

OPEN & CLOSED VOWEL SOUNDS

(THE SECRET TO UNDERSTANDING
EUROPEAN **PORTUGUESE** NATIVES)



Practice  **Portuguese**

About This E-Book

Thanks for checking out this lesson! We hope you find it very useful.

This is part of a 3-part lesson series by Rui Coimbra & Joel Rendall of practiceportuguese.com. There is also a video that goes with this lesson, at practiceportuguese.com/vowels.

If you learn something new from this lesson, we'd love to hear from you in the comments at the above link! Feel free to share this lesson, (all we ask is for you to keep intact our logo and urls).

Obrigado!

- Rui & Joel

Our mission is to create quality European Portuguese learning tools for people around the world, of all ages.



The Secret to Understanding Portuguese Natives: Mastering Open & Closed Vowels

Why Focus on Vowel Pronunciation? (00:39)

Many Portuguese learners study vocabulary and grammar before arriving to Portugal, to find that they are unable to carry a simple conversation with the locals. Even if they know all of the words used in the conversation, their ears aren't yet trained to recognize them or speak them in the way they come up in day-to-day life.

A big part of this has to do with the oral vowel sounds, because as foreigners, we aren't yet used to distinguishing the subtle differences between the open, medium and closed vowel variations. European Portuguese has many more variants in the vowel sounds than other languages so we first need to train our ears to be able to understand and reproduce the new sounds.

Even Brazilian Portuguese is very different in this regard – foreigners often find it easier to understand Brazilian at first because the vowels sound much more open and clear. Continental Portuguese speakers seem to suppress the vowels and slur them together in a way that can make even a phrase of words you already know sound like something brand new.

How to Use This Lesson

Our hope is that this lesson will help you with these challenges. We carefully planned and edited the video and this outline to serve as an invaluable resource that you can use many times throughout your Portuguese learning rather than thinking that you will be able to internalize everything on the first viewing.

This information does exist in other places, but it's usually presented in complicated Portuguese terms aimed at linguistics and native speakers. We decided to record this in English. Despite the benefits of full immersion, this information becomes much more digestible when it's not explained in the same language you're still trying to get a handle on.

You may find yourself returning to this lesson many times, so we included chapter timecodes to help you skip to specific sections that are most relevant to your current Portuguese goals.

Beginners:

The first time you view this, we suggest that you just watch it all the way through without getting too caught up in the details (until you're ready).

If you're still early in your Portuguese learning, you can use this as an overview of some of these sounds that you can look out for as you progress in your learning.

Intermediate:

Once you're more advanced, we suspect you'll discover new tips that you didn't fully understand until now.

As for myself, (Joel, the Canadian co-founder), I didn't have the benefit of learning this quite as thoroughly in my Portuguese classes, even at the more intermediate B1 level. This is probably because:

- Parts of this information is complex and would require a lot of time to cover (which can be used for teaching grammar, conversation etc).
- In our classroom full of students from all over the world, we all had different sets of challenges that needed to be addressed. For example, a native speaker of an asian language may have a more difficult time with certain consonants that don't occur in their language, while the same sound may come more easily to an English or Spanish speaker. The teacher only has enough time to get everyone in the room speaking in a way that they can be decently understood, (not perfecting their accent).

If you use this lesson to discover and then practice some of these subtleties on your own, you can dramatically improve your European Portuguese accent, as your comprehension of the language when spoken at a native speed with varying levels of clarity.

Phonetics Vs. Phonology (02:15)

Phonetics studies how sounds are made, and phonology studies how they are used.

When we speak we produce sounds, each sound is a unit, and we use it to express and build our speech. Those basic units are called phonemes (*fonemas*), but we will just call them sounds.

Each sound has a graphic representation, that we use when we write. They are called graphemes or letters (*letras*). Assuming that we know how to write correctly, when we hear a word, we match it in our brain to its correspondent written representation. The sounds make us think of letters and that's how we think of words.

