

Notes on Transliteration and Tones:

Lao script is completely different from Roman script. Whereas it is not usually considered difficult to learn, it would take more than 10 hours of classroom study just to learn to write with Lao letters and subscripts. Instead, then, we use transliteration into English. After reviewing a number of more technical and comprehensive Lao language learning books, we have taken the liberty of devising our own version of phonetic charts for consonants and vowels used in Lao words. Again, this system was created to be as simple as possible (and risks being too simple), but it follows from our decision at the outset to make things in a short, basic course *basic*.

The three of us could not agree on features of this system, so we do not expect you to fully accept it. In fact, we recommend that rather than arguing points of distinction and representation, you add to our system or develop your own notations as you yourself hear and understand the sounds and write words down—the “whatever works for you” idea.

As for the five (some say six) tones, we have opted for not showing or teaching them at all. According to your interest, you may have to (and are welcome to) consult the teachers between classes, or learn the tones later. In the teaching process, we will naturally model tones in our pronunciation of Lao. You will hear them and notice differences, at least on occasion, and you may want to work out a code for indicating tonal qualities. But please try not to be bothered by them and understand that we will not give time away to mastery of tones. A good reason for this is that the Lao people themselves would probably consider it a waste of our precious time here. You will soon find that the Lao graciously accept—and even reward—shoddy-but-earnest pronunciation from foreigners. We feel you will do better just to say the words as they are spelled, come close enough, and learn as many as you can. In most cases, the context of your speaking will override misunderstandings from wrong tones.

Lao Consonants

Same basic sounds as in English unless marked in English word examples by “x”.

*Note: The “h” after consonants k, t, and p (shown below as **kh**, **th** and **ph**) indicates aspiration.*

CONSONANT	AS IN ENGLISH	LAO EXAMPLE (WORD INITIAL)	PRONUNCIATION FEATURES
g	go	gop (frog)	not used in word-final position
k	x	kaan (work)	like a shortened, “soft” /g/
kh	kiss	khian (write)	
ng	<u>si</u> ng	ngu (snake)	unlike English, appears word-initial too
j	juice	jep (hurts / smarts)	not used in word-final position
s	sit	sung (tall / high)	not used in word-final position
d	dog	dek (child)	
t	x	taa (eye / eyes)	between English /t/ and /d/; little aspiration
th	talk	thian (candle)	
b	bus	boht (church)	
p	x	paa (fish)	between English /p/ and /b/
ph	people	phii (ghost / spirit)	
f	farm	fang (listen)	not used in word-final position
m	meet	maa (come)	
n	new	nok (bird)	
l	like	laen (run)	not-used in word-final position
ny	x	nyaa (grass)	not used in word-final position
y	yes	yen (cool / cold)	
w	wet	wat (temple)	sometimes takes on slight /v/ quality
h	hot	hiin (stone)	

English sounds not found in Lao: /t/, /z/, /sh/ and /ch/

Lao Vowels

Same basic sounds as in English unless marked in English word examples by “x”.

Note: Dash (-) in long or short vowel sound column means there is no long / short version

SHORT	LONG	AS IN ENGLISH	LAO EXAMPLE	PRONUNCIATION FEATURES
a:		<u>a</u> bout (a-bout)	a:t (shut)	short (and at times stopped) “uh”
	aa	car	saam (three)	
i		sit	sip (ten)	
	ii	me	dii (good)	
eu:		x	peu:m (book)	short, tense version of long sound
	eu	x	seu (name)	like saying “good” while smiling
u:		x	kh <u>u</u> : (pail)	
	u	too, blue	mu (friend)	
e		pet, net	het (do)	
	ay	say, Ray	lot may (bus)	
ae:		cat	gae: (sheep)	
	ae	Latin (stretched)	taek (break)	
o		joke	phop (meet)	like a short “oh”
	oh	go, know	john (thief)	
aw:		x	jaw: (to drill)	
	aw	saw	maw (doctor)	
er:		x	ler:k (deep)	
	er	x	fer (noodle soup)	similar to Aussie “ <u>h</u> urt” (?)

Vowel Combinations

VOWEL SOUND	AS IN ENGLISH	LAO EXAMPLE	PRONUNCIATION NOTES
ai	Thai, lie, my	lai (many / very)	can be mid-range or long
ai:	x	kai: (near)	not in Engl. because of shortness
aow	how, cow	naow (to be cold)	
ao:	ouch! (if quick)	khao: (rice)	short vowel
aeo	like “mayo”	maeo (cat)	
eua	x	beua (bored)	/eu/ blended into /a/
euay	x	meuay (tired)	/eu/ blended into /ay/
ia	mania, Julia	bia (beer)	
io	Rio, geophysics	sii khio (green)	
iu	like name “Hugh”	hiu khao: (hungry)	/i/ + /u/
oi	toy, boil	joi (thin, skinny)	
ua	Kahlua	thua (beans)	/u/ + /a/
uay	x	mak guay (banana)	/u/ + /ay/
ui	like name “Louie”	tui (heavy, fat)	/u/ + /ii/