

Pronouncing Schwa in Spoken English
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Pronouncing Schwa in Spoken English

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1 Introduction

Are you good at English? The answer to this question depends on who is judging you. When teachers judge your English, they ask you to take written tests. Your test results then provide a measure of your English ability. And to get good results, you need to memorize lots of English words, study English grammar patterns, and practise translating between Japanese and English. On the other hand, when English native speakers judge you, they tend to focus on other things such as your ability to communicate. In particular, they pay attention to your pronunciation. When you meet a native speaker and begin talking in English, the first thing he or she will notice is your pronunciation — native speakers notice a good or bad pronunciation before they notice good or bad grammar. And unfortunately, they often make quick judgements about your overall English ability based solely on the quality of your pronunciation. For this reason, pronunciation is something that English learners should try to improve, even though it is never tested in exams.

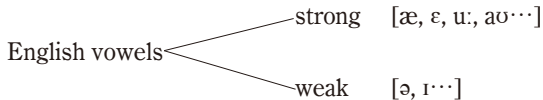
So, how can you make your pronunciation better? The general advice to all English learners is simple : you should listen to spoken English as much as possible. This is because good pronunciation always starts with good listening. By listening to native speaker pronunciation, you have a model on which to base your own English pronunciation. And as a result of careful listening, your pronunciation is less likely to be affected by intrusions from English spelling or from the pronunciation of your native language.

In addition to getting plenty of listening practice, there are also other ways of improving your English pronunciation. For example, you can learn about the English sound system and then apply this knowledge to your spoken

English. In the following pages you will read about an important characteristic of the English sound system : the use of the vowel called ‘schwa’. Learning about [ə] (schwa) will almost certainly help you to develop a better pronunciation. You will learn how [ə] is associated with weak syllables, as in *sofa* and *correct*. You will also see how the distribution of [ə] reflects the distribution of information in words and sentences. This knowledge will give you more confidence when speaking English. Furthermore, it will give listeners a more positive image of your overall English ability.

2 Strong versus weak vowels

Unlike Japanese, English makes a distinction between strong (or stressed) vowels and weak (or unstressed) vowels.



This distinction is important because strong and weak vowels not only have different pronunciations but they also contain different amounts of information. A strong vowel is pronounced in a stressed syllable and carries information to help the listener identify the word being spoken. By contrast, a weak vowel is pronounced in an unstressed syllable and it contains much less information. To understand this, look at the following words. They all have two syllables/vowels.

- | | | | | | |
|--------|----------------|---------|----|---------------|----------|
| (1) a. | <i>bétt</i> er | ['bɛtə] | b. | <i>abhórt</i> | [ə'bo:t] |
| | <i>bít</i> ter | ['bitə] | | <i>abóut</i> | [ə'baʊt] |
| | <i>bútt</i> er | ['bʌtə] | | <i>abáte</i> | [ə'beɪt] |

In (1a) the first vowel is strong and the second is weak. Notice that it is only the first vowel which helps you to recognize the word. (The second vowel

tells you that the word has two syllables, but that is all — the vowel sound itself is the same in all cases.) In (1b) the pattern is reversed: the first vowel is weak and the second is strong. In this case it is the second vowel which is the important sound, because it distinguishes (i.e. shows the difference between) the three words. Again, the weak vowel (in the first syllable) carries much less information — it doesn't really help you to identify the word.

These examples highlight an important aspect of English pronunciation: the vowels in a word are unequal because they contain different amounts of information. And native English speakers know this. So, when a native speaker listens to spoken English, (s)he instinctively focuses on the strong vowels, because these sounds are the most helpful ones for identifying which word is being pronounced. By contrast, weak vowels can usually be ignored — they do not contain much information, so listeners do not have to pay attention to them.

3 Schwa in English

So, the difference between strong (stressed) and weak (unstressed) vowels is important when you are LISTENING to English. But how is it important when you are SPEAKING English? When we speak, our goal is to communicate a message. This message could be a piece of information, or a greeting, or a question, or an opinion...in fact, it could express any thought which is in the speaker's mind at the time of speaking. And it is the speaker's responsibility to make this message as clear as possible, so that the listener can recognize the correct message quickly and easily. Speakers do this by guiding listeners towards the part of each word which carries the most information. As described above, this is usually the strong vowel. That is, speakers help listeners to locate the strong vowel in each word, since strong vowels are important for recognizing and distinguishing words.

