. Three equally weighted criteria were used: **Contrastive Stress (5 points), Idea Handling (5 points), and Fluency (5 points).** The Contrastive Stress criterion evaluated whether the learner used clear and appropriate stress to highlight key contrasts in meaning. Idea Handling assessed the ability to correct or agree with propositions and communicate relevant, understandable opinions. Fluency evaluated smoothness, pace, and hesitation. The separation of these dimensions is important for the present analysis. A learner could therefore formulate an appropriate argument and speak relatively fluently while still receiving a lower score for the prosodic realization of contrast.

3.6 Data analysis

The analysis focused primarily on the relationship between the three analytic dimensions rather than on students' overall scores out of 15. This decision was necessary because an overall score would combine pronunciation with idea development and fluency and could therefore conceal the specific phenomenon under investigation. Assessment records from nine intact groups were reviewed for the quantitative component. To maximize data reliability, a valid-case procedure was applied. Only records containing clearly identifiable scores for all three analytic criteria—Contrastive Stress, Idea Handling, and Fluency—were included in the statistical analysis. Records involving absence, incomplete performance, overwritten or ambiguous scores, or unclear re-attempt information were

excluded rather than estimated. This resulted in a final quantitative sample of 60 complete student records drawn from six groups with unambiguous assessment data. The remaining records were not included in the statistical analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Performance Across the Three Assessment Dimensions

For the quantitative analysis, only records containing clearly identifiable scores for all three assessment dimensions were included. Records involving absence, incomplete assessment, or ambiguous scores were excluded. This valid-case procedure resulted in a final quantitative sample of **60 students**.

Descriptive analysis showed that **Contrastive Stress was the weakest of the three assessed dimensions**. Students obtained a mean score of **2.49 out of 5** for Contrastive Stress (SD = 1.11), compared with **3.03** for Idea Handling (SD = 1.46) and **2.79** for Fluency (SD = 1.35).

Assessment criterion	N	Mean	SD	Median
Contrastive Stress	60	2.49	1.11	3.00
Idea Handling	60	3.03	1.46	3.50
Fluency	60	2.79	1.35	3.00

The difference was particularly noticeable between Contrastive Stress and Idea Handling. In **38 of the 60 cases (63.3%)**, students received a higher score for Idea Handling than for Contrastive Stress. The two scores were equal in 16 cases (26.7%), while only six students (10.0%) obtained a higher Contrastive Stress score than Idea Handling.

A similar, although less pronounced, pattern was observed for Fluency. **Thirty-four students (56.7%)** obtained a higher Fluency score than Contrastive Stress score, 14 students (23.3%) received equal scores, and 12 students (20.0%) obtained a higher Contrastive Stress score. Almost half of the sample (**48.3%**) received **2.5 points or below** for Contrastive Stress, while only **6.7%** obtained a Contrastive Stress score of 4 or above. In comparison, **43.3%** of the students obtained scores of 4 or above for Idea Handling and **25.0%** reached this level for Fluency. Paired-samples comparisons further indicated that Idea Handling scores were significantly higher than Contrastive Stress scores, $t(59) = 6.24$, $p < .001$, with a substantial within-participant effect ($dz = 0.81$). Fluency scores were also significantly higher than Contrastive Stress scores, $t(59) = 2.99$, $p = .004$, although the magnitude of this difference was smaller ($dz = 0.39$). Taken together, the quantitative findings indicate that students generally performed more successfully in generating and communicating relevant ideas than in using contrastive prominence appropriately. The lower Contrastive Stress scores therefore cannot be explained solely by an inability to understand or respond meaningfully to the speaking prompts.

4.2 Observed Difficulties in Producing Contrastive Stress

The quantitative pattern corresponded with observations made during the individual assessment. One recurrent difficulty was **inappropriate placement of prominence**. Students were often able to formulate a relevant response but placed the strongest prominence on a lexical item that did not represent the intended contrast. In some cases, the teacher prompted students to reconsider the intended meaning and re-perform the response.

