

SPECIAL OPERATIONS LANGUAGE TRAINING I

Chinese



Module 1
Lesson 1-6

The US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School
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Module 1

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Sound & Script



Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will have a thorough understanding of the Chinese language pronunciation system “*Pinyin*”; to be able to differentiate the vowels from the consonants; to pronounce the vowels and the consonants individually; and to pronounce the syllables that consist of the vowels and the consonants. You will also be able to understand the tones and to recognize tone marks; to pronounce the syllables with specific tones; to understand and apply the “*pinyin* spelling rules”; finally, you will learn how to look up the Chinese dictionary using pinyin.

Pinyin – The Chinese Pronunciation System

- Understand *pinyin* organization and functionality
 - Identify and pronounce all vowels and consonants
 - Write and pronounce syllables consisting of consonant - vowel combinations
 - Understand tones and identify tone marks for four basic tones
 - Pronounce syllables (consonant - vowel combinations) marked with specific tones
 - Understand and recognize the neutral tone
 - Pronounce the neutral tone
- Follow *pinyin*-spelling rules

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Chinese Language Pronunciation

The Chinese language is the official language used in the People's Republic of China and in some countries and areas in East Asia. It is usually called Mandarin, or Zhongwen (中文), or Putonghua (普通话, common language in the mainland of China), or Guoyu (国语, national language in Taiwan). The Chinese language is the most spoken language in the world today. The very distinctive characteristic of the Chinese language is that it is composed of many individual characters; it is not an alphabetic system of writing as it is in English. These characters are also called square characters because each of them can fit into one square pretty well.

我 爱 妈妈。

I love mother.

我, 爱, 妈 are three Chinese characters.

The character 我 means I.

The character 爱 means love.

The characters 妈妈 mean mother.



Tip of the day

Usually, the Chinese language is printed in horizontal rows. The way you read the Chinese language is to read from top to bottom and from left to right, the same way that you read in English, but some old Chinese novels may still be printed in the vertical column format, which you have to read from top to bottom and from right to left. You may see some newspapers and magazines that have small articles printed in a vertical column format as well. You have to read from top to bottom and from right to left.

Understand *pinyin* organization and functionality

Pinyin (拼音) is the pronunciation system for transliterating the modern Chinese language with 25 European letters (the letter “v” is never used). Pinyin symbols are made of single letters or combinations of these 25 letters. The pronunciation of most single letters is similar to the pronunciation of the European counterpart, but there are notable differences. Take care to distinguish the Chinese pinyin symbols from English letters.

Pinyin (拼音) literally means, “putting sounds together to form new sounds.” All Chinese children learn pinyin after they start schooling in the first grade. Also, all non-Chinese-speaking people usually learn pinyin first when they start to learn Chinese as a second language.

In Chinese, each character corresponds to one syllable made of pinyin symbols. Chinese syllables consist of three elements: initial sound, final sound and tone. The initial sounds are consonants and the final sounds contain at least one vowel. Some syllables consist only of an initial sound or a final sound.

Going back to our first example, now we add pinyin symbols to the characters:

[Wo] for 我, [ai] for 爱, and [mama] for 妈妈.

| | | | |
|-----|------|---------|----------------------|
| [Wo | ai | mama] | - pinyin symbols |
| 我 | 爱 | 妈妈。 | - Chinese characters |
| I | love | mother. | |

Keep in mind that pinyin is just a tool to help you learn how to pronounce the Chinese characters. You need to remember how to pronounce the characters you learned, just as you do when you learn other languages. Once you have learned how to pronounce the characters, your main efforts should be focused on the usage of the characters. The reading materials for students in the third and up, in Chinese elementary schools, will no longer have pinyin symbols with the characters, because all students are expected to be able to read most common characters by the third grade. In other words, once you have learned how to read the characters, for example: 我, 爱, 妈妈, you should be able to read the characters without *pinyin*.

Pinyin symbols are usually written in lower cases, but the first pinyin symbol should be written in capital letters under the following situations: when it is used at the beginning of a line.

When it is used for people's names.

For example:

A person's name: Bái Méi 白玫. Bái is the last name and Méi is the given name.

When it is used for special nouns.

For example:

City's name: Běijīng, Shànghǎi.

Country's name: Měiguó, USA , Zhōngguó, China.

Special noun: Zhōngwén, 中文, Chinese language.

Identify and pronounce all vowels and consonants

In Mandarin Chinese, there are 21 initial sounds (consonants):

| | Unaspirated | Aspirated | Nasal | Voiceless fricative | Voiced fricative |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------|-------|---------------------|------------------|
| Labial | b | p | m | f | |
| Alveolar | d | t | n | | l |
| Velar | g | k | | h | |
| Palatal | j | q | | x | |
| Dental sibilant | z | c | | s | |
| Retroflex | zh | ch | | sh | r |

In Mandarin Chinese, there are 36 final sounds (vowels):

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 6 simple finals | a, e, i, o, u, ü. |
| 14 compound finals | ai, ao, ei, ia, iao, ie, iou, ou, ua, uai, üe, uei, uo, er. |
| 16 nasal finals | 8 front nasals: an, en, ian, in, uan, üan, uen, ün. 8 back nasals: ang, eng, iang, ing, iong, ong, uang, ueng. |

The initial and final sounds make a total of 57 basic sounds. Combinations of initials and finals, plus the special cases, result in over 400 possible combinations. Applying the four tones of Mandarin Chinese to this, we get a total of around 1,600 unique syllables.

