

The Schwa Sound /ə/

Welcome back, everyone, to another episode of "Pronunciation Clinic," the podcast series where we dive deep into the world of phonetics and explore the sounds that make up the language we speak. I'm your host, Aurelia.

In today's episode, we're going to take a closer look at a very lazy vowel sound that is sometimes difficult for students to master. This is the Schwa Sound.

What is the Schwa Sound?

I want you to imagine a game of tennis. Can you hear the noises that the players are making? That is a very strong schwa sound - a sound that isn't specific; it doesn't use the jaw or the mouth to make it. This sound is hidden in many English words because we don't pronounce every single vowel sound. It takes the place of a vowel. E.g. apple

There is no strength in the sound; it is weak, unaccented and reduced. There is no effort in the sound. It can be considered as its own vowel sound, a very unspecific vowel sound.

When you see it on the Phonetic Chart, it looks like an upside down e.

Why Does it Exist?

When speaking fluently, we don't pronounce all of the letters in the word or in the sentence, because when speaking fast it is natural to shorten the word. In Murcia, this happens a lot. For example, Hasta luego becomes Taluego. But in English, it is very normal and if you pronounce every syllable, it sounds like you are a robot.

There are two types of Schwa: lazy sounds in a word and when we say words together in a sentence. Let's break it up:

Schwa in a Word

The schwa sound is never the stressed sound, it will always be the sound that makes no effort. E.g. tomorrow - the stress is mo, the schwa is to. We don't say TWOMorrow.

The schwa can replace any vowel:

- A - atla
- E - enemy
- I - president
- O - brother
- U - support

- Y (because it sometimes sounds like I) - vinyl

This is one reason why students have problems with spelling, because we don't pronounce the words the way that they are spelled. This includes UK vs USA pronunciation.

In America, they pronounce ER a lot stronger than in UK pronunciation. E.g. mother

Schwa in a Sentence

A cup of tea - That's why British people often say "cuppa"

Would/Could/Should + have - often native people think it means should OF because of the schwa

Going/Want + to - these are shortened (only in speaking, not in writing) as gonna or wanna

It sounds quite similar to the Spanish a but more relaxed.

Schwa Story Dictation

I'm gonna read a story that has 25 schwa sounds, see if you can find them:

Once upon a time in a quaint village, there was a charming little bakery owned by a happy baker named Oscar. Oscar was famous for baking delicious treats that brought joy to the villagers.

One fine day, as the sun shone brightly in the sky, Oscar decided to experiment with a new recipe. He thought, "I'll add a dash of cocoa and a pinch of cinnamon to create a special treat for the townspeople." He gathered the ingredients and began to mix, his hands moving with a rhythmic precision.

As the aroma wafted through the air, the villagers couldn't resist the tempting scent. They gathered around the bakery, eager to taste Oscar's creation. With smiles on their faces, they savored the tasty treats.

Oscar, pleased with the positive reception, decided to name his new creation the "Happy Surprise." Word spread quickly about the "Happy Surprise," and soon people from neighboring villages came to experience the magic of Oscar's bakery. And so, Oscar's bakery continued to be successful, spreading joy and sweetness throughout the land. The end.

I can find 25 individual schwa sounds. If you want to download the transcript to find the answers, go to the Daway blog, where you'll all other material and content too.

Here are the 25 words: upon, village, little, bakery, baker, delicious, villagers, the, experiment, recipe, cinnamon, gathered, precision, aroma, around, eager, creation, savoured, positive, reception, surprise, about, people, neighboring, successful.

And that's a Wrap!

That's all for today's episode of "Pronunciation Clinic." We hope you enjoyed our exploration of the "schwa" sound. If you have any questions or want to suggest topics for future episodes, don't hesitate to reach out to us on our website or social media.

Thanks for tuning in, and we'll catch you in the next episode. Until then, keep experimenting with the language, and remember that practice makes perfect!