

The Schwa

By Lurline H. Coltharp

One of the sounds of English that causes problems is the schwa, the lax mid-central vowel. These problems may be classified in several categories. A clear understanding of the differences involved will help the teacher in preparing the student to use English effectively.

One of the problems involves reading. The student must realize that any of the five vowel graphemes can be used in spelling to indicate the vowel sound that should be pronounced as a schwa: above, label, raisin, labor, and walrus. This knowledge may help the student in both reading and spelling.

A second problem is providing a proper lexical interpretation for schwa. It is used with "n" [ən] to mean the word "an" as in "an apple," but the same [ən] is also used

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to mean "and" as in "cup and saucer."

Schwa is used alone to mean three different words. It can be used for the word "a" as in "a cup" [kəp].

In addition it is used to signify the word "of" as in "a cup of coffee" [kəpə]. A third word represented by schwa in normal speech is "have" as in "could have gone" [kudə].

Difficult as these lexical interpretations may be, perhaps it is even more difficult for the non-native speaker to gain mastery of the schwa as a structure signal.

The schwa is used in many compounds for elements that receive weak stress. As an example, the word "man" is normally pronounced with an ash, but in the compound "policeman" the second element is [mən]. If the student is to master normal speech, he must learn two pronunciations, one for a word as a single element and another for the same word when it is used in

a compound. Another aspect of the problem of structure signals is in the pronunciation of verbs. When used as single verbs, "have," "has," and "can," for example, are pronounced with an ash as in the sentences: "I have a book." "He has a book." or "Yes, He can." However, when they become one element in a two-word verb phrase, the ash is replaced by the schwa. "They have gone." [həv] "He has gone." [həz] "He can go." [kən] And, as has been seen, the word "have" may be pronounced as [ə] in a three word verb phrase, "could have gone." A student should be able to interpret these changes as structure signals.

The teacher faces many problems in helping a student gain control of the English language. The schwa is only one sound, but it is an important one. The difficulties have been divided into those involved in reading and spelling, those involved in lexical interpretation, and those involved in structure signals. A knowledge of these divisions can be of great practical advantage to the teacher in evaluating the level of competence of a beginning student, in preparing drills, and in preparing tests to determine the results of training.

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