Written Letters Can Correspond to Multiple Sounds (2:48):

Sometimes the sounds we hear don't correspond exactly to the written word:

When you say "*homem*" (man), you only hear the "o", the "m", and a nasal sound that corresponds to "em". But because we know how to write we know that it corresponds to the 5 letters of the word "*homem*".

If life were simple, each letter would correspond to only one sound; the 26 letters in the portuguese alphabet would have 26 sounds. But what happens is that some letters correspond to more than one sound:

"c" (3:34)

- **c**arro [k]
- **c**into [c]

"x" (3:50)

- **ex**ame [z]
- tá**x**i [kc]
- **me**xo [ch]
- pró**x**imo [c]

The Same Sound Can Also Correspond to Different Letters (4:14):

[j] (4:18)

- **s**ar**g**ento vs **j**ogo

[z] (4:32)

- coisa vs vazio

Languages Sometimes Have Letters Are Not Pronounced, eg. "H" (4:44)

- humano
- horta

Tricky! This helps explain why words aren't always spelled the same way we hear them.

Phonetics

One of the things phonetics studies is the position and movement of the anatomy involved in the production of the sound, like the tongue, lips, palate and all the others.

Oral Vowels (5:23)

Nasal vs. Oral Vowels

- *Nasal vowels* are produced when air passes through the nose as well as the mouth.
- *Oral vowels* are produced with air passing through the mouth and not the nose.

Oral Vowels in Portuguese (05:44)

We have 14 vocal sounds, and all the other sounds are consonants. In European Portuguese we have the same vocal sounds that the Brazilians do, plus some extra ones.

All the vowels require the vibration of the vocal cords and what distinguishes them from the consonants is that there is no blockage to the passage of air when producing them.

The 14 vocal sounds are represented by only 5 letters:

- <a>, <e>, <i>, <o>, <u>

- This means that the some of these letters represent more than one sound. The opposite is also true: some sounds can be created by more than one letter.

The 14 vocal sounds are divided into 9 Oral and 5 Nasal. Today we will focus only on the oral vowel sounds, which are especially challenging for European Portuguese learners to master.

