

Talk a Lot

Foundation Course

Glossary of Pronunciation Terms

Glo s rii y vpr nun sii Yei shn Termz

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Glossary of Pronunciation Terms

This is a glossary of the main terms that learners should become familiar with before beginning a Talk a Lot course:

alphabet

An alphabet is a collection of words which are used to represent on a page the sounds that we make when speaking a language. There are 26 letters in the English alphabet, which are arranged in the following order:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

There are 21 consonant letters and 5 vowel letters (see below).

assimilation

A technique of connected speech. Assimilation occurs when the sound at the end of a syllable changes so that it is easier to pronounce with the sound at the beginning of the next syllable.

e.g. "clean bike" is easier to pronounce when the n at the end of clean changes to m : "cleam bike"

connected speech

The practice of joining together words in a sentence, rather than pronouncing each one separately.

consonant cluster

A combination of two or more consonant letters together in the spelling of a word.

e.g. "br" and "ng" in "bring", or "th" and "nk" in "think"

consonant letter

There are 21 consonant letters in the English alphabet. They are: b c d f g h j k l m n p q r s t v w x y z

consonant sound

There are twenty-five consonant sounds in spoken English. Consonant sounds are made when we move our tongue, lips, and mouth into different positions before releasing breath from our lungs.

There are fifteen voiced consonant sounds (we can feel our vocal cords moving when we make them):

b	bag	n	nurse	w	week
d	dice	ng	ring	y	yoghurt
j	jam	r	road	z	zip
l	lake	th	brother	zz	revision
m	music	v	van		

and there are ten unvoiced consonant sounds (we can't feel our vocal cords moving when we make them):

ch	cheese	hh	loch	s	snow
f	frog	k	kit	sh	shop
h	head	p	pig	tt	thousand

Most consonants sound as you would expect them to from looking at them (they are phonetic), so it is more important to spend time learning how the vowel sounds and diphthongs look and sound.

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content word

A content word is any word that has an individual meaning on its own, outside of a sentence. The following word groups are all content words: nouns, main verbs (but not verb "to be", which is usually unstressed), phrasal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numbers, proper names, and negative auxiliary verbs. Content words contrast with function words (see below), which are not usually stressed.

e.g. nouns – car, biscuit, tree, etc.
main verbs – eat, go, take, etc.
adjectives – interesting, good, expensive, etc.

contraction

A technique of connected speech. A contraction occurs when two words are merged together to make a single word, e.g. "it is" becomes "it's", and "I had" becomes "I'd". The aim is to reduce unstressed syllables in the sentence: two function words, which are both unstressed, become one function word. The reduction of the function words makes the strong stresses on either side stand out more.

Note: a **mega contraction** is when a contraction is reduced even further to the barest minimum possible, without actually deleting the word, e.g. the contraction "you're" is contracted further to y , "he's" becomes uhz , and "they're" becomes th .

diphthong

A diphthong is a vowel sound in English, in which two or more vowel sounds combine to make a new vowel sound. Therefore a diphthong is a double sound. There are 10 diphthongs in spoken English:

ai	time	auw	power	eu	home
aiy	hire	ei	plane	oy	toy
au	cow	eir	pear	uuw	pure

elision

A technique of connected speech. Elision occurs when a sound is removed from the end of a syllable, making it easier to pronounce next to the following syllable. The removal of a sound – usually t or d – often combines with a glottal stop (see below). The aim is to make a vc sound connection, which ensures a smooth transition to the next syllable.

e.g. in the phrase "hot coffee" there are two consonant sounds that meet – t and c – so to make them easier to pronounce together we get rid of the t (elision) and add a glottal stop: Ho_ Ko fii

embedded Schwa sound

An embedded Schwa sound occurs when we pronounce a consonant sound on its own. All consonant sounds are voiced in the NEA, and a Schwa sound naturally follows each consonant sound, e.g. b, f, or t . There is no need to write this Schwa sound (as uh) in the NEA, because it always follows a single consonant sound, e.g.

"today" = t Dei t is a consonant sound pronounced on its own which is followed by an embedded Schwa sound. It is pronounced like this: tuh , but we don't need to write uh because the Schwa sound is assumed

Final Consonant Linking (FCL)

See *linking*, below.

