

Curricula — Bridge Lessons

Schwa-Ending Syllables

A schwa, /ə/, is the sound made by neither raising nor lowering the tongue or moving it to the front of the back of the mouth; it is closest to the sound /u/, and it is the most common sound in the English language. In *The Spell of Language*, the authors refer to the schwa as /u/ until teaching the Ending Classification because it is at this level of instruction that the schwa becomes relevant; that is, students and adults will vary their production and identification of it in unaccented syllables. For instance, *-ant* and *-ance* and *-ent* and *-ence* are typically identified as /ent/ and /ens/ or even /int/ and /ins/. The schwa accounts for this variability in unaccented syllables.

Learning the organized system of schwa endings contributes to understanding how they correspond to parts of speech. It also provides insight into the sound structure of polysyllabic words; how stress ‘moves’ across syllables according to the adding of endings is made more accessible. At this level of instruction, students have the tools to gain insight into the combinatory nature of English.

The Purpose of Bridge Lessons

The fundamental purpose of the “Bridge” Lesson PDFs is to make possible the conceptualization of Schwa-Ending Syllables as a finite number of possibilities owing to their spellings and phonological patterns. Nonsense words are used, first in “Pencil-breaking” and, second, in “Eye-breaking” exercises so that students must work through a word rather than achieve a match in their mental lexicons. Spelling, on the other hand, is accomplished with real words that have few irregularities except for the endings which have already been learned.

The Structure of Bridge Lessons

For practicing decoding in this part of the program, it may be more effective to use nonsense words than real words. The use of nonsense words precludes prediction of similarly spelled ‘known’ words. Teachers write nonsense words such as *tocaption*. Students review, as needed: a voice break is placed **before** a single consonant (V/CV) and **between** two consonants (VC/CV). Students enclose endings, mark remaining vowels, and **then** place voice breaks: to/cap **tion**. They read the syllables, placing equal stress on each and then read the word as it might

sound. When this skill has developed, the pages are used without first marking syllables.

At the same time, real words are used in spelling. The Words for Spelling list provided includes words which do not present an inordinate number of challenges. Picking a word from a list seems to be easier than thinking of ‘good’ words for students during a lesson. They should say the targeted word, say it again while placing a horizontal line for each syllable, and then spell each syllable. They may also be asked to spell base words.