

Spanish Pronunciation: The Complete Guide



One of the big mistakes made by many Spanish students is spending all of their time and effort learning vocabulary and grammar while neglecting Spanish pronunciation. This is big mistake for those who aspire to do more than read and write in Spanish, since your ability to use effective pronunciation will have a much greater impact on your ability to be understood by native Spanish speakers than occasional grammar mistakes.

Whenever I [spoke to someone], they kept asking me ‘What? What?’ I would repeat my sentence again and again. Finally they would say Ah-ha! and then repeat my sentence, using exactly my words! It was very humiliating. I knew my words and grammar were good, but nobody would understand me, just because of my pronunciation.

The other mistake that Spanish students often make is to delay the study of pronunciation until after they have already acquired a large vocabulary. This is also a big mistake — learning vocabulary without correct pronunciation from the beginning means that you end up building a large vocabulary of words that you can recognize on paper, but cannot faithfully reproduce orally. These words must later be re-learned a second time with proper pronunciation — an increasingly difficult task when you have been pronouncing words incorrectly for a long time. For this reason, proper pronunciation should be stressed from the very beginning of your language study in order to provide a solid foundation for future learning.

How to use this Guide

The primary goal of this guide is to teach you how to first *hear*, and eventually *replicate*, proper Spanish pronunciation. Each section below contains audio exercises designed to help you to practice specific aspects of Spanish pronunciation. **Simply reading through this guide without taking the time to complete the audio exercises will likely do little to improve your pronunciation in Spanish.** Listen to the audio exercises carefully and try to emulate their pronunciation as closely as possible. Practice the audio exercises over and over until you are confident you are pronouncing the words correctly. (You can use the link below to download the audio files to your computer for additional practice.)

Download Complete Guide and Audio Files: [Click here to download](#) a PDF copy of this guide along with all of the audio files to your computer.

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The phonetic system in Spanish

The good news for learning Spanish pronunciation is that the Spanish language is almost perfectly “phonetic”, meaning there is a consistent relationship between the way a word is spelled and the way it sounds: You can look at almost any written word in Spanish and automatically know how to pronounce it. This makes mastering Spanish pronunciation considerably easier than English, where the pronunciation of words must be learned independently from their written form. Consider, for example, the different pronunciations of the “ough” suffix in the following English words:

1. though (like o in go)
2. through (like oo in too)
3. cough (like off in offer)
4. rough (like uff in suffer)
5. plough (like ow in flower)
6. ought (like aw in saw)

In English it is almost impossible to determine the correct pronunciation of a word based on spelling alone. However, Spanish letters and letter combinations are almost always pronounced the same way. This makes Spanish pronunciation relatively simple to replicate once you master some the basic rules and a few the unique sounds.

Typical errors from English vowel influence in similar-sounding words

As an initial exercise, it is useful to examine the difference in pronunciation of certain Spanish words that are similar in form to words in English. Consider the list below. Although these words may seem familiar, their Spanish pronunciation is quite different, and you are liable to make serious mistakes if you attempt to pronounce them in the English-sounding way. Note that in the list below we have placed an accent mark (´) to indicate a stressed vowel, even though this does not occur in normal Spanish spelling of these words. Also note that the English words given are not always translations of the Spanish; they are simply used to represent the English word the Spanish word might remind you of.

Audio Exercise: English-sounding words

oficina	<i>office</i>	doctór	<i>doctor</i>
<hr/>			
oportunidad	<i>opportunity</i>	congréso	<i>congress</i>

conferència	<i>conference</i>	tropicál	<i>tropical</i>
atómica	<i>atomic</i>	Hondúras	<i>Honduras</i>
conversación	<i>conversation</i>	hospitál	<i>hospital</i>
contráto	<i>contract</i>	posíble	<i>possible</i>
bombardéo	<i>bombardment</i>	prónto	<i>pronto</i>
próxima	<i>approximate</i>	fósforo	<i>phosphorus</i>
cósto	<i>cost</i>	blánca	<i>blank</i>
Kánsas	<i>Kansas</i>	páse	<i>pass</i>
cláse	<i>class</i>	grácias	<i>grass</i>
lástima	<i>last</i>	espáñol	<i>spaniel</i>
absolúto	<i>absolute</i>		

Pronunciation of the Spanish alphabet

The Spanish alphabet, or *abecedario*, is similar to the English alphabet, with the addition of a few letters that are unique to Spanish. In later sections, we'll take a full examination of the range of sounds that each letter makes as part of word. In this section we simply review the name of and pronunciation of each of the letters themselves.

Video Exercise: The letters of the Spanish alphabet

Watch the following video and repeat the name of each letter as prompted.

Note: This video presents the traditional Spanish alphabet. You should be aware that in 2010, the official Spanish alphabet was changed by the Royal Spanish Academy. The letters Ch and Ll were removed, and the names of some other letters were clarified or changed:

- **V** becomes *uve* instead of *ve*, to avoid confusion with **B** (*be*)
- **W** becomes *uve doble* instead of *doble ve*.
- **Y** becomes *ye* instead of *i griega* Although these differences are relatively minor, you should be aware of both versions.