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Friendly consonant sounds

Friendly consonant sounds are consonant sounds which are quite happy to meet other consonant sounds. They are:

n, m, and ng

(note that l can also sometimes be a friendly consonant sound...)

These are really helpful sounds, because when one of them happens to be at the end of a syllable and a consonant sound follows, they make the sound connection easy – just like a vc sound connection. n, m, and ng are all easy to pronounce with a following consonant sound. This is because the tongue and mouth are in a neutral position after pronouncing these sounds, and as such ready to pronounce any following sound. The tongue can rest on n, m, or ng without having to link it to the start of the next syllable.

function word

A function word is a short, unstressed grammar word that doesn't have an individual meaning on its own, outside of a sentence. Function words are usually: pronouns, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, articles, and conjunctions. Verb "to be" is also a function word – even when used as a main verb. Note: negative forms of auxiliary verbs do have stress, e.g. didn't is stressed on the first syllable (see **content words**, above).

e.g. pronouns – she, their, him, etc.
auxiliary verbs – have, do, will, can, etc.
prepositions – to, for, in, on, etc.
articles and determiners – a, an, the, some, etc.

glottal stop

A technique of connected speech. A glottal stop is not a sound but rather an action – the sudden cutting-off of a vowel sound just after making it, instead of letting it run on. We hear a glottal stop as a tiny gap in the flow of speech. It happens when we close our glottis (the opening of the vocal cords). The aim is to turn cc sound connections into vc sound connections (see below). By replacing a consonant sound with a glottal stop, we stop the friction that would have occurred by the meeting of the two consonant sounds. Glottal stops usually occur at the same time as elision (see above). A sound disappears, and a glottal stop is used automatically by the speaker in its place. Some native speakers tend to make a glottal stop even when the next sound is a vowel sound, but this deviates from standard pronunciation. In the NEA, a glottal stop is represented by the underscore symbol: _

e.g. "My mate Pat." = mai Mei_ Pa_. (the t's are deleted and replaced by glottal stops)

homophone

A homophone is a word that has exactly the same **sounds** as another word, but a different **spelling** and a different **meaning**. Homophones are good examples of how sounds and spelling have become disconnected in English.

e.g. your / yore wait / weight please / pleas mind / mined too / two
sail / sale weak / week tail / tale son / sun bean / been

intonation

Intonation is how we strongly stress one or more particular words in a sentence to emphasise a particular part of it. We use intonation as a variation from standard pronunciation, where all the information is presented with a similar level of importance.

e.g. standard pronunciation: "Julie's just won the swimming gala." = clear and informative, with no particular intonation or emphasis

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with intonation on **Julie**: a) “*Julie’s* just won the swimming gala.” = it is relevant *who* won the gala. Maybe the result is a shock because Julie is known to be a poor swimmer, or maybe the listener didn’t hear the winner’s name

with intonation on **swimming**: b) “Julie’s just won the *swimming* gala.” = it is relevant which gala Julie has won. Maybe the conversation has included several different galas.

intrusion

A technique of connected speech. When the sound connection (see below) between two syllables is **vv** (vowel sound to vowel sound) we insert a new consonant sound between them – *y*, *w*, or *r* – replacing the second vowel sound in the sound connection, making the sound connection much easier to pronounce.

e.g. intrusion with *y* : “grey eyes” = Grei Yaiz *not* Grei Aiz

the *y* in grey is not usually pronounced because it is part of a vowel cluster (“ey”) which makes the diphthong *ei*. However, when the next sound is another vowel sound, we must pronounce it, to create a **vc** sound connection (see below) instead of a **vv** connection.