There are two ways that speakers can help listeners to locate strong vowels. One way is to put a stress on the strong vowel — that is, to make it

louder, longer, and higher in pitch. By doing this, the strong vowel is easily noticed because it is more prominent than the other vowels in a word. Because of its prominence, listeners naturally pay attention to the strong vowel. Another way of making strong vowels sound important is to make the remaining (weak) vowels sound unimportant. In other words, speakers should try to make weak vowels AS DIFFERENT AS POSSIBLE FROM STRONG VOWELS.

What do you notice about the weak vowels in (1)? Even though they have different spellings — letter <a> in *about* [ə'baʊt], letter <e> in *better* ['betə] — they have the same sound: weak vowels in English are usually pronounced as 'schwa', written as [ə]. An important point about [ə] is that it never appears in a stressed syllable, only in weak unstressed syllables.¹ This makes [ə] unique, because it is the only English vowel which is always weak. And since it is weak, it cannot be used to distinguish one word from another — remember, this is something that strong vowels (but not weak vowels) can do. So, when a speaker pronounces [ə], this gives a clear signal to the listener that this part of the word is NOT important — it can be ignored, and instead, the listener should focus on other vowels in the word.

To repeat, vowels other than [ə] are usually strong, so they contain information which helps listeners to recognize a word. For example, when you say the word *dollar* with its correct pronunciation ['dɒlə], you are guiding the listener's attention to the first vowel (i.e. the strong vowel [ɒ]) because it contains information to identify the word, e.g. it distinguishes *dollar* ['dɒlə] from *duller* ['dʌlə], *Deller* ['dɛlə], *dealer* ['di:lə], and so on. To make the strong vowel more noticeable, the speaker uses the two strategies described above :

- (i) pronouncing the first vowel with stress, and
- (ii) pronouncing the second vowel as weak [ə]

By using the strategy in (ii), the speaker tells the listener that the [ə] vowel is unimportant for identifying the word.

1 Some American English dictionaries show [ə] with a stress in words such as *work*. This is just an alternative way of writing the sound which other (e.g. British English) dictionaries transcribe using the symbol [ɜ:].

4 Pronouncing schwa

Section 3 described how [ə] has an important function in spoken English: it helps listeners to locate the strong vowels in a sentence — these are the vowels which are not pronounced as [ə]. By focusing on strong vowels, listeners can identify the speaker's message quickly and easily. To maximize the difference between strong vowels and [ə], English learners should learn to pronounce [ə] with the correct sound and to use it in the correct places in a sentence.

Using [ə] correctly is not easy, however. The problem for Japanese speakers is that there is no vowel sound in their native language which is close to [ə]. As a 'foreign' sound, it is a challenge to pronounce [ə] accurately. To master your pronunciation of [ə], the key is to get plenty of listening practice — see section 1 above. Another problem with acquiring [ə] is that English spelling does not tell you where to pronounce [ə], since there is no letter in the spelling which corresponds to [ə]. The spelling system does not even indicate which parts of a word are strong (stressed) and which parts are weak (unstressed).

So how do you know where to use [ə]? The general rule is to first locate the stressed syllable, either by listening or by checking in a dictionary. Then you should assume that all the remaining (i.e. unstressed) syllables can be pronounced with [ə]. In reality, it is not always the case that unstressed syllables are pronounced [ə], but because most of them can be pronounced as [ə], this is a useful rule to follow. The example in (2) shows the steps just described.

- (2) *cinema*
1. Locate the stress; in *cinema* stress is on the first syllable
 2. Assume that all other syllables have [ə]
[ˈsɪnəmə]
 3. Pronounce as [ˈsɪ.nə.mə] (i.e. strong-weak-weak)
 4. Ignore the spelling — it gives no information about [ə]

Note the final point in (2) about spelling. For historical reasons, English spell-

ing does not always match English pronunciation — spelling often gives insufficient or misleading information about how to pronounce a word. This is clear from the words in (3), which all have [ə] as their final vowel but in each case there is a different letter in the spelling.