Pronunciation Key for Spanish Letters

The last exercise introduced you to the names of each of the letters in Spanish. The Pronunciation Key below describes the sounds that each individual letter makes as part of a word. We will cover the sounds of that each letter makes in greater detail in the individual sections on Spanish vowels and Spanish consonants. For now, you should review the Pronunciation Key only to familiarize yourself with the basic pronunciation of each letter.

Note: This chart is only partially reproduced here. We recommend reviewing the complete [Spanish Pronunciation Key with audio here](#).

Letter	How to pronounce	Sounds like
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a	<i>ah</i>	Sounds like the a in “father.”
b,v	<i>beh</i>	The letters <i>b</i> and <i>v</i> sound the same in Spanish. When found at the beginning of a word or following a consonant, they both make a sound like the English <i>b</i> in “ball”: and When found in the middle or end of word, they make a softer sound that falls somewhere in between the English <i>b</i> and <i>v</i> sounds.
c	<i>seh</i>	Usually sounds like <i>c</i> in cartwheel. Before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> , it makes an <i>s</i> sound.
ch	<i>ch eh</i>	Sounds like the <i>ch</i> in “church.”
d	<i>deh</i>	Sounds like the English <i>d</i> except between vowels and following <i>l</i> or <i>n</i> where pronounced almost like the <i>th</i> in “this.”
e	<i>eh</i>	For a syllable ending in a vowel, like the <i>e</i> in “they”; for a syllable ending in a consonant, like the <i>e</i> in “get.”
f	<i>effe</i>	Sounds like the <i>f</i> in “flute.”
g	<i>ge</i>	Usually like the ‘ <i>g</i> ’ in except before <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> , where it sounds like the English “ <i>h</i> .”
h	<i>hache</i>	In general, the <i>h</i> is silent.
i	<i>i</i>	Sounds like the <i>i</i> in machine. Before vowels <i>a</i> , <i>e</i> , and <i>o</i> , it forms a “ <i>y</i> ” sound.
j	<i>jota</i>	Sounds like an English <i>h</i> sound but a bit stronger.
k	<i>kah</i>	Like the <i>k</i> in English.
l	<i>ele</i>	Like the <i>l</i> in English
ll	<i>elle</i>	Like the <i>y</i> in “you.”
m	<i>eme</i>	Sounds like the English <i>m</i> , as in “mom.”
n	<i>ene</i>	Sounds like an English <i>n</i> .
ñ <td <i>eñe</i> <td>Makes a “nyah” sound like the <i>ñ</i> in “onion” or “canyon.”</td>	Makes a “nyah” sound like the <i>ñ</i> in “onion” or “canyon.”	
o	<i>oh</i>	For a syllable ending in a vowel, sounds like the <i>o</i> in “vote.”
p	<i>peh</i>	Sounds like an English <i>p</i> , but slightly softer.
q	<i>koo</i>	Sounds like a <i>k</i> ; always followed by a silent <i>u</i> .
r	<i>ere</i>	Pronounced with a strong trill when at the beginning of a word or and following an <i>l</i> , <i>n</i> , or <i>s</i> ; medium trill in other positions, and very little trill when at the end of a word.
rr	<i>ere</i>	Strongly rolled <i>r</i> sound.
s	<i>ese</i>	Just like the English <i>s</i> .
t	<i>te</i>	Very close to the English <i>t</i> but softer, the tongue touches the teeth and there is no explosion of breath after moving the tongue away.
u	<i>u</i>	Sounds like the <i>u</i> in rule. When paired with a vowel it makes a sound like the <i>w</i> in “well.”
v	<i>veh</i>	see <i>b</i> , <i>v</i>

w	<i>doble veh</i>	The letter w is somewhat rare in Spanish and mostly used for foreign words. When it appears, it usually makes the same sound as the English w.
x	<i>equis</i>	Usually sounds like the x in “box”
y	<i>y griega</i>	Usually sounds like the y in “yes” In many countries, y is pronounced with a soft j sound.
z	<i>zeta</i>	Mostly pronounced like the English z as in (but can sound like the th in “thin” in parts of Spain)

Pronunciation of Spanish vowels

Although English and Spanish share the same set of vowels (a-e-i-o-u) the pronunciation of vowels in Spanish differs somewhat from their English counterparts. The first difference is that Spanish vowels do not have the same variation in sounds as is found in English (consider the difference between the *i* “give” vs. “alive”, or the *e* in “be” vs. “get”). In Spanish vowels are always pronounced the same way. The other major difference is that Spanish vowels tend to be much shorter in length than their English counterparts. English speakers frequently import the elongated English vowels into Spanish, resulting in a tell-tale gringo accent that sounds something like a “southern drawl.” The exercises below illustrate the differences between English vowel sounds and the shorter Spanish vowels.

