

# Schwa [r]

Phonological Intervention:  
It's About Time

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This is a work in progress. Any suggestions, comments, and recommendations are welcome. My email address is [ken.bleile@uni.edu](mailto:ken.bleile@uni.edu). Thank you!

## Definition

Schwa [r] is a vowel rather than a consonant. Schwa [r] is included in this book because oftentimes the road to a good [r] leads through first learning to make schwa [r]. Schwa [r] is heard in the words *heard*, *butter*, and *girl*, and is produced in either of two ways. In the first production, called bunched, the lips are rounded slightly, the tongue tip is lowered, and the tongue body is bunched up near the area of the palate. In the second production, called retroflex, the lips are rounded slightly and tongue tip is raised and curled back toward the alveolar ridge. Both bunched and retroflex types of production can result in a good sounding schwa [r], though my clinical experience is that more students find it somewhat easier to learn the bunched variety. For both types of schwa [r], the vocal folds are vibrating and the tongue root is retracted, creating a contraction in the pharynx. The technical definition of schwa [r] is a mid central rounded rhoticized vowel. When occurring in stressed syllables schwa [r] is transcribed [ ] and when occurring in unstressed syllables it is transcribed [ ].

## Acquisition

Schwa [r] is acquired by 50% of children by 3;6 and 75% of children by 5;6.

## Errors

The most common error is deleting the [r] part of the vowel, resulting in words such as *fur*, *fare*, and *fear* being pronounced *fu*, *fa*, *fe*, respectively.

## Possible metaphors

*The best metaphor usually focuses on way [r] closes (ends) the vowel.*

<i>Tongue placement:</i>	Tongue flat sound, back of tongue up sound
<i>Vowel closure:</i>	Mad dog or growling tiger sound (grr), arm wrestling sound (rrr), pirate sound (aar)
<i>Voicing:</i>	Motor on, buzzing sound, voice box on
<i>Word initial:</i>	Starting sounds
<i>Word final:</i>	End sounds
<i>Consonant clusters:</i>	Sound friends

## Touch Cue

TO DO

## Quick Stimulability Tests for Schwa [r]

Imitation

1. her \_\_\_\_\_
2. curl \_\_\_\_\_

### Best Bet Environments

In a word consisting of a single stressed syllable, as in *girl* [g l].

1. [ ] \_\_\_\_\_
2. girl \_\_\_\_\_

### Favorite Words

Names of family members: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite people, heroes, and activities: \_\_\_\_\_

### Phonetic Placement

Instruct the student to growl like a tiger (grrr). Alternately, ask the child to make the "arm wrestling sound" ([rrr]) while arm wrestling with the clinician.

Shaping [er] (retroflex) from [ɔ̃]

1. Ask the child to place the tongue as for [ɔ̃].
2. Ask the child to quickly draw the tongue tip back and slightly up, resulting in [er].

### Demonstrations, Phonetic Placement Exercises, and Shaping Exercises

*One challenge of teaching schwa [r] (and also consonant [r]) is that demonstrations often do not help the student. One reason for this is that during the production of schwa [r] and consonant [r] the articulators do not come in contact with much. For example, in the bunched variety the tongue body is bunched in the area of the palate, but does not touch the palate, and in the retroflex variety the tongue tip is raised toward, but does not touch, the alveolar ridge. Another reason "[r] sounds" are challenging to demonstrate is that several multiple, simultaneous articulations—for the bunched variant, this includes rounding the lips, raising the tongue body, and retracting the tongue too. The retroflex variety has similar articulation requirements, the major difference being that the tongue tip is raised rather than the tongue body. The demonstrations for schwa [r] concentrate on lip rounding, approximant manner of production, alveolar tongue placement (for retroflex schwa [r]), and palatal tongue placement (for bunched schwa [r]). An additional – and sometimes very useful—demonstration draws the student's attention to the sides of the tongue, which in all varieties of [r] are spread to touch the inside of the teeth. My clinical experience is that helping a student obtain this contact between tongue side and teeth often is a good first step to a correct production of schwa [r].*

### Place (Alveolar for retroflex)

*These two methods demonstrate place of production (alveolar).*

### First Method

Object: None

Instructions:

1. Instruct the student, "Please stick out your tongue."
2. Once the tongue is out, for [s] with the tongue tip raised ask the student to pull the tongue back to feel bump on the roof of the mouth behind the two front teeth.
3. For [s] with the tongue tip down, ask the student to pull the tongue back to feel the little bump behind the two lower teeth.

