

## Introducing the schwa

Level: B1+

Age: 12+

Time needed: 30 minutes

Materials needed: “Introducing the schwa” handout, smartphones for the students, frontal check slideshow

Classroom organisation: frontal, individual, pair work

Notes for the teacher:

- Before conducting this activity, we advise teaching the students about the notion of stress with the “Stress in English and Hungarian” activity.

Procedure:

1. Introduce the schwa sound to the students. Demonstrate how it is pronounced, both in isolation, and in example words (e.g., *teacher*, *arrive*, etc.). You might want to add that knowing where to pronounce schwas does not only make them sound more natural and native-like, but it also helps them understand native speakers more easily – if they expect to hear [i] in the underlined parts of *pencil*, *civil*, *Cheryl*, *Neville*, etc., they might not be able to recognise these words in the form pronounced by native speakers (i.e., with a schwa).
2. Distribute the “Introducing the schwa” handout and ask the students to circle the vowel letters in Task 1 which they think represent a schwa (revise the pronunciation of the schwa if necessary). This phase of the activity can be done individually or in pairs.
3. Do not conduct a frontal check yet. Teach the students how to recognise the IPA symbol of the schwa\*, and make them practise drawing it in Task 2.

\*ə

4. Tell the students that you are going to check which vowel letters represent a schwa with the help of an online dictionary. We advise using the American version of Macmillan dictionary (<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/>) because using the British version can mislead students in the case of the stressed vowel of *frozen* /əʊ/, the first part of which is transcribed with a schwa symbol, but the vowel is a diphthong and does not count as “schwa proper”. (Other online dictionaries display the British and the American pronunciations next to each other, which may also be confusing.) Point out to the students that if they see schwas in brackets, those also count. This phase of the activity is the most effective if done in pairs.

5. Frontal check the answers with the help of the frontal check slideshow.
6. With the help of the IPA transcriptions (included in the frontal check slideshow), elicit the answers to the gapfill exercise (Task 3). Point out that out of 24 vowels, 14 are schwas. The learners should be familiar with the concept of stress and should be able to recognise IPA stress marks, therefore, elicit with the help of the slideshow that none of the stressed syllables contain a schwa.

The schwa is the most **common/frequent** sound in English. It is also the coolest sound because it is never **stressed**.

7. Optional follow-up: “Schwa shopping game”, “Schwa in grammar words”.