3 Traits for Producing Oral Vowel Sounds (06:46)

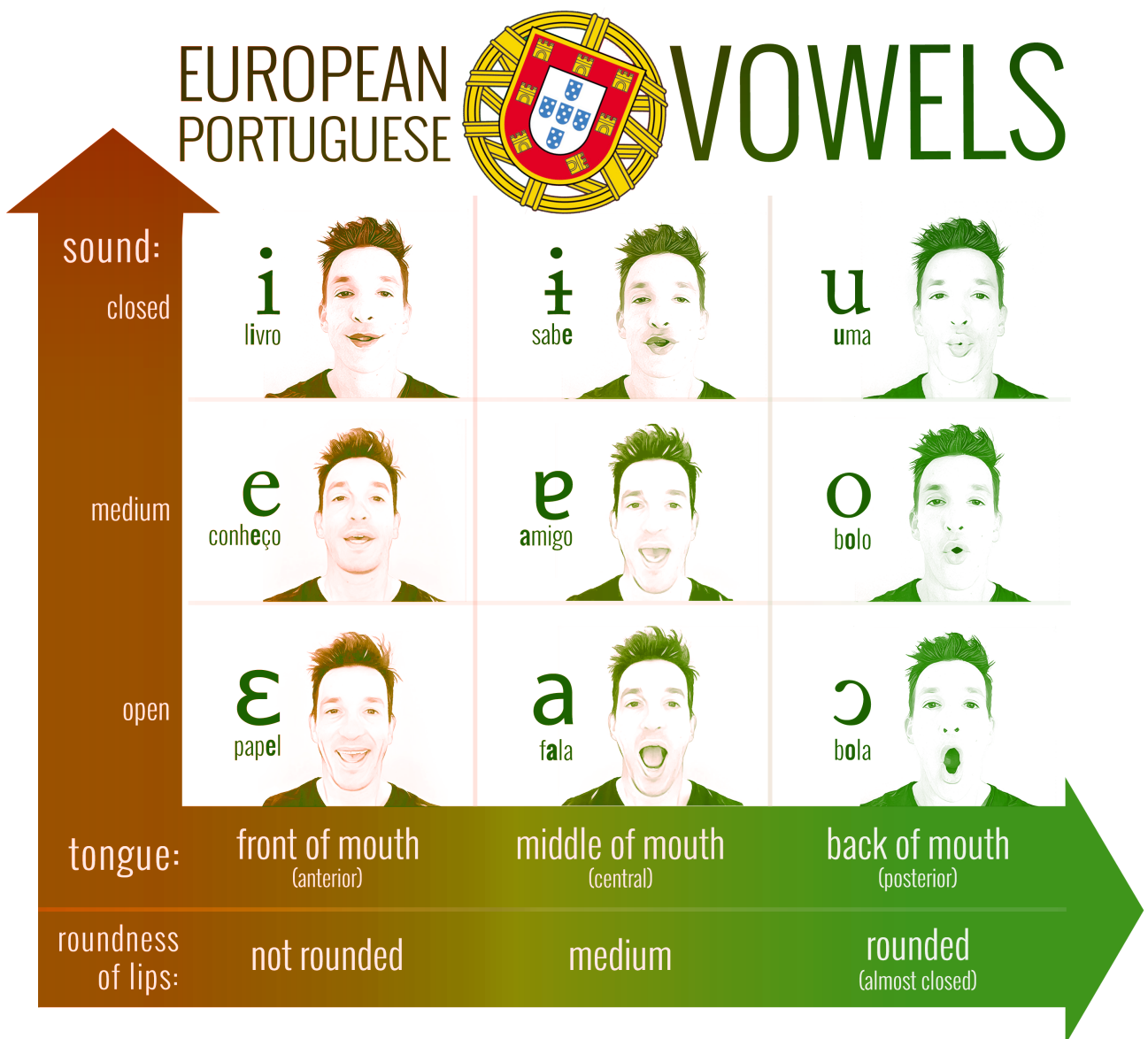
Oral vowels are produced by letting the air pass only through the mouth. They can be distinguished by how we move our lips, tongue and jaw:

1. The opening of the **jaw** can make the vowel sound more open, medium or closed.
2. The sound can come from the front or from the back of the mouth, determined by the position of the **tongue**.
3. The position and opening of the **lips** make the sound more rounded, like [u], or less rounded in the case of [i].

Demonstration of All Oral Vowel Sounds (video: 08:29)

Practicing With Our Interactive Diagram (video: 10:34)

Some Sounds Can Correspond to Multiple Letters (video: 12:00)



Stressed Vs. Un-stressed Syllables (12:41)

All words are made up of one or more syllables. Each syllable has one vowel sound, and may or may not include consonants. An easy way to think of syllables are the rhythmic "beats" that makes up a word:

- syl·la·ble

Just like in English, a Portuguese word will have one syllable that has a syllable that is more stressed than the others. That means that it is spoken with the most emphasis.

Throughout the lesson, we will underline the syllable in a word that gets the emphasis:

- carro

And we will **bold** the part of the word we want to bring your attention to. So if we are discussing the "o" at the end of this word, you'll see:

- carro

How to Tell Which Syllable To Stress (13:20)

If there is a syllable in the word that contains an accented character, then that one will usually be stressed.