English vowels vs. Spanish vowels

The following lists present similar sounding words pronounced by a Spanish speaker and an English speaker respectively, to illustrate important differences in the pronunciation of what might be considered the same vowels. Note especially that the English vowels seem to be more drawn out, and especially note that they seem to change quality from the beginning to the end of the vowel, whereas the Spanish vowels do not. Learning these differences should help reduce your “gringo accent.”

Audio Exercise on Spanish-English vowel differences

English ay and Spanish e

day de Kay que

say se bay be

Fay fe May me

lay le

English o and Spanish o

no no low lo

yoe yo so so

English e, ee and Spanish i

me mi tea ti

see si bee bi

Dee di knee ni

English oo and Spanish u

too tu sue su

pooh pu coo cu

boo bu moo mu

Contrasting Spanish vowel sounds under weak stress

One of the biggest differences between Spanish and English is the pronunciation of vowels under *weak stress* – that is, vowels that do not have the principal stress of the word. In English, only the stressed vowel is usually fully pronounced, while the rest become indistinguishable vowel sounds which all sound alike. Consider for instance, the underlined vowels in the following pairs English words, which have the same vowel sound in spite of differences in spelling:

president precedent

mormon mermen

warden pardon

These vowels would **not** be pronounced the same way in Spanish. In Spanish, all the vowels retain their pronunciation, even those that do not have the principal stress in the word. While it is normal to make mistakes with Spanish vowels at first, this *is a very serious error* which must be corrected early in your efforts to form Spanish habits of pronunciation. The following ten sets of exercises are intended to help you master the pronunciation of Spanish vowels under weak stress. They are arranged in pairs of words, so that the only difference between the members of each pair is the pronunciation of one weak- stressed vowel. Listen carefully and repeat each pair of words after the native speakers presented on the audio. By observing closely the point of difference between each pair, you will begin to hear and appreciate these differences. Practice with the audio until you feel confident that you are distinguishing the vowel sounds in pronunciation. (Please Note: These word lists are for pronunciation only, they're not for building vocabulary. Some are very rare and uncommonly used words, and a few aren't words at all.)

Contrasting /a/ and /e/ sounds

seda cede palón pelón

sapa sape fatal fetal

lota lote tañir teñir

mesas meses papito pepito

bocha boche dadito dedito

tinta tinte escupa escupe

chinchá chinche soqueta soquete

corta corte alumbra alumbre

sobras sobres francesas franceses

basar besar cantoras cantores

manar	menar	barreta	berreta
machón	mechón	señoras	señores
tachar	techar	pastoras	pastores
tachón	techón	mercado	mercado
panal	penal	apagar	apegar
tajón	tejón	portuguesas	portugueses

Contrasting /a/ and /i/ sounds

labar	libar	pañal	piñal
patón	pitón	masita	misita
nadar	nidar	latera	litera
matad	mitad	salero	silero
charlar	chirlar	paquete	piquete
panzón	pinzón	fajarón	fijaron
pasando	pisando	mallador	mallidor

Contrasting /a/ and /o/ sounds

ara	aro	Cuba	cubo
tía	tío	coca	coco
sera	zero	cara	caro
pesa	peso	para	paro
pasa	paso	China	chino
mala	malo	canta	canto
mesa	meso	manta	manto
malla	mallo	zorra	zorro
bola	bolo		
santa	santo	derecha	derecho
suegra	suegro	cigarra	cigarro
negra	negro	María	moría
palma	palmo	zapata	zapato
pasta	pasto	hermana	hermano

trompa	trompo	mimosa	mimoso
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rema	remo	pareja	parejo
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cobra	cobro	marea	mareo
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nieta	nieto	ternera	ternero
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india	indio	cereza	cerezo
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calor	color	llamada	llamado
-------	-------	---------	---------

esposa	esposo	lacónica	lacónico
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Contrasting /a/ and /u/ sounds

pajar	pujar	lanero	lunero
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tarón	turón	Caracas	curacas
-------	-------	---------	---------

sabido	subido	barrita	burrita
--------	--------	---------	---------

papita	pupita	parguita	purguita
--------	--------	----------	----------

malaso	mulaso	cañado	cuñado
--------	--------	--------	--------

canita	cunita	marciano	murciano
--------	--------	----------	----------

lanita	lunita	palidez	pulidez
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malita	mulita	matador	mutador
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Contrasting /e/ and /i/ sounds

penar	pinar	pesado	pisado
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petón	pitón	perita	pirita
-------	-------	--------	--------

pelón	pilón	pesada	pisada
-------	-------	--------	--------

telón	tilón	pesaron	pisaron
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remar	rimar	mellar	millar
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mesera	misera	peñita	piñita
--------	--------	--------	--------