- (3) <a> *cápital* [···təl]
<o> *dóctor* [···tə]
<e> *winter* [···tə]
<u> *dífficult* [···kəlt]

The reason why these words all have [ə] in their final syllable is because that syllable is unstressed — the spelling is irrelevant : spelling is concerned with the written language, whereas stress is concerned with the spoken language. So, if you have studied English mainly by reading and translating, rather than by listening and speaking, then it is more of a challenge to master the use of [ə]. However, using [ə] correctly is a reachable goal if you follow the simple steps in (2). The result will be a more natural English pronunciation which listeners will be able to understand without effort.

5 Schwa and word structure

It is a fact that [ə] is the most common vowel sound in English. One reason for this is that [ə] is pronounced in unstressed syllables, and most English words contain at least one unstressed syllable. Another reason for the frequent occurrence of [ə] is that this vowel appears in many suffixes. Why do suffixes usually have [ə] ? Because they are usually unstressed.

In English, suffixes are often added to the end of nouns, verbs and adjectives to change their meaning or to change their grammatical function. In the examples in (4), notice how stress remains on the first part of the word after the suffix is added. The suffix itself is therefore unstressed and pronounced with [ə].

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(4) <i>sing</i> + <i>er</i>	→	<i>síng</i> [ə] <i>r</i>	
<i>fame</i> + <i>ous</i>	→	<i>fám</i> [ə] <i>s</i>	
<i>reach</i> + <i>able</i>	→	<i>réach</i> [ə] <i>ble</i>	
<i>waiter</i> + <i>ess</i>	→	<i>wáiter</i> [ə] <i>ss</i>	* <i>waitr</i> [ɛ] <i>ss</i>
<i>pay</i> + <i>ment</i>	→	<i>páy</i> m[ə] <i>nt</i>	* <i>paym</i> [ɛ] <i>nt</i>
<i>dark</i> + <i>ness</i>	→	<i>dárkn</i> [ə] <i>ss</i>	* <i>darkn</i> [ɛ] <i>ss</i>
<i>act</i> + <i>or</i>	→	<i>áct</i> [ə] <i>r</i>	

Among native Japanese speakers there is a tendency to follow the spelling when pronouncing suffixed words. But unfortunately, this often leads to a typical ‘Japanese English’ pronunciation such as those (marked with *) on the right in (4). To avoid these unnatural pronunciations, learners should treat suffixed words in the same way as other words — that is, determine when and where to pronounce [ə] using the steps described in (2).

The suffixes in (4) have no effect on stress. That is, stress in the original word (e.g. in *síng*, *fám*e, *wáiter*) remains in the same place when the suffix is added. For this reason, suffixes such as *-er*, *-ous* and *-ess* are known as stress-neutral suffixes. However, there is another group of suffixes in English which DO affect the position of stress. And because they interact with stress, they also affect the position of [ə]. Look at these examples (large dot = stressed, small dot = unstressed).

(5) <i>músic</i> (•.) + <i>ian</i>	→	<i>musician</i> (.•.)
<i>héro</i> (•.) + <i>ic</i>	→	<i>heroic</i> (.•.)
<i>vúlgar</i> (•.) + <i>ity</i>	→	<i>vulgarity</i> (.••.)

The suffixes in (5) control stress by requiring that stress falls on the syllable immediately before the suffix — no matter where stress was located before the suffix was added. For example, *músic* has stress on the first syllable *mu*, but when the suffix *-ian* is added the stress moves to the second syllable *síc*, because this is the syllable which immediately precedes *-ian*. Suffixes such as *-ian*, *-ic* and *-ity* are called stress-shifting suffixes because they can cause

stress to shift from its original location.

How does this relate to a discussion about [ə]? It is relevant because when stress moves to its new position, the original position becomes weak — and therefore, it is likely to be pronounced as [ə]. In *musician*, the addition of the suffix *-ian* causes the first syllable *mu* to become weak. And since it is weak, speakers naturally change the original strong vowel [u:] to a weak vowel [ə]. This gives the pronunciation *musician* [mjə'zɪʃən]. Examples such as this are useful in showing that students of English can usually predict when to pronounce [ə] if they follow the principle that SCHWA AND STRESS NEVER GO TOGETHER.

