

What is the Schwa Sound?

The schwa sound is the most common vowel sound in the English language. In casual speech, we use the schwa sound more than any other vowel sound (Yule, 1996).

English is a stress-timed language in which multisyllabic words include primary and secondary-stressed syllables and unstressed syllables. The vowel sounds in unstressed syllables are often reduced to the schwa sound, that often presents as a shortened /ü/ or /i/. The schwa sound is commonly referred to as a “lazy” vowel sound.

/ə/

The diacritic mark for schwa looks like an upside-down e.



Diacritic marks for stressed and unstressed syllables

◦ = Unstressed or unaccented syllable ’ = Stressed or accented syllable Example: Pi’•lot◦

Why Teach Schwa?

When we speak, we apply and change stress patterns naturally, resulting in suprasegmental shifts in words. Suprasegmental shifts in speech are heard in tone, pitch, and stressed sounds across words and phrases. For example, listen how the stress patterns and vowel sounds shift as you say the words photograph, photographer, and photographic. We flex vowel sounds as the syllabic stress patterns change.

A learner’s first language, dialect, and individual accents also influence schwa sounds in English. For example, some spoken languages are timed by syllables where the vowel sounds are fully produced and stressed. Dialect and accents can vary greatly, even between those whose first language is English. These shifts within spoken English language can make multi-syllabic word awareness more challenging for students, especially for those who struggle with phonological awareness.

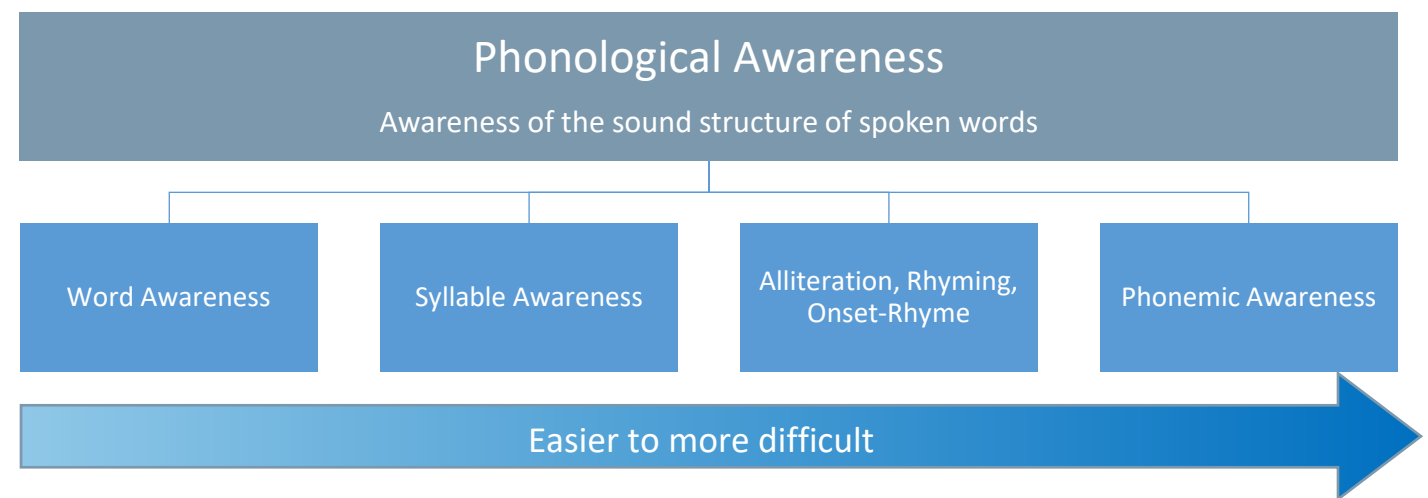
The prevalence of vowels that produce the schwa sound makes spelling especially challenging. Any English vowel sound can be reduced to the schwa, including vowel-y. Because of this, we cannot rely solely on teaching students to sound out multi-syllabic words when spelling them.

When are Students Ready to Learn About Schwa?

Teaching students to hear, identify, and produce stress patterns in our spoken language lays a foundation for teaching the schwa sound. This type of explicit instruction can begin in early grades and practice can be embedded into regular phonological awareness routines. Instruction on reading and spelling words with the schwa sound occurs when students begin to read multisyllabic words.

Schwa and Phonological Awareness

Begin with explicit instruction of teaching students how to listen and recognize stressed words within a spoken sentence. Develop routines that you can incorporate throughout your day, across content areas. Embed these activities into your daily instruction and lessons.



Incorporate Multi-Sensory Practices Within Instructional Routines and Activities

Example: Using mirrors, have students watch and feel what their mouths do when producing a stressed sound. Auditory Cue: *“When we accent a word, our mouths open wider, our voices get louder, and we hold the sound longer.”*

Teach Students to Listen, Recognize, and Produce Stressed Sounds using Systematic and Explicit Instruction

Example: Use games, song, rhymes, visuals, and stories. Practice is auditory, or “lights-off.” Begin at the sentence level, gradually making the task more challenging as students become more proficient with these tasks. Move on to teaching them to hear and practice producing stressed patterns within syllables of a word. Embed practice into regular routines, such as stressing every other letter in the alphabet.