A second recurring difficulty was **excessive prominence**. Some students stressed several words within an utterance rather than making the principal contrast perceptually salient. This suggested that they understood that emphasis was required but had difficulty determining which element should carry the primary prominence.

A third difficulty concerned the **phonetic realization of prominence**. Some students appeared to associate contrastive stress predominantly with increased loudness. Consequently, the intended word was sometimes produced more loudly without sufficient use of other prosodic cues, particularly pitch.

4.3 The Apparent Recognition–Production Gap

The assessment results were particularly noteworthy when considered alongside students' performance during the preceding instructional stage. During explicit instruction, students were generally able to interpret changes in meaning when different words in otherwise identical sentences were visually highlighted. However, appropriate production became considerably more difficult when these visual cues were removed and students were required to formulate their own agreement, disagreement, correction, or extension.

The assessment required students to respond independently to propositions concerning minimalism, possessions, consumerism, freedom, stress, and quality of life. The stimulus set included statements such as "Our things own us," "Less stuff means more freedom," "We confuse wants with needs," and "Happiness is not about having more." Because students were required to formulate their own responses rather than reproduce predetermined sentences, successful performance involved coordinating idea generation, linguistic formulation, and prosodic realization.

The combination of the assessment results and classroom observations therefore suggests an **apparent recognition–production gap**: learners could often understand the communicative function of contrastive stress when it was explicitly demonstrated but experienced substantially greater difficulty deploying it independently during meaning-focused speech.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate a clear discrepancy between students' performance in contrastive stress and their performance in the other dimensions of the speaking task. Contrastive Stress produced the lowest mean score (M = 2.49), compared with Idea Handling (M = 3.03) and Fluency (M = 2.79). Most notably, 63.3% of the students obtained a higher score for Idea Handling than for Contrastive Stress. The statistical comparison also showed that the difference between these two dimensions was significant. These results suggest that many learners were able to understand the propositions and formulate relevant responses while experiencing greater difficulty using prosodic prominence to communicate the intended contrast. This distinction is important because it indicates that successful idea generation does not necessarily entail successful prosodic realization. Students could possess sufficient grammatical, lexical, and conceptual resources to construct an appropriate message while lacking control over the pronunciation resources needed to organize that message effectively. Pronunciation should therefore not be regarded merely as an additional feature applied to an otherwise complete utterance; rather, prosody contributes directly to how meaning is structured and interpreted in spoken communication. The quantitative findings also correspond with observations made during the instructional stage. When students were initially presented with identical sentences in which different words were visually highlighted, they were generally able to interpret how the intended meaning changed. However, when they subsequently had to determine the contrast themselves and express it through speech, many experienced difficulty. This supports the interpretation of an **apparent recognition–production gap**. Nevertheless, this interpretation should be treated cautiously because recognition was observed through classroom activities rather than measured using a standardized receptive test.

Several specific production difficulties help explain this discrepancy. Students sometimes placed prominence on an inappropriate word even when the idea they had generated was relevant. Others stressed several words, apparently interpreting contrastive stress as general emphasis rather than selective prominence. A further recurring problem was reliance primarily on increased loudness. Some students attempted to make a word contrastive simply by producing it more loudly, without sufficiently manipulating other prosodic cues, particularly pitch. These observations suggest that knowing which information is important and knowing how to realize that importance phonologically constitute related but distinct abilities.

The findings are consistent with the broader argument that pronunciation instruction should focus on communicative effectiveness rather than simply native-like production. Derwing and Munro (2015) emphasize intelligibility and comprehensibility as central goals of second-language pronunciation instruction. From this perspective, contrastive stress is pedagogically important not because learners must reproduce a particular accent, but because prominence contributes to listeners' interpretation of information structure and speaker intention.