Contrasting /e/ and /o/ sounds

pase	paso	pepe	pepo
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tome	tomo	tire	tiro
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fume	fumo	cabe	cabo
------	------	------	------

vine	vino	vive	vivo
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leche	lecho	lección	loción
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traje	trajo	mesita	mosita
deje	dejo	belita	bolita
teje	tejo	betado	botado
quiere	quiero	pesada	posada
peine	peino	hermita	hornita
cobre	cobro	guerrita	gorrita
cante	canto	conteste	contesto
lleve	llevo	ternero	tornero
mande	mando	cerrito	zorrito
cambie	cambio	conforme	conformo
compre	compro	eclipse	eclipso
pelar	polar	trabaje	trabajo
mentón	montón	preposición	proposición

Contrasting /e/ and /u/ sounds

temor	tumor	cerrar	surrar
legar	lugar	lechón	luchón
lechar	luchar	festín	fustín
sección	succión	pensado	punsado
pensión	punsión	tendero	tundero
mesita	musita	pechero	puchero
lelito	lulito	perita	purita
cercado	surcado	retina	rutina
terquito	turquito	anhelar	anular

Contrasting /i/ and /o/ sounds

timo	tomo	mirada	morada
figón	fogón	piquito	poquito
lisar	losar	pisada	posada
mirar	morar	tirito	torito
misión	moción	hijito	ojito
trincar	troncar	imito	omito

millar	mollar	tintísimo	tontísimo
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Contrasting /i/ and /u/ sounds

ligar	lugar	mirar	murar
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mirón	murón	piñón	puñón
-------	-------	-------	-------

billar	bullar	minita	munita
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pinzón	punzón	chinchero	chunchero
--------	--------	-----------	-----------

pintar	puntar	nidoso	nudoso
--------	--------	--------	--------

fisión	fusión	pidiendo	pudiendo
--------	--------	----------	----------

fingir	fungir	rimita	rumita
--------	--------	--------	--------

misita	musita	mirajes	murajes
--------	--------	---------	---------

imito	humito	pintada	puntada
-------	--------	---------	---------

milita	mulita	riquita	ruquita
--------	--------	---------	---------

linoso	lunoso	birlador	burlador
--------	--------	----------	----------

tinero	tunero	pirita	purita
--------	--------	--------	--------

filera	fulera	linares	lunares
--------	--------	---------	---------

circuito	surquito
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Contrasting /o/ and /u/ sounds

tope	tupe	omito	humito
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vocal	vucal	monita	munita
-------	-------	--------	--------

olate	ulate	plomero	plumero
-------	-------	---------	---------

troncar	truncar	mosita	musita
---------	---------	--------	--------

lonita	lunita	roquita	ruquita
--------	--------	---------	---------

sotana	sutana	motilar	mutilar
--------	--------	---------	---------

porito	purito	acosar	acusar
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Stress Placement in Spanish

In Spanish, just like English, we do not pronounce every syllable of a word with the same force or strength. Rather we emphasize or *stress* one syllable strongly and pronounce all the other syllables quietly. Take for example the words: **photograph**, **photographer** and **photographic**. Although these words all share a common root, each word places stress on a different syllable:

- PHO-to-graph

- pho-TOG-ra-pher
- pho-to-GRAPH-ic

This happens in ALL words with 2 or more syllables: one syllable is stressed strongly and all the other syllables are not. The syllables that are not stressed referred to are **weak stressed** or **quiet**. Placing proper stress may seem like a minor matter, but correct stress placement is a *critical* part of Spanish pronunciation. Often, changing the stress will change the meaning of a word entirely. This is sometimes true in English as well (consider the difference in stress between **desert** and **dessert**). The following exercise demonstrates the difference in stress placement and the corresponding change in meaning. (Note the use of the accent mark in the second column to indicate accentuated syllables.)

Stress pattern illustrations

Repeat each pair of words, paying particular attention to the differences in stress

esta	<i>this</i>	está	<i>is</i>
ingles	<i>groins</i>	inglés	<i>English</i>
peso	<i>monetary unit</i>	pesó	<i>he weighed</i>
perno	<i>bolt</i>	pernó	<i>a kind of wine</i>
pico	<i>peak</i>	picó	<i>he stung</i>
balde	<i>bucket</i>	baldé	<i>I crippled</i>
libro	<i>book</i>	libró	<i>he freed</i>
ara	<i>altar</i>	hará	<i>he will do</i>
abra	<i>open</i>	habrá	<i>there will be</i>

Basic Rules of Accentuation

Spanish also provides standard rules for the placement of stress, making it relatively easy to determine the proper stress placement for any word in Spanish:

1. For words ending in a vowel, or *n* or *s*, the second to last syllable is stressed.
 - **todo**
 - **persona**
 - **cantan**
 - **computadoras**
2. For words ending in a consonant other than *n* or *s*, the stress falls on the last syllable.
 - **azul**
 - **matador**
 - **bailar**

3. If the word has an accent mark, then that syllable is stressed, ignoring the rules above.

- **sán**wiche
- **mú**sica
- alegr**ía**

The following exercises are arranged according to the number of syllables and placement of stress. You should attempt to carefully emulate the pronunciation of words in the audio files, paying close attention to the stress patterns used by native speakers. Until you can complete these exercises with proper stress, you cannot expect to progress and pronounce complex sentences successfully. To assist you with these exercises, we have placed an accent mark over the stressed vowel—please note that this is not always the case in the proper Spanish spelling of each word.