6 Schwa in sentences

So far, we have only considered how single words are pronounced. But in real communication, single words are rarely enough — we combine words into phrases and sentences. So, how is [ə] used in these longer units of speech? Once again, to understand how [ə] behaves it is necessary to think about stress. This time, however, the focus is on sentence stress rather than word stress.

The first point to make is that, in natural spoken English, not every word is stressed — most phrases and sentences contain a mixture of stressed and unstressed words. For instance, the phrase in (6a) and the sentence in (6b) each have only one stressed vowel (shown by an acute accent in the spelling).

- (6) a. *in a móment* [ɪn ə 'mɒmənt]
b. *she gáve it to me* [ʃi 'geɪv ɪt tə mi]

Following (2), we can assume that all other vowels are weak, and as such, can be pronounced as [ə]. In fact, this is mostly true but not entirely true: English learners should be aware that when an unstressed vowel has <i> or <e> in the spelling, it is often pronounced as the weak vowel [ɪ] rather than [ə], e.g. *in* [ɪn], *she* [ʃɪ], *me* [mi].

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To decide whether a word should be stressed or not, you must decide whether its role is to provide information about meaning (= ‘content’ word) or information about the grammar of the sentence (= ‘function’ word). Content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, demonstratives) are important for communication because they carry information about what the speaker wants to say. So, listeners have to identify the content words in a sentence in order to understand the overall message. To help listeners do this, speakers put a stress on content words, e.g. *móment*, *gáve*. By contrast, function words (pronouns, prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs) are important because they show how the words in a sentence are related to one another ; they also ensure that the sentence is grammatical. But in terms of meaning, function words are unimportant — and because of this, they are uninteresting for listeners. To distinguish between content words and function words, speakers avoid putting a stress on function words ; instead, they pronounce them with a weak vowel [ə] or [ɪ]. Examples of function words (pronounced with [ə]) are shown in (7).

(7) Auxiliary verbs

can	<i>Sám</i> [kən] <i>swím</i> .	*[kæn]
have	<i>Clásses</i> [həv] <i>finíshed</i> .	*[hæv]
do	<i>Whát</i> [də] <i>they wánt?</i>	*[du:]
are	<i>There</i> [ə] <i>nóne léft</i> .	*[ɑ:]
were	<i>Chíldren</i> [wə] <i>pláying</i> .	*[wɜ:]

Prepositions

at	<i>Let's méet</i> [ət] <i>thré</i> .	*[æt]
for	<i>Thánks</i> [fə] <i>hélping</i> .	*[fɔ:]
from	<i>I wálked</i> [frəm] <i>hére</i> .	*[frɒm]
of	<i>Twó bóttles</i> [əv] <i>béer</i> .	*[ɒv]

Determiners

a	<i>Máke</i> [ə] <i>líving</i> .	*[eɪ], *[æ]
her	<i>Táke</i> [hə] <i>hóme</i> .	*[hɜ:]

Clearly, English learners who are trying to master the use of [ə] will need

to become aware of the distinction between content words and function words. Then, they must make an effort to pronounce a weak vowel [ə] (or sometimes [ɪ]) in function words. This is another useful strategy for improving the naturalness of their spoken English.

7 Summary

Most English learners would like to improve their pronunciation, because a good pronunciation gives listeners a positive impression of your overall English ability. A simple way of developing a better, more natural English pronunciation is to introduce [ə] into your spoken English. [ə] is not only the most common vowel sound in English, it is also the most characteristic vowel sound in English — [ə] can be heard in every sentence of English, and it gives the language its unique character.

For Japanese speakers, [ə] is a ‘foreign’ sound because it does not belong in their native language. However, it is not so difficult to develop a good understanding of how and where to use [ə] in your spoken English. The ‘how’ requires plenty of listening practice and speaking practice. The ‘where’ can be learned by focusing on the difference between strong and weak syllables, as described in the preceding pages. By mastering this important aspect of English pronunciation, you will not only feel more confident in using spoken English, but you will also make it easier for listeners to understand you without effort.