The results also relate to previous research on explicit contrastive-stress instruction. Levis and Muller Levis (2018) identify contrastive stress as a potentially high-value pronunciation feature and demonstrate the relevance of explicit instruction to learners' spoken performance. The present study extends this issue into a meaning-focused classroom assessment context. Rather than reproducing predetermined contrastive sentences, the students had to decide whether to agree with, disagree with, correct, or extend a proposition and then determine which part of their own response required prominence. This additional communicative demand may help explain why conceptual understanding did not consistently transfer to successful production.

Proficiency also appeared to interact with the task in a complex way. Lower-proficiency students sometimes required additional explanation of the task itself, suggesting that simultaneously processing the proposition, generating an idea, constructing an utterance, and monitoring pronunciation created a considerable cognitive demand. This observation is compatible with Levis's (2023) discussion of the challenges involved in teaching contrastive stress to lower-proficiency learners. However, difficulties were not confined to these students. Some comparatively stronger learners also initially treated grammar, vocabulary, and idea generation as more important components of speaking than pronunciation. General language proficiency therefore did not appear to guarantee conscious control of contrastive prominence, although the present study did not formally test the relationship between proficiency level and contrastive-stress performance.

Another important outcome concerned students' developing awareness of what successful speaking involves. Before the task, agreement and disagreement tended to be associated primarily with linguistic devices such as linking expressions and functional language. Through the contrastive-stress activities, students began to recognize that communicative relationships such as correction, disagreement, and contrast can also be expressed prosodically. This represents an important shift from viewing pronunciation as a matter of producing sounds correctly toward understanding it as a resource for constructing meaning.

Students' reactions following the assessment provide further contextual support for this interpretation. Although many initially found the task difficult and unfamiliar, some subsequently requested similar activities in future classes. Several students who were also working part-time as teachers indicated that they intended to use comparable activities in their own IELTS preparation classes. These reactions were informal and were not collected through a systematic questionnaire or

interview; consequently, they should not be interpreted as formal attitudinal data. Nevertheless, they suggest that the activity encouraged greater awareness of the pedagogical and communicative value of pronunciation.

Overall, the findings suggest that **explicit awareness represents only one stage in the development of contrastive-stress competence**. Learners may be able to recognize or explain the communicative function of prominence without being able to coordinate it successfully with grammar, vocabulary, idea generation, and fluency during meaning-focused speech. Pronunciation instruction should therefore provide opportunities for learners to progress from noticing and recognition to controlled production and, ultimately, communicatively motivated use. This interpretation provides the basis for the pedagogical implications discussed in the following section.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that contrastive stress should not be taught exclusively through theoretical explanation or recognition activities. Although students were generally able to interpret contrastive meaning when prominence was explicitly demonstrated, their lower performance in Contrastive Stress (M = 2.49) compared with Idea Handling (M = 3.03) and Fluency (M = 2.79) indicates that awareness did not consistently transfer to successful production during meaning-focused speaking.

Pronunciation instruction should therefore follow a progressive sequence moving from **noticing and identification to controlled production and communicative use**. Learners first need opportunities to recognize how changes in prominence affect meaning. This should be followed by guided production activities in which they practise selecting and realizing the appropriate prominent element. Finally, learners should use the feature in tasks that require simultaneous attention to meaning, language formulation, and pronunciation.

The present assessment provides one possible model for such practice. Rather than simply reading sentences containing predetermined stress patterns, students had to respond to propositions by agreeing, disagreeing, correcting, or extending an idea. This required them to determine the intended contrast themselves and then express it prosodically. Meaning-focused activities of this type may help bridge the transition from explicit knowledge of a pronunciation feature to its communicative use. The observed tendency to rely primarily on loudness also suggests that instruction should address the **phonetic realization of prominence more explicitly**. Learners need to understand that contrastive prominence is not achieved simply by making a word louder. Classroom modelling and guided practice should draw attention to the interaction of pitch, duration, intensity, and the relative prominence of surrounding material. Contrastive stress can also be integrated naturally with the teaching of functional language. Speaking activities involving agreement, disagreement, correction, clarification, comparison, and information gaps provide communicative contexts in which prominence contributes directly to meaning. Integrating pronunciation with these functions may help learners perceive it as part of communicative competence rather than as an isolated pronunciation exercise.