Audio Exercise: Stress placement – words with 2 syllables

Repeat each word, paying particular attention to the placement of stress

rója	cómo	fúmo	ábra
múcho	gústó	báño	vísa
tángo	buéno	ténga	táxi
hásta	luégo	áño	hiélo
dónde	fráses	tárde	cérca
está	colór	pasár	favór
calór	usted	abrír	perdón
estóy	adiós	decír	visté
señór	cortés	ciudad	también
razón	fumár	sérvir	cerrár

Audio Exercise: Stress placement – words with 3 syllables

rápido	bárbano	trabájo	ventána
lástima	médico	salúdos	minútos
fósforo	miércoles	máñana	tiquétes
siéntese	sábado	señóra	centávós
déjeme	céntimo	difícil	boléto
único	sánwiche	molésta	sabémos
	último	escúche	llegáda
	próximo		
trabajár	saludár		

oración	regulár
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entendér	conocér
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español	Paraguáy
---------	----------

autobús	Uruguáy
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estación	salvadór
----------	----------

corazón	contestár
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Audio Exercise: Stress placement – words with 4 syllables

dígame	viéndoselo	teléfono	perdóneme
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préstese	cámbiemelo	simpático	altímetro
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tómeselo	sáqueselo	decídase	figúrese
----------	-----------	----------	----------

traígame	muévaselo	magnífico	América
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véase	súbamelas	muchísimo	milésimo
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cuénteme	cómaselo	propósito	tantísimo
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dándome	búscame	fanático	buenísimo
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telegráma	conociendo	trabajaré	agricultór
-----------	------------	-----------	------------

inmediáta	adelánte	casualidad	entonación
-----------	----------	------------	------------

despedidas	demasiádo	liberación	encontrará
------------	-----------	------------	------------

absolúto	panoráma	habilidad	caminaré
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suficiente	monográma	comunicar	amarizár
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presentárle	entendído	ferrocarríl	amanecér
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señoríta	confundído	mentalidád	facilitár
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Audio Exercise: Stress Placement – Words with 5 or more syllables

conociéndose	presentaciones	anterioridád
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acercándose	americano	posterioridád
-------------	-----------	---------------

preciosísimo	laboratório	cristalización
--------------	-------------	----------------

presentándole	conversaciones	cumunicación
---------------	----------------	--------------

primerísimo	conservatório	nacionalidád
-------------	---------------	--------------

encontrándola	camisería	argumentación
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generalización	especialización	institucionalidad	desnaturalización
identificación	decontaminación	impresionabilidad	impersonalización
naturalización	responsabilidad	constitucionalidad	agriculturización
recapitulación	respetabilidad	supernaturalidad	americanización
capitalización	irregularidad	descapitalización	superalimentación

igualmente	Generalmente
usualmente	literalmente
actualmente	materialmente
cordialmente	el señor Cárter
señor Cárter	al señor Cástro
doctor Cámpos	inmoralmente
color verde	informalmente
señor Cástro	especialmente
así dice	el color negro
el ya viene	el señor Vargas

Pronunciation of Spanish Consonants

In the section on Spanish vowels, we noted that where Spanish vowels retain their full pronunciation even under weak stress, English vowels often become indistinguishable from each other. The issue with Spanish consonants is somewhat the opposite. While pronunciation of consonants in English tends to be very crisp and distinct, Spanish consonants, particularly d, b, v, l, and s are often pronounced softly and sound somewhat “muddled” by English standards. The major exception to this is the r sound which is much harder in Spanish and is frequently pronounced with a hard trill. The remainder of this section covers the Spanish consonants most likely to trip up native English speakers.

The letter Dd in Spanish

The problem that arises from Dd is that it has two varieties of pronunciation which are, from the point of view of English speakers, actually different sounds; but from the point of view of Spanish speakers are one and the same sound.

The first sound of the letter d is the “d” sound of English den, do, die, dare, etc., but the tip of the tongue actually touches the back side of the upper teeth when this sound is produced in Spanish, whereas in English it touches somewhat further back toward the roof of the mouth.