- carácter

If there is no accented character, then it will often be the second last syllable of a word:

- carro

There are many exceptions. For example, the infinitive form of most verbs end with either "-er", "-ar" or "-ir", and the last syllable is stressed:

- Falar
- Fazer
- Servir

Vowels in Stressed Syllables (14:27)

Acentuadas	
[´i]	siló [ˈsilu]
[´e]	seló [ˈselu] (N)
[´ɛ]	seló [ˈselu] (V)
[´a]	telhá [ˈtɛλɐ]
[´a]	talhá [ˈtɛλɐ]
[´ɔ]	bolá [ˈbɔlɐ]
[´o]	bolá [ˈbolɐ]
[´u]	bulá [ˈbulɐ]

http://cvc.instituto-camoes.pt/cpp/acessibilidade/capitulo3_2.html

As you can see in this table, almost all oral vowel sounds can occur on a stressed syllable, with the exception of the [ɨ], which only occurs on an unaccented syllable.

Interestingly, the pronunciation of oral vowels on stressed syllables is very similar in Brazilian and European Portuguese.

Vowels Sounds in Stressed Syllables Can Change the Word's Meaning (15:09)

These vowel sounds that occur on stressed syllables are all "phonological", which means their pronunciation is especially important to conveying the meaning of the word.

In other words, if you can't distinguish between these sounds when you are speaking or listening to the language, then a different word with a completely different meaning could be interpreted.

Examples of words that change if the stressed syllable is pronounced differently:

- Bola [o] vs. Bola [ɔ]
 - Both are written the same, but their pronunciation completely changes the meaning of the word.
- Bela [e] vs. Bala [a]

Interesting Tip About Verb Conjugations:

It's common in European Portuguese to find examples of conjugations from the same verb tense that have the same written vowel, but different pronunciation.

Aside from the obvious difference at the end of the word, there is also a difference in the first syllable pronunciation, despite containing the same letters:

- Eu devo [e] vs. Ele deve [ɛ]
 - These are the first and third person conjugations of the verb "dever", which means "to owe".
 - Compared to the "e" in "devo", "deve" is pronounced with a more open vowel sound.

Is the Vowel Open or Medium? (16:30)

You probably noticed that some of these medium and open vowel sounds are pretty similar:

- [e] -> [ɛ]
- [o] -> [ɔ]
- [ə] -> [a]

To make things even more challenging, when the vowel is stressed and there is *no* graphical accent (eg. é ê ó ô), it's hard to know whether the vowel sound will be open or medium.

For example, the following two words are written the same, but have different meanings. It's the pronunciation of the **o** that changes the meaning:

- molho [o] = a bunch (of something)

- molho [ɔ] = sauce

Here are a couple hints we can use to help us determine whether a vowel will be open or medium. (Note that the following rules apply to *stressed* syllables):

If the word ends with "or", the o will always sound like [o] (17:55)

- amor - love
- calor - heat
- dor - pain

When the letter "e" is followed by... (18:19)

- lh: telha -> t[ɛ]lha
- nh: tenha - t[ɛ]nha
- i: queijo - qu[ɛ]ijo

...it will sound like [ɛ]

If the vowel appears before an " m" or "n", the vowel will not be open, but medium (19:18)

- cama [ɐ] - bed
- sono [o] - dream
- mente [e] - mind

Vowels in Un-stressed Syllables (19:37)

In the previous section, we focussed on what these oral vowels sound like on stressed syllables. Now we will explore how these vowel sounds change when they *don't* fall on a stressed syllable.

A very general rule is that when a written vowel appears on an unstressed syllable, it's pronunciation will be more more closed than on a stressed syllable.

Unstressed syllables is where we will find the most differences between Brazilian and European Portuguese pronunciation.

[ɨ] is the only closed sound that exists in European Portuguese and *not* Brazilian Portuguese. But since it occurs so frequently, this is a major factor that makes the two dialects sound so different.

Let's start off easy...

[i] / [u] (20:14)

These two vowels sound exactly the same whether the syllable is stressed or not. (They are already closed sounds to begin with when they appear on a stressed syllable, so they can't close any further in an unstressed syllable.)