Model Metacognition When Teaching Skills

Example: Teach how the meaning of a sentence can change based on which words are stressed.

*“I **don’t** think he should eat the candy.” vs. “I don’t **think** he should eat the candy.”*

Thinking aloud, explain how you are wondering why the meaning changed when the words are the same. Involve students in the discussion. Model asking yourself questions about which words are stressed and asking how the meaning changed after identifying the stressed words.

Provide Multiple Opportunities for Student Practice

Example: Use the gradual release of responsibility “I do, We do, You do” frequently throughout your day. Plan instructional time for students to practice producing and identifying stress patterns in words through phonological activities and word play.

Schwa and Phonics/Advanced Word Study

Begin explicit instruction of the schwa sound after students have a strong understanding of basic sound-symbol correspondences. Instruction of closely connected concepts such as syllable types, stressed and unstressed patterns in words, morphemes, and etymology helps students learn to read and spell words with schwa sounds. When students begin to encounter multi-syllabic words in their reading, they are ready to learn about the corresponding schwa sounds and the letters that can produce them.

Teach Sound-Symbol Correspondences

Provide many opportunities for students to practice reading and writing newly learned skills. Well-developed phoneme-grapheme mapping helps support students as they develop advanced phonics skills.



“Ultimately, students will need to learn about graphemes, syllables, and morphemes, as well as something about word meanings and origins, to remember schwa vowel spellings.”

-Louisa Moats

Teach the 6-Syllable Types

Introduce syllable-types in accordance with the progression of skills from most simple to more complex. Provide direct instruction on identifying stressed and unstressed syllables as students begin to decode and encode multisyllabic words. Combine decoding and encoding in routines to solidify skills and engage students.

After general rules for open and closed syllables and common stress patterns are well established, begin to teach students more advanced, recognizable patterns associated with unstressed syllable types.

Example 1: In an open, unstressed syllable, the vowel is often shortened and produces a schwa sound.

secure = se° •cure´ above = a° •bove´ relax= re° •lax´

Example 2: Final stable syllables are unstressed

table = ta´ [ble° caption = cap´[tion° social = so´[cial°

Example 3: After dividing and identifying common syllable patterns, teach students to listen for and to produce the stressed and unstressed syllables within the word. Model and teach students to flex the vowel sounds to decode multisyllabic words.

Modeling pronunciation of polite: /pə/° • /līt/´ vs /pō/´ • /līt/°

Provide Multiple Opportunities for Guided Practice

Students should pronounce, read, and spell multisyllabic words while applying their knowledge of stress patterns and spelling rules. As they practice decoding and encoding multisyllabic words that contain the schwa vowel sound, provide immediate, corrective feedback and scaffold instruction to meet the needs of the learners.

Signs a Student is Struggling with the Schwa Sound

Signs that a student is struggling specifically with schwa will be evident in their reading and spelling of multi-syllabic words.

Reading

Errors in reading multisyllabic words with schwa will most likely occur in an over-annunciation or articulation of the vowel in the syllable with the schwa sound, or an inability to flex the vowel sounds in a word.



Example: “salad” may be pronounced /s/ /a/ /l/ • /ă//d/ instead of /s/ /a/ /l/ • /ü//d/ °

Writing

When a student is struggling in remembering schwa spellings, several orthographic spelling errors may be noted. Teachers may observe a different vowel representing the schwa sound, often a letter u or a letter i due to their prevalence. The multisyllabic words may be spelled correctly phonetically.



Example: America = umericuh, banana= bunanuh

The pronunciation of schwa syllables can be greatly reduced when spoken, causing students to omit the vowel representation altogether. These types of errors call for additional analysis using different multisyllabic words to determine if the error is specific to schwa sounds or if the error is semi-phonetic in that students are not hearing or able to regularly discern vowel phonemes. Each of these errors result in different instructional decisions in providing support and scaffolds.



Example: chocolate = chocklate (possibly caused by reduced schwa) vs.
alligator = algratr = (semiphonetic, missing symbols representing medial /i/ and /er/ sounds)

Differentiation

To extend learning, use the same instructional strategies and routines with more complex vocabulary. Introducing less familiar and more complex words for students needing extension helps them practice reading and spelling words that they have not yet orthographically mapped. Teachers may also go into greater depth on morphology and word origin. This also helps teachers ensure students are holding on to their decoding and encoding skills for those working above grade level content.

For students who continue to struggle, scaffolding back to solidify mastery in syllable types, reteaching previously learned phonics skills, and providing more guided practice are likely to increase automaticity. Incorporating more visual supports and selecting words that connect to existing schema help solidify new learning. Some students may need a more intensive approach of explicitly teaching them to code words and sentences as they read and write. This involves using the diacritic marks to code long and short vowels, schwa, digraphs, trigraphs, quadgraphs, diphthongs, syllable patterns, stress patterns, and affixes. As they become increasingly automatic in both reading and writing these words, coding can then be scaffolded back until it is no longer needed.

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References:

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