### **Second Method**

Objects: Q-tip, peanut butter or other favored food.

Instructions:

1. Instruct the student, "Please open your mouth."
2. One the mouth is open, with Q-tip dab a little peanut butter or other favorite food on alveolar ridge (for tongue tip raised [s]) or behind lower front teeth (for tongue tip lowered [s]).
3. Ask the student to touch the food with the tongue tip.

Place (Palatal for bunched schwa [r])

Place (Sides of tongue for bunched and retroflex varieties)

Place (Lip rounding for both bunched and retroflex varieties)

### **Manner (Approximant)**

#### **First Method**

Objects: None

Instructions:

Run your or the student's finger down the student's arm while making several long glides or liquids to demonstrate the "flowing" quality and length of this sound.

#### **Second Method**

Objects: Strip of paper, a feather, or a small paper flower taped on the end of a pencil

Instructions:

Use a strip of paper, a feather, or the hand held in front of the student's mouth while you produce several glides or liquids to draw attention to the "flowing" quality and continuous nature of the sounds. Alternately, tape a small paper flower on the end of a pencil and encourage the student to move the flower in the wind.

### **Phonetic Placement Exercises for Schwa [r]:**

#### **First method (retroflex or humped)**

*This method is simple and quick. If it doesn't work after a few tries, it is best to give up and try a somewhat more complicated method.*

Objects: None

Instructions:

Instruct the student to growl like a tiger ([grrr]). Alternately, ask the student to make the "arm wrestling sound" ([rrr]) while arm wrestling the clinician.

#### **Second method (retroflex or humped)**

*This method works because if a student lies back and relaxes, the tongue "bunches" and falls into the position for schwa [r]. Though it seems funny, sometimes after establishing [er] flat on the back, you need to work for the student to say the sound when not reclining.*

Objects: None

Instructions:

Instruct the student to lie on his or her back, relax the mouth, and say [er].

### *Third method (humped)*

Objects: None

Instructions:

1. Instruct the student to lower his or her tongue tip.
2. Ask the student to hump up the back of the tongue as for “a silent [k].”
3. Ask the student to make the sides of the back of the tongue touch the insides of the back teeth. Ask the student to turn on the voice box, resulting in [er].

### **Shaping Exercises for Schwa [ɚ]**

#### **[er] (humped) from [w]**

*This method requires a number of steps, but is effective with the right student.*

Objects: Tongue depressor (optional)

Instructions:

1. Lower the student’s jaw slightly.
2. Ask the student to say [w].
3. Next, ask the student to make the tongue position for [d].
4. Lastly, ask the student to retract the tongue slightly while lowering the tongue tip and to say [er].

#### **[er] (humped) from [d]**

Objects: None

Instructions:

Lower the student’s jaw slightly as for [d]. While the student’s jaw is lowered, ask him or her to pull back the tongue slightly, to lower the tongue tip, and to say [er].

#### **[er] (retroflex) from [th]**

Objects: None

Instructions:

1. Instruct the student to place his or her tongue as for [th]
2. Ask the student to quickly draw the tongue tip back and slightly up, which typically results in [er].

#### **[er] (retroflex) from [sh]**

*This clever technique relies on the surprising similarities between [ʃ] and [ʒ], both of which involve slightly rounded lips, raising of the tongue blade, and contact between the tongue sides and the insides of the teeth.*

Objects: None

Instructions:

1. Instruct the student to say [sh], but to curl the tongue tip back while keeping contact with the tongue on the insides of the back teeth.
2. Ask the student to turn on the voice box, resulting in [er].