[i]

The Letter "i" on a stressed syllable:

- **Ficar**

... has the same sound as on an unstressed syllable:

- **Filho**
- **Dívida**

Reminder: Stressed syllables are underlined, and the letter(s) of interest are **bolded**

[u]

Remember that the [u] sound (20:14) can sometimes be represented by an "o" as well as a "u". The [u] sounds the same on syllables that are...

stressed:

- Tua

as well as unstressed:

- Luar
- Cómoda
- Pato

The Letter "e" (21:51)

As we saw in the previous section, when the letter "e" falls on a stressed syllable, it may sound like either [e] or [ɛ].

When the letter "e" falls on an unstressed syllable, it will be pronounced with the closed [ɨ] sound.

- Selar
- Ómega
- Bate

Words That Start with "E" (22:32)

Even on unstressed syllables, an "e" at the beginning of a word will often be medium [e] or open [ɛ].

But if an "e" appears at the *beginning* of a word, it **will** only be pronounced as [ɨ] if it is followed by a "s" (which uses the phonetic [ʃ] sound).

- Estrada [ɨ]
- Estar [ɨ]

Case of the Missing [ɨ] (22:32)

It's especially common for Portuguese natives to suppress this [ɨ] sound completely in the 2 previous examples, or in the following:

- Come
- Sabe
- Meter

This gets challenging when you hear multiple words in a row that (should) contain [ɨ]:

- Bate depressa -> Batdepressa

This doesn't always happen, however. If another vowel follows the [ɨ] sound, the [ɨ] has to remain, otherwise it won't sound like the same word:

- Cear -> Car
- Passear -> Passar

What Do Brazilians Use If They Don't Have [ɨ]? (24:43)

For these situations in which European Portuguese would use [ɨ], a Brazilian speaker uses [i], making it sound like a written "i".

For example, instead of:

- ele sabe [ɨ] 🇵🇹

You would hear:

- ele sabe [i] 🇧🇷

The Letter "a" (25:24)

"A" only has two possible vowel sounds:

1. open [a], which occurs on stressed syllables

2. medium [ɐ], which can occur on both stressed **and** unstressed syllables:

- Casar
- Estômago
- Bota
- Casa

The Letter "o" (26:22)

On unstressed syllables, a written "o" will sound like [u].

- Porta -> **P**orteira

Just like we saw with [ɨ], often the sound [u] is *sometimes* suppressed in spoken conversation when it appears at the end of a word after a consonant:

- Obrigo
- Gosto

Careful: Just like [ɨ], a [u] must always be pronounced (and not suppressed) if followed by another vowel:

- Luar
- Toalha

Sometimes Extra Vowel Sounds Even Get Added! (28:35)

When 2 consonants appear together belonging to different syllables, a vowel sound is sometimes added when speaking, (because this makes it easier for Portuguese speakers to pronounce):

- Obter -> Ob[**i**]ter 
- Ob[**i**]ter 
- Captar -> Cap[**i**]tar 
- Cap[**i**]tar 

Quick Summary of Unstressed Vowels (29:43)

There has been a lot of information to take in so far, especially if many of these concepts are new to you. You should review this point of the video for a quick visual summary, but the following is a reminder of the most important rules to remember:

- In general, vowels on **unstressed** syllables become more closed compared to stressed syllables (as represented as the y-axis of our fancy diagram with Rui's face).
- A written "u" and "i" always sound the same on stressed and unstressed syllables.

The following sections review more examples as well as exceptions to these rules.

Stressed Vs. Un-stressed Vowel Examples (30:27)

The majority of non-stressed syllables become more closed (represented as the y-axis of the diagram).

- An "o" at the end of a word sounds has the [u] sound instead of the [o] or [ɔ] sound. Example: morto**o**.

