

Level: Elementary

Lesson 1 Pronunciation Part 1

Pinyin was introduced to China in 1955. Basically Chinese language has 7 major dialects, which are the Northern dialect (used by 73% of the population), the Wu dialect (7.2%), the Xiang dialect (3.2%), the Gan dialect (3.3%), the Kejia dialect (3.6%), the Min dialect (5.7%) and the Yue dialect aka Cantonese (4%). Mandarin aka Putonghua is what we're going to learn. It is based on the Beijing pronunciation, the Northern dialect and classical modern Chinese literature as written form. The pinyin is essential for acquiring the correct pronunciation.

The basic unit in the Chinese language is a character, and one character is one syllable. In English one word might have more than one syllable, for instance, "important" has three syllables which are "im", "por", "tant". A Chinese character is composed of an initial and a final, sometimes only a final. Initial resembles consonant in English, like "h" in "how", or "k" in "kitty". Final resembles the vowel, for instance "a" in "are", "o" in "no". Unlike in English and most languages, there are tones in Chinese, namely four tones and a light and short neutral tone. Most initials are voiceless, so a vowel is added to make them easier to be perceived. Only four initials m, n, l, r are voiced, which means you can still hear the sound without the vowel.

Basic finals :

a o e i u ü

a is pronounced with wide open mouth, like when you go to see the doctor and he/she wants to check your throat, and asks you to say "ahhhhh".

o is pronounced similarly as "all" in English, but you need to make your lips round as a circle.

e sounds like when a British person pronounces "er" in "her". Don't ever pronounce it as "eeeeeeee" in English!

i is the real "eeeeeee", it's like the "ea" in "read".

u is the "oo" in "moon", but your lips are more intense and tight.

ü is probably the most difficult one. It is similar to the same letter pronounced in German. If you have trouble making that sound, try to sound "i", keep that position and continue making a sound, then try to round your lips gradually as if you're giving someone a peck on the cheek. It does take some practice to get the right sound.

Initials :

Group 1 : b p m f + o

b is not the “b” in “bell”, but the “p” in “spell”.

p is similar to the “p” in “port”. It is aspirated, which means some air is pushed out when it’s pronounced. You can try putting a piece of thin paper in front of your mouth to see whether it moves when you make the sound.

m is similar to the “m” in “mood”.

f is similar to the “f” in “food”.

Let’s try some simple examples, you don’t have to remember the meaning but it would be cool if you can. Don’t worry about tones yet, just try to pronounce the initial with a simple final first.

bàba	dad	爸爸
pà	fear	怕
māma	mom	妈妈
fó	buddha	佛

Group 2 : d t n l + e

d is not the “d” in “dell” but the “t” in “still”. Pay attention to your tongue, in English it touches the gum close to your upper front teeth, but in Chinese it touches the roof of your month. So your tongue is a bit back.

t is almost the same as “d” except it’s aspirated.

n is similar to “n” in “ten”.

l is similar to “l” in “lesson”.

dà	big	大
tā	he/she/it	他/她/它
nǐ	you	你
lù	road	路

Group 3 : g k h + e

g is not the “g” in “girl “ but the “ch” in “school”.

k is similar to “k” in “kite”.

h is similar to “h” in “height” but it’s pronounced with more friction. It sounds close to the Scottish “loch” or the German “Buch”.

gē	elder brother	哥
kè	lesson	课
hē	drink	喝