

Ask about English

The

A question from Subbu:

How do you pronounce the word 'the'? There are two pronunciations: 'The' sometimes sounds like 'thee'. Sometimes it sounds like 'thaaa'.?

Amos Paran answers:

Well done, Subbu for noticing this. I think because 'the' is such a common word in English - it is in fact the most common word both in writing and in speech - we often tend to overlook it.

It has two pronunciations. One pronunciation - the one that most learners will know - is 'the' with a vowel that we call a schwa - a very common vowel. So we talk about 'the sound'; 'the word' ; 'the number'. This pronunciation appears before consonants. The other pronunciation 'the' comes before a vowel. So you will notice that I said 'the other pronunciation'.

One warning though - there are words that look as if they begin with a vowel, but they actually begin with a consonant. One example is the word 'university'. It starts with a /j/ sound, which is a consonant. So we say, 'the university'. Another example is the word 'one' - 'the one that most learners will know'. So remember that these words are consonants, not vowels.

The other place you would use 'the' is when you are stressing the word and adding extra emphasis to the noun coming after it. So you talk about restaurant that you like and say, ' It's THE best restaurant in town'; or 'It's THE restaurant in town'. Very useful for expressing your enthusiasm about anything.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer

Amos Paran is the Course Leader of the MA in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) by Distance Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London. His main teaching and research interests are reading in a foreign language and the use of literature in foreign language teaching and learning.