Final Sounds (Vowels, 韵母 yùnmǔ)

Simple finals (single vowels) (单韵母 dānyùnmǔ)

| Mandarin Pinyin | English Equivalent |
|-----------------|---|
| a | As the “a” in “father,” “ar” in “bar,” “o” in “mother,” and “brother,” but lasts much longer. |
| o | As the vowels in “saw,” “all.” |
| e | As the vowel sound in “bird” and “sir”; as the vowel sound in “fur” and in “uh.” |
| i/yi | 1. As the vowels in “sit,” “it,” “machine”; as the vowel in “eve.” The spelling “yi” is used when there is no consonant in the beginning of a syllable. 2. When preceded by “c,” “s,” and “z” (dental sibilants), you get a sound like a mosquito buzzing (zii...). 3. In the syllables “chi,” “shi,” “zhi,” and “ri” (retroflexes), the entire syllables are pronounced as one retroflex sound. Pronounce all the letters of the syllable with your tongue curled back! |
| u/wu | As the vowel “o” in “too,” “woman,” “loop,” and vowel “u” in “flute.” The spelling “wu” is used when there is no consonant in the beginning of a syllable. |
| ü | As the German “ü.” Try to say “yeee,” keep your tongue exactly where it is and let the sound continue while you form your lips to the shape they’d have when you say “yuuu.” |

The following hints might help you to pronounce these vowels as well:

a is a central vowel. The tongue remains in a natural, relaxed position.

o is a rounded semi-high back vowel.

e is an un-rounded semi-high back vowel.

i is an un-rounded high front vowel. The tongue is raised higher than it would be to pronounce its counterpart in English.

u is a rounded high back vowel. The tongue is raised higher than it would be to pronounce its counterpart in English.

ü is a rounded high front vowel. To produce this vowel, first pronounce i, and then modify the shape of the mouth from not round to round.

It is very important to pronounce these six vowels well because they form compound vowels and they form pinyin syllables with consonants.

Exercise 1

Listen as your instructor pronounces the following simple vowels. Repeat after him/her.

Compound Finals (compound vowels) (复韵母 fùyùnmǔ)

Two or three vowels together make up compound vowels.

| Mandarin Pinyin | English Equivalent |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. ai | As the “ai” sound in “byes,” “bike,” “high.” |
| 2. ao | As the “ow” in “how,” “down.” |
| 3. ei | As the “ay” sound in “cake,” “say”; as the “ei” in “eight.” |
| 4. ia/ya | As the “ya” sound in “Mayan.” The spelling “ya” is used to replace “ia” when there is no consonant before “ia.” |
| 5. iao/yao | As the “ya” sound in “yowl,” that is the sound of “Ya,” followed by an English “w.” The spelling “yao” is used to replace “iao” when there is no consonant before “iao.” |
| 6. ie/ye | Similar to the English “ye,” as in “yes.” The spelling “ye” is used to replace “ie” when there is no consonant before “ie.” |
| 7. iou/iu/you | The spelling “iou” is never used, but describes the sound best. Pronounced as Pinyin “y” + the English sound “ow” in “go,” “note,” “row.” The spelling “iu” is used normally. The spelling “you” is used to replace “iu” when there is no consonant before “iu.” |
| 8. ou | As the “ow” sound in “go,” “note,” “row.” |
| 9. ua/wa | As an English “w” followed by a Pinyin “a.” The most probable English spelling of this sound would be “wah.” Do not pronounce this combination as the English “wa” sound in “water” or “walet”! The spelling “wa” is used to replace “ua” when there is no consonant before “ua.” |
| 10. uai/wai | English “w” + Pinyin “ai.” The spelling “wai” is used to replace “uai” when there is no consonant before “uai.” |
| 11. üe/ue/yue | Pinyin “ü” + “e.” “üe” is written as “ue” in the syllables “jue,” “que,” “xue” and “yue.” The spelling “yue” is used to replace “ue” when there is no consonant before “ue.” |
| 12. uei/ui/wei | The spelling “uei” is never used, but describes the sound best. The spelling “wei” is used to replace “ui” when there is no consonant before “ui.” |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| 13. uo/wo | Similar to the “wuo” sound in “war,” “quark.” The spelling “wo” is used to replace “uo” when there is no consonant before “uo.” |
| 14. er | “er” is a special sound composed of “e” and consonant “r.” This vowel can form a syllable by itself. The sound of “er” is very similar to the English word “are” sound, or like the “er” in “herd.” |



Exercise 3

Listen as your instructor pronounces the following 14 compound vowels. Repeat after the instructor.

ai ei uei ia ie iao ua uai ao uo üe ou iou er

Exercise 4

Pronounce the following sets of compound vowels along with your instructor.

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|
| Ai | ei | uei | ia | ie | iao | ua | uai | ao | uo | üe | ou | er |
| iao | iou | ou | ua | uai | uei | ei | ia | ai | üe | uo | ao | er |
| ai | ei | ao | ou | iou | ai | ia | ie | iao | iou | ou | uei | er |
| ua | uo | uai | uei | ei | iou | üe | ia | ai | iao | ao | uo | er |