more examples:

intrusion with *w* : “how old” = Hau Weuld *not* Hau Euld

intrusion with *r* : “four elephants” = For Re I fn_s *not* For E I fn_s

IPA

The IPA is an acronym for the International Phonetic Alphabet, a standard form of writing the sounds of a language. The current IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) was invented in the nineteenth century by French and British linguists. The IPA can be helpful in some situations, for example if a student takes the time to learn it they will be able to accurately pronounce any word in the dictionary. When teaching language – and especially pronunciation – we do need a way of representing sounds on a page, but the current IPA is no longer fit for purpose in the Digital Age, because it cannot be easily reproduced on a keyboard or mobile phone keypad. Just try sharing a document that uses IPA symbols and you will see what I mean. Everybody needs to buy a new font – which does not happen. So we need a new phonetic way of writing. Another problem with the IPA is that students have to learn a whole new alphabet of around fifty new characters. Students are often put off by the unfamiliar and exotic-looking symbols that they have to learn, which only adds an extra burden for students – especially those whose first language does not always use the Roman alphabet, e.g. those whose first language is Arabic, Russian, Chinese, etc. They already have to learn one new alphabet to learn English; then we try to add a second. It’s no wonder the IPA is put on the back burner.

The **New English Alphabet (NEA)** is a modern phonetic English alphabet (see below).

linking

A technique of connected speech. Also known as Final Consonant Linking (FCL), linking occurs when the sound connection between two syllables is **cv** (consonant to vowel). Linking allows us to join together the two syllables with a **vc** (vowel to consonant) sound connection instead, which is the preferred sound connection for English native speakers, because it is the easiest to pronounce (see below).

e.g. in “like it” the two sounds meeting are *k* (consonant sound) and *i* (vowel sound)

before linking (original **cv** sound connection): Laik it

after linking (new **vc** sound connection): Lai kit

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mega contraction

See *contraction*, above.

New English Alphabet (NEA)

A new alphabet for the English language, which is similar to the IPA in that it enables the reader to see all the phonemes (sounds) contained in each word. However, unlike the IPA, the NEA uses the more familiar Roman alphabet – a, b, c, etc. – and allows the reader to see the stressed syllable in a word as well as the connections between syllables and words. Each of the 48 sounds of English has its own written ID (identifier).

e.g. the “a” sound in “cake” is always written as *ei* – Keik

In normal spelling this sound can be written in different ways, but with the NEA it always looks the same: *ei*

e.g. make = *meik*, day = *dei*, change = *cheinj*, etc.

(See the separate NEA handout for the full list of sounds and IDs.)

phoneme

A phoneme is an individual sound, which is part of a syllable.

e.g. in the word “cat” there are three separate letters – c-a-t – and three separate phonemes – k a t – while in the word “tooth” there are five separate letters – t-o-o-t-h – but only three separate phonemes – t oo tt .

phonetics

Phonetics is the study of sound in human speech. “Phone” comes from the Greek word for “sound” and “voice”: *phōnē*, e.g. telephone = tele (distant) + phone (sound) = distant sound.

phonics

Phonics is how the study of phonetics is applied to language, e.g. understanding how spelling and sounds are connected. For example, Phonics may be used to teach reading to language learners. Phonics is sometimes used as a direct synonym for phonetics, though this is incorrect.

R-linking

A technique of connected speech. R-linking is part of intrusion and occurs when the *r* consonant sound is inserted between two vowel sounds, effectively replacing the second vowel sound in the sound connection. The aim is to transform a *vv* (vowel to vowel) sound connection into a *vc* (vowel to consonant) sound connection, which is easier to pronounce.

e.g. in “there is” the two sounds meeting are **eir** (consonant sound) and **i** (vowel sound)

original *cv* sound connection: **their iz**

new *vc* sound connection: **their riz**

Schwa sound

The Schwa sound **uh** is the most common vowel sound in English, and the least known. It is also the weakest vowel sound. It is the only sound in English to have an individual name, with “Schwa” coming from the Hebrew letter called *Shva*, which has the same function. It often occurs in weak stressed syllables, being a short expulsion of air, which

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sounds like the noise made when somebody hits you in the stomach – “Uh!” Or the kind of grunt that a teenager might make first thing in the morning as a form of greeting – “Uh!”

