

# PHONEMAPHOBIA - TAKING THE STRESS OUT OF PRONUNCIATION



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## Stress

Of all the 44 sounds on the phonemic chart, the schwa is the most important. The schwa is the most common sound in English – it's always found in unstressed syllables. Stress is giving emphasis to certain syllables by making them longer, louder, higher and clearer.

English is a stress-timed language. This means that stress in a spoken sentence occurs at regular intervals, and the time it takes to say something depends on the number of stressed syllables, NOT the total number of syllables. Spanish, on the other hand, is syllable-timed with each syllable being more or less the same length

Sentence stress is predictable – we stress content words (nouns and verbs – house, go) and de-stress function words (articles, prepositions, auxiliaries – the, at, have, was)

Word stress is unpredictable, but there are some rules.

Word	Type of word	Tendency	Exceptions
apple table happy	two-syllable nouns and adjectives	stress on the first syllable O o apple	hotel lagoon
suspect import insult	words which can be used as both nouns and verbs	the noun has stress on the first syllable O o "You are the <b>suspect</b> !" the verb has stress on the second syllable o O "I <b>suspect</b> you."	respect witness
hairbrush football	compound nouns	fairly equally balanced but with stronger stress on the first part O o hairbrush	

Help students to identify the number of syllables and where the stress falls using the following questions:

*How many syllables are there? – There are 4 syllables*

*Where's the stress? -It's on the second syllable*

Always mark the stress clearly on new vocab (perhaps using big and small circles). Use Cuisenaire rods or pieces of paper to make stress more tangible for students. To help them hear the correct stress, say a word with the stress placed on each syllable in turn so they have to choose which sounds better. Get them to practice with words as on the worksheet. A good starting point is to use their names. Demonstrate where the stress is on your name first.

Help them to see the patterns in word stress and practice as follows.

## More advanced word stress activity

- Categorising words into the correct column

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.

• Students have a list of relevant words to categorise  
E.g. INDEPENDENT                  GENESIS                  CATASTROPHE

### Weak forms

Function words will generally not be stressed and will be pronounced with their weak form, unless they are in short answers or are given special emphasis.

*Həv you seen it? Yes, I have*

Counting the number of words in a sentence, or sentence dictations can help raise awareness of weak forms.

### Different accents

The schwa hardly varies between different accents but a lot of other sounds change a lot. For a dictionary where you can hear words pronounced with different accents, see:

<http://www.wordreference.com/>

Don't worry if your accent doesn't fit the Phonemic chart. Teach the sounds as on the chart (using recordings if you don't feel confident) but explain that in your accent you would say it this way. And when talking to them in class, don't try to change your accent. It's good for them to be exposed to different accents.

### Phonemic Alphabet Activity

The Alphabet						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
/eɪ/	/i:/	/e/	/aɪ/	/əʊ/	/u:/	/ɑ:/
A	B	F	I	O	Q	R
H	C	L	Y		U	
J	D	M			W	
K	E	N				
	G	S				
	P	X				
	T	Z				
	V					

/eɪ/ - grey

/i:/ - green

/e/ - red

/aɪ/ - white

/əʊ/ - yellow

/u:/ - blue

/ɑ:/ - dark green

To type with the phonemic script, go to:

<http://phonemicchart.com/>

### Phonics

Most current children's text books include phonics from a very early age. With songs, gestures, pictures of the mouth and games, they thoroughly enjoy them, as well as progressing in pronunciation, reading and spelling.

### Introducing new vocabulary to young learners

It's a good idea to introduce new vocab only orally (without showing the written word) using picture flashcards, especially with children who don't have a solid grounding in phonics. Only when they know it well would you introduce them to the written word, or get them to try to spell it for you. This will avoid them later pronouncing the word as it is written.

### Drilling

Drilling is extremely important and often somewhat neglected. Students need a lot of practice to get their mouths around new words, but you can vary it – choral, individual, quiet, loud, happy, angry, scared, back-chaining...

## Correction

A correction made by the teacher, especially if they aren't even asked to repeat it, will just go in one ear and out the other. In order to engage their brains, show them there is a problem by saying "sorry?" accompanied with a gesture and get THEM to correct it. If that student can't, open it up to the class, and only as a last resort, give it to them yourself. Then drill it as above and revisit it a later date.

