

## The Schwa in Connected Speech

### About this activity

One of the most important sounds in the English language and definitely the most common, is the schwa, a sound that literally means 'null'. Which goes a long way to explain why our students find it so difficult to hear in connected speech.

As English is a stress-timed language, understanding how the schwa works in connected speech is crucial for students seeking increased fluency and superior listening skills.

The schwa is responsible for why many of our students don't hear prepositions, auxiliary verbs, connectors and articles in speech as they are often replaced by the schwa sound and not stressed.

#### Activity 1: bottom-up listening dictation

- a. Read the sentence "I'm an English student learning about the schwa, what am I going to learn?". Make sure you read it at normal speaking speed, using connected speech features. (Change the sentence depending on level, create more challenge for B1+ students)
- b. Ask students to note down how many words they think you read. Have them compare their ideas with their partners.
- c. Show students the sentence and check their answers
- d. Explain that some of the words weren't heard properly because they are weak forms (an, about, the, am, to).
- e. Annotate the schwa on the sentence.
- f. Repeat the activity with 4 new sentences.

#### Activity 2: Reading to the beat

- a. Show the students the sentence "Man plays drums"
- b. Have them read the sentence, clap the beat – 1,2,3
- c. Write the next sentence "The Man plays drums", continue to clap the beat.
- d. Repeat the process with these sentences:
  - i. The man plays the drums
  - ii. The man is playing the drums
  - iii. The man has been playing the drums
- e. The beat should never change. It should take you the same amount of time to pronounce sentence a. and sentence iii.
- f. Explain to students that this is because of the weak forms in the sentences
- g. Split the class and give each group a sentence, challenge them to keep to the beat

**Activity 3: What  
are the lyrics?**

- a. Choose a song that your students like (any song works for this!)
- b. Print of the lyrics and create gaps for any weak form that is in the song
- c. Students listen to the song and try to hear what's missing.
- d. Analyse the lyrics' grammatical structures and have students deduce what is missing using their linguistic knowledge
- e. Elicit why these words are less important to hear than the content words
- f. Practice the lyrics using the weak form

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