The Schwa sound helps to make the stress pattern in a sentence, because it makes the unstressed syllables weaker by replacing vowel sounds, especially diphthongs and long vowel sounds. This makes the unstressed syllables shorter, which in turn makes the stressed syllables stronger, by increasing the contrast between weak and strong. When you don't use the Schwa sound your spoken word will lack stress and you will be likely to pronounce letters that should be silent, e.g. the “o” and “r” at the end of “doctor”:

Pronunciation written using the NEA: Do kt

The word “doctor” has two syllables. The first syllable is stressed, and the second is not. The first has a strong-stressed vowel sound, while the second has a Schwa sound – the weakest and dullest vowel sound there is. The contrast adds to the stress pattern in the sentence. The intention of the spelling “or” is to represent the Schwa sound. Unfortunately, many learners are unaware of this sound and, trying to pronounce every letter in the word, will learn the pronunciation as: do ktor. Some will even roll the r at the end of the word, which is never done in English.

The Schwa sound is not unique to English and occurs in a variety of languages, from Russian to Dutch, and Indonesian to Hindi. Do you have it in *your* language? Does it provide a similar function to the English Schwa sound?

In the NEA the Schwa sound can be written as **uh**, but it is often not written at all, and simply pronounced as part of a consonant sound, e.g. **t** has a built-in Schwa sound when we say it: **t**. We call this an embedded Schwa sound (see NEA chart). It is enough to do this to pronounce the Schwa sound.

As we have seen above, in the NEA “doctor” is spelled: Do kt. The first syllable is the stressed one (hence capital “D”) and has a strong vowel sound **o**. The second syllable does not have a vowel sound, apart from an embedded Schwa sound which is not written, but occurs naturally when we pronounce the sound **t**. The “r” disappears from the spelling because it is a silent letter (see below) and not pronounced.

sentence stress

The sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables in a spoken sentence.

silent letters

Extra letters which appear in the spelling of the word when we write it, but which are not pronounced when we say the word.

e.g. “o”, “r”, “a”, and “e” in the word “comfortable”, which is pronounced Kum ft bl

sound connection

The place between two syllables where two sounds meet. There are four possible kinds of sound connection:

vc (vowel sound to consonant sound)	e.g. “my car”	mai Kar = easy to pronounce
vv (vowel sound to vowel sound)	e.g. “we are”	wee ar = difficult to pronounce
cv (consonant sound to vowel sound)	e.g. “it is”	it iz = difficult to pronounce
cc (consonant sound to consonant sound)	e.g. “that book”	that Buuk = difficult to pronounce

Speakers of English will do anything to their words and letters to create easy vc sound connections between syllables when they speak. They will quite ruthlessly get rid of sounds, add sounds, and change sounds to make these all-important vc sound connections. However, English spelling doesn't help, because not every syllable starts with a consonant sound and ends with a vowel sound. If only it did! Then we could all speak like this: ba ba ba ba ba etc. and we wouldn't need to use – or study – connected speech! Instead words clash and scrape together, like badly fitting puzzle pieces, and we must use the techniques of connected speech to “bash out” those troublesome sound connections. This is what usually happens:

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If the sound connection is:

we use:

vc
vv

OK – easy to pronounce (no connected speech required!)
intrusion with an extra consonant sound, which makes the connection vc: y, w, or r

cv
cc

Final Consonant Linking (FCL)
Elision, Glottal Stop, Assimilation, or FCL

examples:

vc (vowel sound to consonant sound)

mai Kar – no need to do anything!

vv (vowel sound to vowel sound)

wee yar – add y to make a vc sound connection

cv (consonant sound to vowel sound)

i tiz – move the final consonant t forward to start the next syllable, making a vc sound connection

cc (consonant sound to consonant sound)

tha_ Buuk – use elision: delete t and use a glottal stop instead. A vc sound connection results

sound spine

The sound spine is the sequence of vowel sounds on the stressed syllables in a sentence. These sounds are the most important sounds in the sentence – the sounds that the listener needs to hear in order to correctly process the words. They form the “backbone” of the sentence – hence “sound spine”. We should always try to find and emphasise the sound spine in a sentence. Whatever other sounds are wrongly pronounced, the vowel sounds on the stressed syllables should be heard clearly and correctly. If one or more of these vowel sounds are wrongly pronounced, miscommunication can occur and the listener may have to say: “Sorry, I didn’t catch that. Could you repeat that, please?”

e.g. compare these two sound spines:

1. correct vowel sounds on stressed syllables:

ei i u ar a ar
Jason has finished cutting the grass in the back garden.