The other sound of d is much like the “th” sound of English then, thee, the, those, that, there, etc., or the middle sound of mother, other, father, etc., or the final sound of lathe, bathe. This sound must be distinguished carefully, however,

from the other sound which English writes with th, the initial sound of thin, thick, thistle, or the middle sound of ether, Ethel, or the final sound of bath. This sound is used only by Spanish speakers from central Spain (around Madrid, it's called the madrileño dialect). It has no relationship to the "th" sound of d we'll be working with here.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish D

Examples of the two "d" sounds are:

dádo	dédo	adónde	andádo
dúdar	dudoso	soldádo	tildádo
guardádo	cardádo	desdeñádo	desdichádo

Exercise on the letters Dd and Rr between vowels

oda	ora	pidá	pira
todo	toro	lodo	loro
cada	cara	codó	coro
seda	sera	mudo	muro
modo	moro	ada	ara
mida	mira		

The letters Bb and Vv in Spanish

The problem with b and v is similar to that of d, but compounded by the fact that two different symbols are used for the same sound in Spanish, both of which exist in English and have very different sounds. To Spanish speakers there is no difference; one of the most common spelling errors native Spanish speakers make is confusing b for v and vice versa. The first of these sounds is almost the same as the initial sound of English words like bee, bill, buy, borrow; the middle sound in baby, tabby, tubby; and the final sound in tub, hub, rub. We call it the "hard b". The second is a sound that does not exist in English. It is produced by bringing the lips close together, but not allowing them to touch, so that the air passes through them with a slight friction noise. The result, to English-speaker ears, sounds like a mixture of b, v, and w. The easiest way to learn to produce it is to start out as though you're going to say the hard "b" described above, but not allow the lips to touch so that the resulting sound is something like a v. This is called the "soft b".

Remember, though, that it is not the English "v" sound—that sound doesn't exist in Spanish.

Audio Exercise: The B and V in Spanish

Examples of the sounds of b and v:

beber	vivir	silbaba	salvaba
abor	babosa	enervaba	hervaba
zumbaba	cambiaba	esbozaba	esbozó

Making a mistake with b and v is not as serious as with the two "d" sounds, but errors can lead to misunderstandings and will emphasize that you're not a proficient Spanish speaker. Most important, though, is that there is no sound like the English "v" in Spanish, although Spanish uses the "v" symbol in writing. The Spanish sound which English

speakers may hear as v in a word like Havana is actually the “soft b” sound.

The letter Gg in Spanish

The problem with g is similar to that of d and b/v. There are two varieties which are the same from the Spanish point of view, but noticeably different from the English point of view. We will call them “hard g” and “soft g”. The “hard g” is almost the same as the initial sound of English words like go, get, got, guess; the middle sound in ago, again; the final sound in tug, tag, tog. The “soft g” is a sound that is approximated rarely in English, in a word like “sugar”. It is produced by raising the back part of the tongue up toward the roof of the mouth as though to make a “hard g” sound, but without allowing the tongue to touch, so that the air is free to pass through with a slight friction noise.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish G

Examples of “hard g” and “soft g”:

galgo	gaga	estegalgo	el gago
Gregorio	gagera	la garganta	la gorga
agringado	agangrenarse	es Gregorio	es gagera

The letter Rr in Spanish

Even though both English and Spanish use the same r symbol, you should understand that there is little relationship between the sounds it represents in English and Spanish. **Any attempt to transfer the English r sound to Spanish will result in a sound that is unidentifiable in Spanish-speaking ears.** You have already had a session of drill work on the difference between r and the variety of d that appears between vowels in words like *todo* and *toro*. Now we come to the difference between the single r (which is very similar to English tt or dd in words like cottage, better, wader, shudder) from the double rr. The double rr is a rapid trill of the tongue-tip, and it can usually be learned only by careful imitation. The following drill is to help you hear and learn to reproduce the difference between the two kinds of r. Many native English speaker struggle with the trilled R sound. If you find yourself unable to reproduce the trilled R, try these [6 exercises designed to teach you how to roll your Rs](#).

Audio Exercise: The Spanish R

Exercise on r and rr between vowels

pero	perro	caro	carro
para	parra	bara	barra
coro	corro	cero	cerro
hierro	hierro	foro	forro
fiero	fierro	amará	amarra

Not only is the Spanish r very different from the English r when it occurs between vowels, as in the preceding drills, it is also quite different in association with consonants. Take the Spanish word *tarde*, for example. Your first attempt will probably sound something like the English words *tar day*. If you will try to make it sound more like *totter-they* (spoken rapidly) it will come pretty close to the Spanish pronunciation. The following drill will allow you to practice r in all combinations with other consonants.

Exercise on r before and after consonants

pronto	cuerpo	grande	amargo
primo	torpe	frío	marfil
tres	carta	frase	perfil
trato	puerta		farsa
crudo	cerca		irse
creo	parque		Argentina
Brasil	arbol		surgió
broma	curva		dormir
drama	tarde		arma
droga	guarda		viernes
gracias	garganta		horno

Whenever r occurs at the very end of an utterance (not necessarily the end of a word, but the end just before a pause), and especially when that final syllable is a stressed syllable, it has a different pronunciation from what is heard elsewhere. It is more like rr, but the vocal cords do not vibrate (produce sound) during its production. The effect is almost like combining r with s, except that the tongue-tip remains up at the end. This sound can be practiced by imitation of the following words.

