

Pronunciation Basics — T

语音入门 声调与拼音

01 Intro

Chinese pronunciation is written with the spelling of each syllable — **Pinyin** (a Roman-letter system) — plus the pitch of the sound, the **tone**. The basic idea is to **read Pinyin with its tone**. Once you have this, the conversations from Lesson 1 get much easier. It doesn't have to be perfect now; you'll practice it again in every lesson.

02 Tones

ā

1st tone

high and flat

á

2nd tone

rising

ǎ

3rd tone

dip low, then
rise (↘↗)**à**

4th tone

sharp fall

a

neutral tone

short and light

The same "ma" changes meaning with the tone:

妈 mā (mother)

麻 má (hemp)

马 mǎ (horse)

骂 mà (to scold)

吗 ma (question particle)

03 Vowels

Single Vowels	a	o	e	i	u	ü	Compound Vowels	ai	ei	ao	ou
								ia	ie	ua	uo
Front Nasal (-n)	an	en	in	un			Back Nasal (-ng)	ang	eng	ing	
	ün							ong			

※ These are the main finals. **ü** has no English equivalent: say "ee" (as in *see*), then round your lips into a tight circle while keeping the tongue still. After j, q, x the dots are dropped and it is written **ju • qu • xu**.

04 Consonants

Labials	b	p	m	f	Alveolars (tongue-tip)	d	t	n	l
Velars (tongue-root)	g	k	h		Palatals (tongue- surface)	j	q	x	
Retroflex	zh	ch	sh	r	Dental sibilants	z	c	s	

05 Tone Sandhi

Pronunciation Point

Sounds whose spelling stays the same but pronunciation changes

Some sounds keep their written tone marks but soften in actual speech. Learn these three common cases.

① 3rd tone + 3rd tone → 2nd tone + 3rd tone

When two 3rd tones come together, the first is read rising, like a 2nd tone. 你好 is written **nǐ hǎo** but actually read **ní hǎo** (the spelling does not change).

② Half 3rd tone

A full 3rd tone dips low and then rises (pitch movement: ↘↗). But when a **1st, 2nd, 4th, or neutral tone** follows, the final "rise" is dropped and the voice stays low as it moves to the next sound (↘). This is called the half 3rd tone.

※ It does **not** mean the sound of 老 disappears or gets swallowed by fast speech. 老 is pronounced clearly. What changes is **only the pitch contour** — the final rise is omitted. In the examples below, the first 3rd tone (老 lǎo • 请 qǐng • 你 nǐ) becomes a half 3rd tone.

① lǎo shī 老师

teacher (3rd + 1st). Keep "lǎo" low without rising.

② qǐng wèn 请问

May I ask (3rd + 4th). "qǐng" is a half 3rd tone.

③ nǐ men 你们

you, plural (3rd + neutral). "nǐ" is a half 3rd tone.

③ Tone changes of "不 bù" and "一 yī"

① bú shì 不是

不 is read bú before a 4th tone (不 bù + 4th tone).

② yí gè
一 个

— is read yí before a 4th tone.

③ yì qǐ
一 起

— is read yì before a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd tone. Alone or as an ordinal it is yī.

Practice tip: Exaggerate the tones at first — it helps them stick. Listening and imitating is the fastest way.

06 Practice

1 nǐ hǎo
你 好！

| Hello. (actually read ní hǎo)

2 xièxie
谢 谢。

| Thank you.

3 bú kèqì
不 客 气。

| You're welcome.

4 duìbuqǐ
对 不 起。

| Sorry (apology).

5 zàijiàn 再见！

| Goodbye.