



# Phoneme similarities and differences in the Spanish and English languages

## Consonant Phoneme Similarities

In both languages consonant phonemes are categorized by three features. Phonemes are distinguished by the place of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing. The place of articulation is the location in the mouth where the phoneme is produced. The manner of articulation is how the air moves through the mouth and if our vocal cords are engaged to make a phoneme. If vocal cords are engaged, then that phoneme is voiced. If our vocal cords are not engaged that phoneme is unvoiced. All consonant phonemes are formed by obstructing the flow of air through the mouth in some manner.

## Consonant Phoneme Differences

The English language has 25 consonant sounds (phonemes). The Spanish language has 16-20 consonant phonemes. The English and Spanish language share 14 phonemes.

## Consonant Phonemes

- Are all closed (airflow is obstructed)
- Can be stops or continuants
- Can be voiced or unvoiced

Spanish words with /ñ/:  
niño, Español, mañana

Spanish speakers learning English may need explicit instruction in:

- Consonant digraphs: sh, th (voiced and unvoiced), wh, ph
- Initial sounds: kn, qu, wr, sk
- Final Sounds: ck, ng, gh
- Consonant blends (sílabas trabadas) that transfer across both languages: pl, cl, fl, bl, gl, pr, cr, fr, br, tr, gr, dr

### Consonant Phonemes

English only phonemes (black)  
Spanish only phonemes (red)  
Shared phonemes (highlighted)

|           |                        |  | PLACE              |                        |                      |                        |                     |                     |                  |     |
|-----------|------------------------|--|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----|
|           |                        |  | Bilabial           | Labio-dental           | Dental               | Alveolar               | Palatal             | Velar               | Glottal          |     |
| MANNER    |                        |  | Two Lips           | Lower lip, upper teeth | Tongue between teeth | Alveolar ridge, tongue | Tongue, hard palate | Tongue, soft palate | Larynx           |     |
| OBSTRENTS | Stop (stop)            | Cuts off airflow                                       | Voiceless          | /p/                    |                      |                        | /t/                 |                     | /k/              |     |
|           | (stop)                 |  | Voiced             | /b/                    |                      |                        | /d/                 |                     | /g/              |     |
|           | Fricative (continuant) | Narrow channel of airflow                              | Voiceless          |                        | /f/                  | /θ/                    | /s/                 | /ʃ/                 | /h/              | /h/ |
|           | (continuant)           |  | Voiced             |                        | /v/                  | /ð/                    | /z/                 | /ʒ/                 |                  |     |
|           | Affricate (stop)       | Combination of stop & fricative                        | Voiceless          |                        |                      |                        |                     | /tʃ/                |                  |     |
|           | (stop)                 |  | Voiced             |                        |                      |                        |                     | /dʒ/                |                  |     |
| SONORANTS | Nasal                  | Block airflow through mouth, passes through nose       | Voiced             | /m/ (continuant)       |                      |                        | /n/ (continuant)    | /ɲ/ (continuant)    | /ŋ/ (stop)       |     |
|           | Liquid (continuant)    | Tongue blocks middle of mouth, air passes around sides | Voiced             |                        |                      |                        | /l/                 | /r/                 |                  |     |
|           | Glide (continuant)     | Produced with little obstruction of the airstream      | Voiced & Voiceless | /w/                    |                      |                        |                     | /y/                 | /hw/ (voiceless) |     |

Adapted from IPA Chart, <http://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/ipa-chart>, International Phonetic Association, 2015.

### Additional Instructional Suggestions:

Spanish speakers may need additional instruction in:

- endings -ed (pronounced /d/ or /t/ or /ed/), -s (pronounced (/z/, /s/, /iz/ or /is/)
- Silent -e spellings
- R-controlled vowels
- Prefixes (prefijos) that transfer across both languages: re-, bi, tri-, pre-

### Vowel Phoneme Similarities

Vowel phonemes are classified by the way they are produced. All vowel phonemes are open, unobstructed sounds. All vowel phonemes are continuous and voiced sounds. Vowels are categorized based on the height of the tongue, the location of the tongue, and whether the tongue is tense or lax.

### Vowel Phoneme Differences

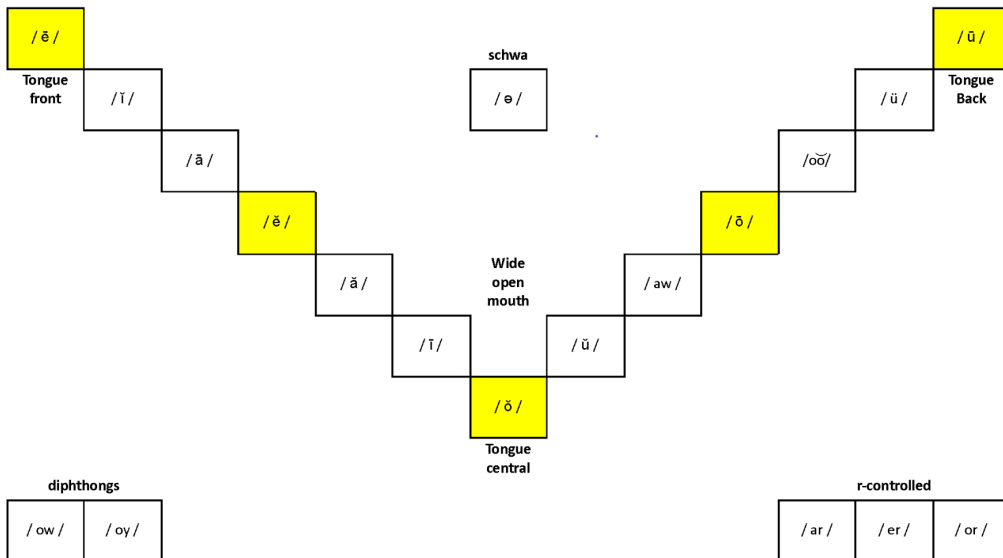
The English language has 19 vowel phonemes including 3 r-controlled vowels and schwa. In English the presence of consonants before or after the vowels will affect the way the vowel sounds are pronounced. The Spanish language has 5 vowel sounds. The 5 Spanish vowels are represented by consistent spellings, and it is common for two or three vowels to be together in words.

### Vowel Phonemes

5 Spanish vowels shared with English (highlighted)

Begins with smile

Ends with rounded mouth



Spanish Speakers may need explicit instruction in:

- Vowel digraphs: ou, ow, eigh, au, aw, oo

**Resources:**

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/resources>

Adapted from Moats, L.C. (2020). *Speech to print: Language Essentials for Teachers*.

### References:

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Ford, K., & Palacios, R. (2015). "Early literacy instruction in Spanish: Teaching the beginning reader." *Colorín Colorado*. <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/early-literacy-instruction-spanish-teaching-beginning-reader>

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