## Some typical Spanish pronunciation errors

In Spanish there is never an 's' plus a consonant without a vowel in front of it. So they tend to say 'espanish', 'estop' etc. Get them to practice the word in isolation and also to link it to the word before, as if it were all one word.

Other consonant clusters can cause problems, such as in "crisps". Break the word down – 'cris' then add the ending - 'cris – p' 'cris – ps'.

Certain pairs of vowels can cause problems too - /ɪ/ and /i:/ and /æ/ and /ʌ/. Practice these using minimal pairs (words that are the same except for these sounds – *ship* and *sheep* or *cat* and *cut*). Students have to listen and decide which word is being said. Try to eradicate bad pronunciation early on before it becomes an ingrained habit.

## The 'schwa' - Teacher's notes

First, have a look at this useful link.

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-schwa>

The last page is the student's copy of the schwa exercise.

### Teaching ideas

Any introduction to the schwa should include a focus on a) word stress and b) sentence stress.

- a) Students could count the number of syllables and mark the stressed syllable on words from the text, such as phənɒləgy (4 syllables).
- b) They could listen and mark the stressed syllables/words on the first text (see key) to help them realize that it's generally content words which are stressed. (Higher levels could try to predict stresses before listening).

Higher level classes using the normal text could then go on to try and find all the examples of the schwa, either with or without the help of the accompanying audio. After feedback they could then go on to practice themselves.

For lower levels, you might then prefer to give them the key, which they could follow whilst listening to the audio and then pause it for them to listen and repeat, finally moving on to the students reading it without help.

If you prefer to read the text out loud yourself, it's important to keep the flow natural, because if words are uttered in isolation or very slowly, there is a temptation to revert to strong rather than weak sounds.

## Key

Here are the stresses underlined from the recording.

ə lot əf studənts hævə absəlutely no ideə əbaut thə use əf thə schwa in English phənɒlədʒi and hævə prɒbəbly nevə evən heard əf it. It's important fər ə teachə tə make thəm əware əf it becəuse it will help with both their listəniŋ comprəhensən **and** their prənʊnsiətən in spokən English.

Tə make thə sound, you jəst hævə **to** ɔpən your mouth ə littəl, make sure thət all thə muscləs əre cəmpletely relaxed, and uttə thə sound /ə/.

Thə phənemik syμβəl may seem ə littəl strange tə thəm ət first, bət it's actəly jəst ən upside-down 'e'.

Thə soənə studənts start tə become fəmilɪə with thə schwa, thə betə.

- 1) Here we would naturally stress the word 'and' to emphasise the fact that knowing about the schwa not only helps their listening but also their pronunciation.
- 2) 'To' is normally unstressed and pronounced /tə/, but here because the following word ('open') begins with a vowel, we would pronounce it /tu:/. A similar thing happens when 'the' is followed by a vowel – in 'the egg' it is pronounced /ði:/.  
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- 4) Here the first syllable is stressed for emphasis - /'æbsə,lu:tli/, but in other contexts the primary and secondary stresses are reversed, giving /,æbsə'lu:tli/. Both are correct.
- 5) We can observe intrusion here – in connected speech the extra sound /w/ is added between 'to' and 'open' and between 'no' and 'idea' to make them easier to say.
- 6) We can hear an intrusive /r/ between 'idea' and 'about'. (In the example mentioned above, between 'the' and 'egg' there is an intrusive /j/).

If you would like me to send you the audio for the schwa exercise, or for any other query, please contact me at:

[jennythomas@idiomaster.es](mailto:jennythomas@idiomaster.es)

## The 'Schwa'

A lot of students have absolutely no idea about the use of the schwa in English phonology and have probably never even heard of it. It's important for a teacher to make them aware of it because it will help with both their listening comprehension and their pronunciation in spoken English.

To make the sound, you just have to open your mouth a little, make sure that all the muscles are completely relaxed, and utter the sound /ə/.

The phonemic symbol may seem a little strange to them at first, but it's actually just an upside-down 'e'!

The sooner students start to become familiar with the schwa, the better!

- 1) Why isn't the word 'and' in the 4th line pronounced with the schwa?
- 2) And why isn't the word 'to' in the 6th line pronounced with the schwa either?
- 3) Think of other words which are pronounced with the schwa?  
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- 4) What do you notice about the word 'absolutely'?
- 5) What extra sound do you notice between the words 'to' and 'open' in the 6th line? (And between 'no' and 'idea' in the 1st line?)
- 6) And between 'idea' and 'about' in the 1st line?