

Spanish vowels

A,a (ah) *adiós, abuelo* [grandfather], *americano, caro* [expensive], *carro* [car]

E,e (eh) *educación, México, abuelo, americano, pero* [but], *perro* [dog]. This vowel sometimes subtly changes in “open syllables” [*bueno*], and the *buenos* in *buenos días* can sound almost like “bwaynos”—indeed, some phonetic systems give it as the equivalent sound, which it really isn’t. This is a good example of the difficulty of trying to phonetically spell one language’s sounds in another, and one of the reasons why a good role-model (instructor) is very important, particularly in the beginning of language learning.

I,i (called *i* Latín) (*ee*) *libro* [book], *información, billete* [bill], *adiós, americano*

O,o (oh) *libro, información, adiós, americano, pero, carro, oficial*

U,u (oo) *abuelo, uno, usar, bueno, utilidad*

Y,y (Called *li griega* (Greek *li*). Pronounced by most Spanish speakers in most cases like English “*Yy*”, pronunciation indistinguishable from the double *LI* (which until recently was considered a separate letter in Spanish). This is one of the major areas of regional pronunciation difference in Latin America.

Spanish speakers in southern South America, particularly Argentina and Uruguay, are famous for pronouncing *y* and *ll* with a sound similar to the “*zh*” sound in English.

Spanish Consonants

With some exceptions, Spanish consonants approximate the sounds of their English equivalents. For that we should be grateful. We will briefly discuss here only the exceptions, which cause enough problems.

B,b and **V,v** Pronounced exactly alike in Spanish, their sound depending on their position in a word. This gives rise to one of the most common spelling errors of Spanish speakers: confusing *b* and *v*. At the beginning of a sentence, as the first letter of a word to be emphasized, and following the letters *m* and *r*, very similar to the English “*b*” in *boy*, but not quite as explosive: *envidia* [jealousy], *en verdad* [in truth], *embajada* [embassy]. In all other cases, pronounced with a sound peculiar to Spanish, which is made by pronouncing the “*b*” in “*boy*” without the lips actually touching, allowing breath to escape: *es bobo* [he’s foolish], *me voy* [I’m leaving], *la vida* [life], *escribir* [write], *lavar* [wash], etc. At times this sounds to an English-tuned ear like “*v*”, at times like “*b*”, depending in large part on the spelling of the word and what we expect to hear. The sound of the English “*v*” is only heard in Spanish of the most affected, stilted kind; you should avoid it like the plague. To distinguish these two letters in speaking, which are both pronounced “*b/veh*”, Spanish speakers use “*b grande*” for *b* and “*v chica*” for *v*; alternatively they may say *b de burro* or *v de vaca*.

C,c Pronounced like “*k*” in English when followed by *a*, *u* or *o*; when followed by *e*, or *i*, pronounced as a sibilant - see below.

D,d Pronounced similarly to “*Dd*” in English at the beginning of a sentence, as the first letter in a word to be emphasized, or following *al*, *d*, *n*: *donde* [where], *caldo* [soup], *sendero* [path]. In all other cases pronounced similar to the English “*th*” in “*though*” “*lado* [side], *arder* [burn], *desde* [since], *dedo* [finger], *cada* [each, every]. Mispronunciation in these cases can be very confusing

to a Spanish speaker, because the “d” will sound like the Spanish *r*, and *cada* can be mistaken for *cara* [face], *todo* [all] for *toro* [bull], etc.

LI, ll (ehyeh) Until recently considered a separate letter of the alphabet, now treated as merely a double “L”. In some areas, particularly Argentina and Uruguay, pronounced similar to “j” or “zh” in English; in affected speech pronounced like “ly”. The most usual pronunciation, and the one we teach, however, is like the English “y”: *lleno* [full]; *llave* [key]; *bella* [pretty, feminine], *allá* [over there].

Ñ, ñ (ehnyeh) Unique to Spanish, this letter almost never occurs at the beginning of a word. Pronounced like English “ny”, but integrated into a single sound: *niño* [child], *baño* [bath], *señora*.

Q, q (kuh) Almost always appears followed by *u*, and invariably pronounced like “k” in English. Because the same “qu” combination in English has a very different pronunciation, this can be very confusing for some English speakers.

R, r (ehrrreh) This letter is the most confusing between Spanish and English because there is absolutely no similarity in the two languages in the sound(s) it represents. In many cases, the single *r* in Spanish (for the double *rr* see below) represents a sound similar to the “dd” in the English “ladder” when pronounced rapidly. If you pronounce “r” in the American English way, you’ll either not be understood, or will sound unintentionally funny. Either English or Spanish really should substitute something else for this letter, but deciding who should give it up and what to replace it with is probably beyond the scope of diplomacy.

rr We don’t show capitals for the double *r*, since it never appears at the beginning of a word. The double *rr*, and the single *Rr* at the beginning of a word or following the letters *l* and *n* is a sound similar to that of the single *r*, but produced rapidly, usually three times in machine-gun like succession. This is the so-called “trilled” *r*: *carro*, *Enrique*, *río* [river], *alrededor* [around]. It is important to use this sound appropriately, since failure to do so can change meanings: *caro* [expensive] > *carro* [car]; *pero* [but] > *perro* [dog]. Almost everyone can learn to make this sound with practice. A word of advice for those to whom it doesn’t come easily: keep trying, but don’t try to force the “trill” by consciously moving your tongue. Let the air that is being forced past your tongue do the work.

S, s; Zz; and C, c (when followed by *i* or *e*) are pronounced alike in Latin America as a soft, or unvoiced “s”. In some major dialects of Spain, *z* and *c* are pronounced with a sound similar to the English “th” of thought. If you learn this style of pronunciation, it is very important that you not make the mistake of pronouncing *s* with the “th” sound--this is a real attention-getter. The *s* in all dialects of Spanish is usually pronounced unvoiced, like the “s” in “sit”. There are some exceptions when the *s* appears before voiced consonants (*d*, *l*, *m*, *n*), in these cases the sound moves toward the English “z” sound. Using the “soft” *s* sound in these cases isn’t as big a mistake as using the “z” sound in other cases would be.