2. incorrect vowel sounds on stressed syllables:

ee er e i uu iy
Jason has finished cutting the grass in the back garden.

In the second example it is very difficult to work out what is meant, because the incorrect vowel sounds transform the content words into something different (sometimes into completely different words), making them unidentifiable, e.g. “finished” now sounds like “furnished”, “back” now sounds like “book”, and “grass” now sounds like “griss”, which isn’t a word in English, etc.

spelling

The system we use to put language into written form. Unfortunately for people trying to learn English, spelling in English is not phonetic, i.e. the sound of a word (in most cases) does not match the spelling. This means that we have to learn how each word is pronounced by listening to a native speaker – who is hopefully a good model. We have to learn by experience, or by using the IPA phonetic spellings in a dictionary. So there are two parallel components for each word – its sound and its spelling. Furthermore, once we have learned how each word sounds on its own, we then have to take into account how they sound when they are joined together, since we don’t speak word by word, but rather syllable by syllable, merging words together using the techniques of connected speech.

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standard pronunciation

Standard pronunciation is a neutral form of pronunciation, which is not influenced by any specific accented version of English, e.g. Scouse (the Liverpool accent), Geordie (the Newcastle accent), or Welsh (a Welsh accent). Formerly known as Received Pronunciation (RP), standard English can be heard when you watch the news on a British TV channel, or listen to many of the programmes on BBC Radio 4. Standard pronunciation is used in all of the Talk a Lot books, so that learners can study pronunciation with a neutral accent, rather than a particular regional one.

stressed syllable

The syllable in a content word that has greater stress than all of the other syllables. We pronounce this syllable a little louder – more strongly – than the others. In the NEA the stressed syllable always begins with a capital letter. This helps learners to identify them in a sentence and then work out the sound spine.

e.g. in the word “television”, there are four syllables and the third syllable is stressed: te l Vi zzn

stress mark

The stress mark shows us which syllable is stressed in an IPA phonetic spelling of a word. The stress mark always comes before the stressed syllable and looks like this: /'/. The stress mark takes the guesswork out of finding the stress in a word when using the IPA. In the NEA there is no need for a stress mark, because the stressed syllable always starts with a capital letter.

stress pattern

A stress pattern is the sequence of strong (stressed) and weak (unstressed) syllables in a sentence.

e.g. in the following sentence the syllables in bold are strong while the others are weak:

Jason has finished **cutting** the **grass** in the **back** garden.

stress-timed languages

English is a stress-timed language, which means that it should be spoken with its familiar rhythm, e.g. du DUH du DUH du DUH du DUH... etc. The stress pattern is like a mountain range, with the strong stresses the peaks, and the weak stresses the valleys. The contrast between weak and strong makes the distinctive rhythm of English. Other stress-timed languages include German, Dutch, and Swedish. Some languages are not stress-timed, but syllable-timed, with each syllable having roughly equal stress. Syllable-timed languages include French and Spanish. Learners of English who have these languages as their first language often try to force English to follow the same stress pattern. The result is confusion for the listener, because in English much of the meaning of the words is picked up subconsciously by the listener from the vowel sounds on the stressed syllables in a sentence.

strong form

Function words can have strong forms and weak forms, depending on where they are in a sentence. When a function word is in between words in a sentence, we should pronounce the weak form, e.g. the preposition “to” in the following sentences:

I went to the bank. ai Wen_ t th Bangkok.

But when a function word comes at the end of a sentence, we should pronounce the strong form, e.g.

Which bank did you go to? Wi Chbang kdi ch Geu too?

Often learners use strong forms of words like prepositions (to, for, etc.) instead of the weak forms, leading to errors in the sentence stress, e.g.