- An unaccented "a" is read as [ɐ] instead of [a].
- An unaccented "e" is read as [ɨ] instead of [e] or [ɛ]

Vogais Tónicas		Vogais Átonas	
'l <u>iv</u> ro	[i]	li'vr <u>in</u> ho	[i]
'm <u>e</u> do	[e]	m <u>e</u> 'droso	[ɛ]
'b <u>e</u> lo	[ɛ]	b <u>e</u> 'leza	[ɛ]
's <u>a</u> po	[a]	s <u>a</u> 'pinho	[ɐ]
'p <u>o</u> rta	[ɔ]	p <u>o</u> r'teira	[u]
'f <u>o</u> go	[o]	f <u>o</u> 'gueira	[u]
'l <u>u</u> z	[u]	l <u>u</u> 'zeiro	[u]

http://cvc.instituto-camoes.pt/cpp/acessibilidade/capitulo3_2.html

In the diagram above, we have examples of all the oral vowel sounds. In the left column is an example of each vowel when it falls on a stressed syllable.

The right column shows a variation of the same word. Since the vowel we're focussed on no longer falls on the stressed syllable, most vowels become closed. (Remember that [i] and [u] stay the same whether the syllable is stressed or not.)

We go from a total of 7 stressed sounds to 4 unstressed sounds, because in 2 situations, 2 open vowel sounds correspond to 1 closed sound.

ALTURA ↓ PUNTO DE ARTICULAÇÃO →	ANTERIOR OU PALATAL	CENTRAL	POSTERIOR OU VELAR
ALTAS	í	ɨ	u
MÉDIAS	e	ɘ	o
BAIXAS	ɛ	a	ɔ

The diagram shows a vowel chart with three rows representing height (ALTAS, MÉDIAS, BAIXAS) and three columns representing articulation point (ANTERIOR OU PALATAL, CENTRAL, POSTERIOR OU VELAR). Arrows indicate the following relationships:

- From [e] (MÉDIAS, ANTERIOR) to [ɨ] (ALTAS, CENTRAL)
- From [ɛ] (BAIXAS, ANTERIOR) to [ɘ] (MÉDIAS, CENTRAL)
- From [ɛ] (BAIXAS, ANTERIOR) to [a] (BAIXAS, CENTRAL)
- From [o] (MÉDIAS, POSTERIOR) to [u] (ALTAS, POSTERIOR)
- From [ɔ] (BAIXAS, POSTERIOR) to [u] (ALTAS, POSTERIOR)

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Exceptions to Unstressed Vowel Sounds (32:14)

This section explores some exceptions to vowels that fall on **unstressed** syllables.

As you've learned by now, the vowel sounds usually close on unstressed syllables. But in the following cases, the vowel sounds will stay open or medium instead of closed.

"AL" and "EL" Stay Open (32:36)

- Salto -> Saltar
- Mal -> Maldade
- Relva -> Relvado
- Incrível

But not always! Fala -> Falador is an example of when the "a" closes as expected: [ə]

This is because the "a" and the "l" that follows it belong to 2 different syllables.

"OL" Stays Medium [o] (33:33)

- Solta -> Soltar
- Volta -> Voltar
- **O**luveira

(But not always! cola -> colado is an example of when the **o** closes as expected, [u])

"ai" and "au" Stay Open, [a] (34:11)

- Causa -> Causar
- Caixa -> Caixaote

"ou" and "oi" Stay Medium, [o] (34:34)

- Touro -> Tourada
- Louro -> Alourado
- Oito -> Oitavo

Words Ending With "er" Stay Open, [ɛ] (34:50)

- revólver
- cadáver
- líder

Words Starting With "e" or "o" Don't Close (35:14)

...and instead are pronounced either closed or medium.

The "e" will *not* be closed [ɛ]

- **E**rnesto
- **E**lisa

The "o" will *not* be closed [u]

- **O**perário
- **O**lhar

Special Suffixes (35:55)

If the word has one of the suffixes "-zinho", "-zito", "-zão" or "-mente" added to it, the stressed vowel in the *original* word remains open or medium (and not closed).

- Devagar -> Devagarzinho
- Papel -> Papelzinho
- Papel -> Papelzão
- Seca -> Secamente
- Pobre -> Pobremte