

# A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

Kristin Lems

## About this Column

In any language, diphthongs need to be reckoned with, but teaching diphthongs to learners of English as a new language requires greater insight and special skills. In this column, we take a look at English diphthongs, why they matter, and how they might be best handled when teaching English language learners.

## English Diphthongs for English Learners: The Same but Different

### An Irritating Word

Before digging into their content and use, let's admit it: the word *diphthong* is a bother both to pronounce and spell. The only other word I can think of with a “phth” spelling is *diphtheria* (an unpleasant word I remember because my father almost died from it during World War II). Surprisingly, the etymology of the word, from Greek, does not split the *ph* from the *th* as we would hope; rather, it has two morphemes: “di” meaning “two,” and “phthongos” for “voice or sound” (or in Greek letters: φθόγγος; Mounce, 2026).

However, the etymology reminds us that we are referring to *sounds*—specifically, two sounds that are created in the mouth while producing what is considered a single vowel. If you look at your mouth in the mirror while producing a vowel with a diphthong (try the list of diphthongs below), you will see that the position of your mouth, lips, tongue, and even your cheeks changes when you move from the first sound to the second one. A “pure” vowel (or *monophthong* to be fancy and really erudite) does not require the mouth position to change. Instead, the mouth

just releases air in one position, in a “steady state,” as it is described in the studysmarter UK teaching site (“Monophthongs,” 2026).

Because they are part of our mother tongue, we do not consciously notice diphthongs when we hear them; we also do not struggle to pronounce them because those skills are part of our “mother lode.” As we move into literacy, however, diphthongs become more important for spelling, especially because English, an opaque orthography, has so many spellings for the same vowel sounds (Lems et al., 2023). The spelling for those sounds differs as they appear in different writing systems, however, and this makes a difference in the way we teach diphthongs to English language learners.

### The English Diphthongs

Most sources cite eight English language diphthongs (Roach, 1998; also see “Complete Guide . . .,” 2026). I am adding “long E” to make nine because even though the movement from the first sound (“short I”) to the second (“long E”) is not as perceptible to native English speakers, to speakers from languages with a “pure E” (like Italian or Spanish), the two different sounds are really obvious. Here are the English diphthongs with some of the ways they can be spelled:

Long A – *day, rain, break, gave, weigh*

Long I – *try, light, tie, mine, I*

Long E – *see, flea, me, key*

Oy – *boy, coin, voice*

Au – *now, town, house*

Long O – *go, slow, boat, home*

R controlled long E – *near, here, pier, weird*

R controlled long A – *hair, bear, care*

R controlled long U – *tour, poor, sure*

Just to make it a little more fun (exasperating!) for teachers, the first three diphthongs in the list, “long A,” “long E,” and “long I,” have another feature. When the last sound of a word with that diphthong is L, it adds an extra syllable. That’s because bringing the mouth down to the L sound makes the difference between the first and second vowel sound much more noticeable. For example:

| <u>1 syllable</u> | <u>2 syllables</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| sell              | sail               |
| still             | style              |
| fill              | feel               |

Diphthongs exist in other languages, too, but we will focus on English and contrast the English diphthongs with how they are represented in Spanish since the majority of ELLs in Illinois (and the United States) speak Spanish as a mother tongue.

## ***English Diphthongs Spelled in Spanish***

As we see from the examples of the English diphthongs, they can be spelled in many different ways. In fact, sometimes an English diphthong is spelled with only one vowel (e.g., the word “I”). However, in many languages, those two different sounds are always represented by two different letters. Spanish is one of those languages. The following are Spanish words that match or are close to the sounds of English

diphthongs. In all but one case you will see that the word is spelled with two vowels, not one:

Long A – *reina, rey*

Long I – *caído, bailar, vaya*

Oy – *oigo, soy*

Au – *Laura, autor*

Long O – *todo, los*

R controlled long E – doesn’t exist; closest sound is *decir*

R controlled long A – doesn’t exist; closest sound is *placer*

R controlled long U – doesn’t exist; closest sound is *amor*

To summarize, even though English and Spanish have the same written vowel letters in their alphabet, the Spanish spellings for these sounds do not use the same vowels as the English ones. When we know this and see how the Spanish spelling represents these sounds, we have a much better understanding of the developmental spelling of Spanish English language learners. Their spelling will not follow the same trajectory as native English speakers (Zutell & Allen, 1988). This is equally true for learners in a dual language, bilingual, or ESL class setting so long as they have some exposure to their first language writing system.

## **Confabulating Features**

Across online sources, there are inconsistent definitions of which vowel sounds are diphthongs and which are not. One person’s diphthong is another person’s nuanced pronunciation, not enough to really call it a second vowel, such as the case of the “long E.” And what constitutes a syllable is also not perfectly clear. If the two sounds are a “glide,” is it not a syllable, which is often called a “beat”?

It would be wonderful for teaching pronunciation if a spelling pattern could tell learners

that a word has a diphthong, but the spelling patterns in our irregular, opaque English are not an indication of a diphthong.

As a final head scratcher, the always fastidious Oxford Reference of the *Oxford Dictionary* gives guidance about Received Pronunciation (RP) of English (Oxford Reference, 2026) and has five words it considers to be *triphthongs* (try to pronounce that!). Of course, those may not be triphthongs in the American English dialect.

By the end of this, you probably only want one kind of thong: the one for the beach. Nevertheless, you may find this small corner of English knowledge illuminating for your teaching of spelling, pronunciation, or listening comprehension with English learners. I found it shocking, in the best way, when I learned about diphthongs in my TESOL linguistics classes and have kept them in mind ever since!

## References

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## About the Author

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Monty Vaz, "The Quiz"