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normal spelling:	NEA spelling (strong form):	NEA spelling (weak form):
to	too	t
for	for	f
the	thee	th
	or thu	th

strong stress

The strong stress is the stressed syllable in a word. This syllable must be pronounced more strongly – and clearly – than the others in the word. The vowel sound in this syllable must be correct and clear, because it is the most important sound in the syllable – and one of the most important sounds in the sentence as a whole. Pronouncing the correct vowel sound on the correct stressed syllable will help to ensure that the listener understands you.

suffix

A suffix is a word ending which is the same in many different words. Suffixes are not usually stressed. This is helpful to note because it means that we can discount the suffix when we are looking for the stressed syllable in a content word.

e.g. “-ing” in: “**cooking**”, “**going**”, “**putting**”, “**taking**”, etc.
or “-er” in: “**baker**”, “**letter**”, “**builder**”, “**player**”, better, etc.

syllable

A syllable is part of a word that can be said in one beat.

e.g. in the word “potato” there are three syllables = three beats: po-ta-to. The middle syllable is stressed: p Tei teu

vc sound connection

A vc sound connection occurs when a syllable that ends with a vowel sound meets a syllable that begins with a consonant sound, e.g. “be nice” or “daytime”. vc sound connections are the easiest of the four kinds of sound connection for native speakers of English to pronounce, because after making the vowel sound our tongue, lips, and mouth are in a neutral position – ready to form any consonant sound.

vowel cluster

A combination of two or more letters (vowel or consonant letters) together in the normal spelling of a word, which makes one sound.

e.g. the vowel cluster “ea” makes the sound e in the word “bread”, ei in the word “break”, and ee in the word “read” (among others).

(See also *Talk a Lot Handbook* p.18.55: List of Vowel Clusters – In Alphabetical Order.)

vowel letter

There are 5 vowel letters in the English alphabet. They are: **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**. The lack of vowel letters in the English language leads to the problematic differences between spelling and sounds, because just five vowel letters have to represent twenty-three different vowel sounds. For example, vowel letters can combine to form vowel clusters (see above) which then represent different sounds, creating a lot of confusion for learners of English. In the NEA one written ID (identifier) always represents the same single sound, so the sounds always look the same on the page.

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Because of this, spelling with the NEA is much easier: when you think of the sound, you know how it should look, and you know which letters to write. You don't have to memorise two different elements per word: spelling and sounds.

vowel sound

There are twenty-three vowel sounds in spoken English. Vowel sounds are made when we allow breath to move freely from our lungs out of our mouths, without blocking it with our tongue, lips, or mouth (as we do with consonant sounds).

There are eight short vowel sounds:

a	bat	ii	happy	uh	arrive (Schwa sound)
e	leg	o	sock	uu	pull
i	dish	u	cup		

...five long vowel sounds:

ar	star	er	shirt	or	ball
ee	three	oo	shoot		

...and ten diphthongs:

ai	time	ei	plane	oy	toy
aiy	hire	eir	pear	uuy	pure
au	cow	eu	home		
auw	power	iy	here		

Learners whose first language doesn't contain any long vowel sounds or diphthongs will often try to use only short vowel sounds to make all of the vowel sounds in English – which leads to errors and misunderstandings, because the vowel sounds on the stressed syllables in a sentence (the sound spine) must be correct and clear. In comparison, consonant sounds are mostly phonetic, i.e. they sound how you would expect them to from how they look, e.g. t, d, m, n, etc.

weak form

One-syllable function words often have weak forms, which should be used in spoken English instead of their strong forms (see *strong form* above). For example, the weak form of the preposition “for” is pronounced simply f, without a vowel sound, apart from the embedded Schwa sound (see above) which is the natural result of saying f. If learners use strong forms instead of weak forms, their pronunciation will sound stilted and “foreign”, because the sentence stress and the sound spine will be incorrect.

word stress

Word stress is the system of stress within an individual word. Every content word in English has one strong stress.

e.g. in the word “government”, the strong stress is on the first syllable: Gu v mnt

The second syllable contains an embedded Schwa sound, which is pronounced naturally when you say v, and the final syllable also contains an embedded Schwa sound after m. The strong stress in a content word should be emphasised by saying it more loudly and strongly than the other unstressed syllables. In any given content word, one syllable will be stressed strongly (with the vowel sound being the most important sound) and the other syllables will be unstressed, with one or more of them likely to contain a Schwa sound.