

Guide to Cambodian Pronunciation

Sounds

While Cambodian is not a tonal language, it does have its challenges. The hardest part is learning proper pronunciation. This can be especially difficult for English speakers because there are many sounds in Cambodian that are not represented in the English language. Also, there are many subtleties to master. If you pronounce a word or a phrase incorrectly, other people may not understand what you mean to say. But here is the good news: our transliteration script will help you immensely, as you will see below. We cannot possibly provide a fully accurate phonetic reflection of each language sound, so students should use the compact discs for this book or a competent teacher when learning these sounds for the first time.

Vowels

Cambodian vowels can be short or long, and each vowel can have two sounds depending on the consonant used. Short vowels are clipped and cut off at the end. Long ones are drawn out. This book shows short vowels with a single letter and long vowels with double letters (“a” for short; “aa” for long).

Many of these vowel sounds have no comparable sound in English. While it is possible to find English words with vowels that are somewhat similar to the Cambodian vowel, the sound is not exactly the same. For this reason, it is imperative that the student uses the compact discs as a study aid to develop correct pronunciation. Vowels and consonants with little or no English equivalent are marked with an asterisk.

Simple Vowels

ɔ	like <u>ɔ</u> in <u>o</u> ppportunity	jɔŋg	- to want
ɔɔ	like <u>ɔɔ</u> in <u>A</u> ugust	dɔɔb	- bottle
a	like <u>a</u> in <u>a</u> pple	gat	- to cut
aa	like <u>a</u> in <u>c</u> at	dtaa	- grandfather
i	like <u>i</u> in <u>t</u> ip	jit	- close
e	like <u>e</u> in <u>b</u> et	jet	- heart
ii	like <u>ee</u> in <u>s</u> ee	dtii	- place
ey	like <u>ey</u> in <u>h</u> ey	dɛy	- land *
ə	like <u>ə</u> in <u>g</u> un	dəŋg	- to know
əə	like <u>əə</u> in <u>t</u> each <u>e</u> r without the r sound	jəəŋg	- foot, leg *
uu	like <u>uu</u> in <u>r</u> uler	guu	- is, to be *
o	like <u>o</u> in <u>n</u> ote	dtok	- table
oo	like <u>ow</u> in <u>sh</u> ow	goon	- child
u	like <u>u</u> in <u>f</u> lute	dtuk	- to keep
uu	like <u>oo</u> in <u>s</u> oon	juun	- to send
ee	like <u>a</u> in <u>l</u> ate	deek	- to sleep
ɛɛ	similar to ee (less common)	mɛɛn	- real *

Complex Vowels

The following diphthongs are combinations of the above vowels.

au	gaut - to be born	ao	gao - to shave
ia	rian - to study	ua	suan- park
ua	jua - to believe	ae	daek - metal
ai	dai - hand	ei	bprei - forest
au	jau - grandchildren	əu	nəu - at, present
oa	groan - better	ɛa	ləak - to hide

Consonant Combination Vowels

The following vowels have a final consonant sound.

om	gom - "don't"	um	bprɔ-jum - meeting
ɔm	jɔm - exactly	am	jam - to remember
oam	noam - to lead	eh	beh - to pick, pluck
ih	nih - this	oh	joh - to descend
uh	pdtuh - to explode	ɔh	gch - island
ang	dtang - to appoint	ɛang	rɛang - dry, lack of rain
ɛah	dteah - to slap	uah	bpruah - because
əm	rəm-pɛəb - excited	ah	bpah - to touch

Consonants

g	as in <u>g</u> old	gat - to cut
k	as in <u>k</u> iss	kam - to bite
ng	as in <u>ri</u> nging	ngiay - easy
j	as in <u>j</u> et	jeek - banana
ch	as in <u>ch</u> in	ch eh - to burn
ñ	as in el ni <u>ño</u>	ñam - to eat *
d	as in <u>d</u> oll	daɯ - to walk
t	as in <u>t</u> ender	toat - to be fat
n	as in <u>n</u> eed	nək - to miss
dt	in between the d and t sound	dtaa - grandfather *
b	as in <u>b</u> aby	baay - food, cooked rice
p	as in <u>p</u> retty	pia-saa - language
bp	in between the b and p sound	bpuu - uncle *
m	as in <u>m</u> oney	mian - to have
y	as in <u>y</u> ou	yiam - to guard
r	rolled like the Spanish <u>r</u>	rian - to study
l	as in <u>l</u> ove	luy - money
vw	a combination of the English v and w sound	vwaen-dtaa - glasses *
s	as in <u>s</u> and	siaw-pəu - book
h	as in <u>h</u> oney	haal - to dry