Exercise on Spanish r at the end of an word

señor	azucar	hablar	nacar
meter	éter	cansar	cáncer
revolver	revólver	partir	mártir
favor	bulevar		

The letter Pp in Spanish

It was mentioned earlier that in English there are at least two conspicuously different kinds of p sounds: the p of pin, pill; which has the puff of air called aspiration; and the p of spin, spill; which has no aspiration. The Spanish p is always produced without aspiration. One way for an English speaker to get at the mastery of it is by thinking an s before Spanish words that begin with p in order to transfer the English pattern of producing unaspirated p after s.

The following list will give you a basis for comparing the p sound in the two languages and learning to reproduce the difference.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish P

Exercise on Spanish Pp

pace	pes	Peru	Perú
pawn	pan	par	par

pore por pone pon

pooh pu plan plan

The letter Tt in Spanish

The t problem is like the p problem: in English it is aspirated, in Spanish it is not. In addition, the tongue touches a point that is more forward in the mouth to produce a Spanish t: it literally touches the back side of the upper teeth, which it does not do in English.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish T

Exercise on Spanish t

ti ten ten

toss tas taboo tabú

The letter Cc (in some cases), the combination Qu, and the letter Kk in Spanish

If you have mastered p and t, the “k” sound will be a breeze since it involves again the aspiration issue. Note that the letter “k” is almost never used in Spanish, and only in words of foreign origin. The only fairly common examples are words referring to the metric system (kilo, kilógrama, etc.) and whiskey.

Audio Exercise: The letters C, Q and K in Spanish

Exercise on Spanish “k” sound

kilo kilo Kay que

call cal can can

cafe café

The “S” sound in Spanish: the letters Ss, Zz and in some cases Cc

Spanish has an s and a z, but unlike English they are considered as variants of a single sound, “s”. That is to say two words in Latin American Spanish are never distinguished solely by the difference s- z, as are the English words seal and zeal. In Latin American Spanish s, z and c (in some cases) are pronounced alike.

Audio Exercise: The letters S, Z and C in Spanish

Exercise on the distribution of the variants of the “s” sound

esbozo esposo rasgar rascar

esvelta espelta azno asco

mismo misto juzgar buscar

desdeñar desteñir disgusto discurso

desde de este es de este

In some dialects and styles of speaking Spanish, another variety of the “s” sound occurs. In some Caribbean and South American dialects, the “s” sound, particularly at the end of words, becomes something very close to the “h” sound in English. This sound is particularly pronounced in the Chilean dialect; in much of the Caribbean it is so faint as to appear to have disappeared entirely. The “s” sound is not dropped entirely, although in the case of speakers from the Caribbean Basin it may sound as if it has been.

You will notice that the “z” sound occurs in Spanish only in a syllable-final position before a voiced consonant, namely b, d, g, m, n, l and r. Everywhere else, the “s” occurs, except before semi-vowels (y and w) where both the “s” and the “z” sound occur, depending on whether the syllable begins with the “s” sound or with the semi-vowel. Since there is no choice on the part of the speaker—only one or the other appears in any given situation, but not both—they are not in contrast and belong to only one basis sound unit.

For most people, it is a good idea to learn the “s” pronunciation as it is on the audio that accompanies this program. It is the most common, and is perfectly understood and not considered “incorrect” anywhere. One thing to remember: the “h” variant never appears for the “s” sound at the beginning of a syllable.

Typical errors from English “z” influence on Spanish “s”

There are certain groups of words in which the “s” sound will bother you more than elsewhere, because the words seem familiar and may lead you back to the English “z” sound. Some of these are below.

Kansas	<i>Kansas</i>	presidente	<i>president</i>
influenza	<i>influenza</i>	presente	<i>present</i>
Venezuela	<i>Venezuela</i>	presentar	<i>present</i>
exámenes	<i>exams</i>	presentaciones	<i>presentations</i>
razón	<i>reason</i>	visitar	<i>visit</i>
división	<i>division</i>	Santa Rosa	<i>Santa Rosa</i>
propósito	<i>proposition</i>	Rosalinda	<i>Rosalinda</i>

The lateral L in Spanish

L in English is a sound that is produced by raising the tip of the tongue up to touch the roof of the mouth in such a way that the air column is forced to pass around either side of it: this way of producing a sound is called lateral (i.e., “side”) articulation.

In Spanish, the L is actually a laterally released d, and it has a very different sound from the English L. If you will try to follow by manipulating your own tongue, a technical description will be helpful: produce a d as in the word *did*. Notice that to make the “d”, you release the whole tip of the tongue so that the air can flow suddenly out across the top of it. Now instead of releasing the entire tongue downward, keep the tip locked in its d position at the end of the word *did*, but release the air through one side as though you were going to say the word *diddle*, but without lowering the back part of the tongue as you would in *diddle*. If you have followed these instructions, you are producing a close approximation of a Spanish L.