Finally, the findings support giving suprasegmental pronunciation a more systematic place within EFL speaking curricula. The present study does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that pronunciation should necessarily be taught as a completely separate module. However, it does suggest that occasional theoretical coverage is insufficient. Pronunciation, particularly communicatively significant suprasegmental features, should receive **planned, recurrent, and performance-based attention** throughout speaking instruction.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study was retrospective and classroom-based rather than a controlled experimental investigation. Although students received explicit instruction in contrastive stress before completing the assessment, there was no pre-test, post-test, or control group. The findings therefore cannot establish that the instruction caused changes in students' ability to produce contrastive stress.

Second, although assessment records from nine intact groups were reviewed, the quantitative analysis was restricted to **60 complete student records from six groups**. Records involving absence, incomplete performance, ambiguous or overwritten scores, or unclear re-attempt information were excluded rather than estimated. This valid-case procedure increased the reliability of the dataset used for analysis, but it also reduced the available sample.

Third, the proposed **recognition–production gap** should be interpreted cautiously. Students' ability to recognize changes in contrastive meaning was observed during classroom instruction but was not measured through a formal recognition test. The study therefore provides evidence of relatively weak contrastive-stress production alongside classroom observations of successful recognition, rather than a direct statistical comparison between independently measured recognition and production abilities.

Fourth, the assessment was conducted and scored by the teacher-researcher using an analytic classroom rubric. No second rater was employed, and inter-rater reliability could therefore not be established. In addition, the study did not include acoustic analysis of students' speech. Observations concerning prominence placement, excessive stress, and reliance on loudness were based on teacher assessment rather than instrumental measurements of pitch, intensity, or duration.

Finally, students' proficiency levels were estimated from their classroom performance and course context rather than established through an independent standardized proficiency measure. Consequently, the study cannot determine whether proficiency level significantly influenced contrastive-stress performance.

These limitations restrict the generalizability of the findings but do not diminish their value as evidence from an authentic EFL classroom context. Future research could build on the present study by incorporating pre- and post-instruction measures, formal recognition and production tasks, multiple raters, acoustic analysis, and independent measures of language proficiency.

8. Conclusion

This classroom-based exploratory study examined first-year university EFL students' ability to use contrastive stress during a meaning-focused speaking assessment following explicit classroom instruction. The findings revealed that Contrastive Stress was the weakest of the three assessed dimensions, with a mean score of **2.49 out of 5**, compared with **3.03 for Idea Handling** and **2.79 for Fluency**. Furthermore, **63.3% of students obtained higher scores for Idea Handling than for Contrastive Stress**, indicating that many learners were able to formulate relevant responses more successfully than they were able to realize the intended contrasts prosodically.

Classroom observations provided further insight into these difficulties. Recurring problems included inappropriate placement of prominence, excessive stressing of multiple words, and reliance primarily on loudness to signal contrast. When considered alongside students' ability to interpret contrastive meaning during explicit classroom activities, these findings suggest an apparent **recognition–production gap**. However, because recognition was not independently measured, this interpretation should be regarded as exploratory rather than as evidence of a formally established difference between receptive and productive abilities.

The study highlights the importance of treating pronunciation as a resource for meaning rather than merely as a matter of accurate sound production. In particular, contrastive stress can contribute directly to communicative functions such as agreement, disagreement, correction, clarification, and emphasis. Learners therefore need opportunities not only to identify these prosodic patterns but also to employ them while simultaneously generating and communicating their own ideas.

Overall, the findings support a **planned, recurrent, and performance-based approach to pronunciation instruction** in EFL speaking courses. Moving systematically from noticing and recognition through controlled practice to meaning-focused production may provide learners with greater opportunities to develop the prosodic resources required for effective spoken communication. Further research using formal recognition measures, pre- and post-instruction assessment, multiple raters, and acoustic analysis would help determine more precisely how learners develop control of contrastive stress and how such control can be supported pedagogically.

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