Note on Consonants

The /dt/ sound lies between the /d/ and the /t/. Similarly, the /bp/ sound is between the /b/ and /p/. However, the /vw/ sound is a combination of both sounds, and both are voiced in one double consonant sound. However, when this consonant is used as a final consonant, only the /w/ sound is pronounced. Unlike English, /ng/ can occur at the beginning of words in Cambodian.

Cambodian also has many initial consonant clusters that are not found in English. Some of these sounds are /jr/, /mk/, /pdt/, /dtr/, /tm/, /bd/, /km/, /kn/, and /gd/.

Other final consonant sounds will be represented as follows: /k/ for /g/ and /k/ final consonants; /b/ for /b/, /bp/, and /p/ final consonants; and /t/ for /d/, /dt/, and /t/ final consonants. The letter /y/ will also be used as a final consonant to represent a short /ii/ vowel sound. The /ñ/ final consonant combines an initial /y/ final consonant with a final /n/ final consonant.

Practice the Following Words

A. Words with long vowels:

1. jaan (ចាន) - dish, bowl
2. ruub (រូប) - picture
3. geeng (គេង) - to sleep, rest
4. bey (បី) - three
5. dtaam (តាម) - to follow

B. Words with short vowels:

1. gat (កាត់) - to cut
2. chob (ឈប់) - to stop
3. jet (ចិត្ត) - heart
4. dtək (ទឹក) - water
5. dtok (តុ) - table

C. Words with complex vowels:

1. dau (ដើរ) - to walk
2. pliang (ភ្លៀង) - rain
3. jaot (ចោទ) - to accuse
4. ruang (រឿង) - story
5. gae (កែ) - to correct

D. Words with consonant combination vowels:

1. noam (នាំ) - to lead
2. seh (សេះ) - horse
3. jih (ជិះ) - to ride
4. dtεang (ទាំង) - including, both
5. dam (ដាំ) - to plant, grow something

E. Words with double consonants:

1. gruu (គ្រូ) - teacher
2. tmeeñ (ធ្មេញ) - tooth
3. pleeng (ភ្លេង) - music
4. bdey (ប្តី) - husband
5. gbaal (ក្បាល) - head

Similar Consonant and Vowel Sounds

Correct pronunciation is critical in Cambodian and is one of the language's greatest challenges. Words with similar sounds can have completely different meanings. The length of the vowel is also very important. Try to get the vowel length correct. If you do not, it is easy for others to misunderstand you. Practice saying the following words.

Similar Sound, Different Meaning

1. dtaa (តា) - grandfather
- taa (ថា) - to speak
2. tom (ធំ) - big
- dom (ដំ) - pile

	dtum	(ទ្ងំ)	- ripe, mature
	tum	(ទ្ងំ)	- to smell
3.	jam	(ចាំ)	- to remember; to wait
	jɔm	(ចំ)	- exactly
4.	dtroo	(ទ្រូ)	- to hold, support
	dtroəw	(ទ្រូវ)	- correct; must
5.	bat	(បាត់)	- to lose, disappear
	bak	(បាក់)	- to break
	baat	(បាត / បាទ)	- bottom; foot; yes particle (male)
6.	bak jəəng	(បាក់ជើង)	- to break your foot
	baat jəəng	(បាតជើង)	- the bottom of your foot
	bot jəəng	(បត់ជើង)	- to go to the bathroom
7.	dtaam	(តាម)	- to follow
	dam	(ដាំ)	- to plant, grow
8.	gaat	(កាត)	- card
	kaat	(ខាត)	- to waste, lose
	gat	(កាត់)	- to cut

Short and Long Vowels

1.	jɔəŋg	(ចង)	- to tie, bind	jɔŋg	(ចង់)	- to want
2.	baat	(បាទ)	- yes (male)	bat	(បាត់)	- gone, lost
3.	gaat	(កាត)	- card	gat	(កាត់)	- to cut
4.	dɔəb	(ដប)	- bottle	dɔb	(ដប់)	- ten