Compare the following word pairs which are approximately alike except for the l sounds, and try to imitate the difference.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish L

Exercises on Spanish L

feel fil dell del

coal col hotel hotel

tall tal tool tul

el el

The letter Hh in Spanish

You probably already know that letter h is silent in Spanish. However, there are some Spanish words that approximate the English “h” sound, usually spelled with a j, x, or sometimes ag. This sound isn’t exactly like the English “h”, though. It is more guttural, and can sometimes sound almost like clearing the throat. Following are words showing the English and Spanish pronunciation of this sound. When you produce the “h” sound in English, your tongue is relaxed and low in your mouth, so that you merely breathe easily across it before beginning the vowel that follows. For a Spanish “h” sound, the tongue must be tenser and higher in the mouth, near the roof but not touching it, so that more friction noise is created when air is forced past. It is especially difficult for an English speaker to produce the Spanish “h” sound between vowels and after a stressed syllable as in México, déjeme, etc. Though it is always stronger than the English “h” sound, the Spanish carries more or less friction noise depending on the area of the Spanish speaking word. Listen carefully and imitate what you hear the best you can. Audio

Exercise on Spanish “h” sound

heater gira hurrah hurra

holly jale hotter hara

hoosegow juzgado Hilda Hilda

junta junta aha ajá

Mohican Mohican

The letter Nn in Spanish

The Spanish “n” sound differs from the English sound in that it is usually produced against the back of the upper teeth, instead of on the gum ridge above the teeth. In this respect it is similar to Spanish t and d. The correct articulation of n is not too difficult for English speakers, but there are a couple of combinations of n plus another consonant that create problems.

Exercise on the “nt” cluster

quantity cantidad Tonto tanto

lentil lente canto canto

antidote antidoto Tantalus tántalo

pinto pinto junta junta

Santa Monica Santa Mónica

The close yoking of nt in English in words like the ones above does not happen in the pronunciation of Spanish nt, where the n is clearly pronounced through the nose before the t begins.

The letter Yy in Spanish

The sounds represented by the y in Spanish have two variants which are obvious to the English ear because they are like two entirely separate sounds in English. The most common pronunciation is almost exactly like the English y sound, however, the pronunciation of the y can vary from something similar to the “zh” sound in French to something sounding very like the j sound in English. Note that sometimes the y sound is spelled with hi in Spanish (which almost always will use the standard “y” pronunciation rather than the “zh” variation).

In the English words below, either of the two words on each line begins with a sound that is equally likely to occur in the Spanish words (some of which aren’t really words, but just syllables to illustrate the pronunciation) in the right hand column.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish Y

yes	Jess	yeso
yellow	jello	hielo
yah	jaw	ya
yoe	Joe	yo
uke	juke	yugo
yearn	germ	verno
yabber	jabber	yaba
yea	jay	ye

Spanish intonation

There is a final “pronunciation” issue which frequently causes problems for English speakers. That is the issue of *intonation*; the rise and fall in pitch of the voice in speaking a phrase or sentence. The intonation of phrases in Spanish follows three main patterns. The exercises below are on these three patterns. Note that **Group I (falling pattern)** includes commands, declarative phrases, and some questions (those that begin with an interrogative word – *cómo* (“how”); *cuándo* (“when”), etc.) **Group II (rising pattern)** are all questions. **Group III (ending in a low level pattern)** are declarative, in the examples given mostly simple responses to questions.

Audio Exercise: The Spanish Intonation System

Repeat the phrases, paying particular attention to the intonation of each phrase.

Group I (falling pattern)

1	Venga acá.	12	¿Cómo le va?
2	Claro que sí.	13	¿Quiénes son?
3	Son las tres.	14	¿Qué le pasa?
4	Llega en avión	15	¿Cuándo llega?

5	No lo creo.	16	¿Cuanto cuesta?
6	No me importa.	17	¿Qué comemos?
7	Viene mañana.	18	¿De dónde son?
8	Llegó María.	19	¿Para dónde van?
9	Aquí se baila.	20	¿Por qué se fue?
10	¿Cómo está?	21	¿Por cuánto tiempo?
11	¿Dónde está?	22	¿A cuánto estamos?

Group II Rising Pattern

1	¿Ya se va?	7	¿Le gustó María?
2	¿Quiere café?	8	¿Leyó el diario?
3	¿Vino con usted?	9	¿Tienen otro?
4	¿Comieron ya?	10	¿Le paso la leche?
5	¿Tiene un lápiz?	11	¿Trajo su carro?
6	¿Se va conmigo?	12	¿Le gusta su trabajo?

Group III (Ending in a low level pattern)

1	Gracias, señor.	7	No. Muchas gracias.
2	Muy bien, gracias.	8	No viene entonces.
3	Si, señora.	9	Sí, papá.
4	No, señorita.	10	No, mamá.
5	No hay, hombre.	11	Adiós, señores.
6	Venga María.	12	Hasta mañana, señorita.

References

- [Tomzap's Spanish Pronunciation Key](#)
- [What is word stress?](#)
- [One Month Spanish conversational Spanish course](#)
- [Daniel Eisenberg's Reading Spanish](#)

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