

VIETNAMESE FOR SOCIAL LIFE

Foundations

Tiếng Việt Nền Tảng

Six tones, one Latin alphabet, and the pronoun system that decides whether you sound like a stranger, a friend, or **someone she might fall for.**

LESSON 0 OF 6

01 How Vietnamese sounds Sáu thanh điệu

Vietnamese is a **tonal** language: the same letters can mean six different things depending on the pitch you ride on the syllable. This is the one thing worth real practice — and the one thing that makes locals light up when a foreigner gets it close.

The classic minimal pair is the syllable **ma**. Same spelling, same mouth — only the tone changes, and the meaning swings wildly. Say them out loud:

The six tones ma · mà · má · mả · mã · mạ

ma <i>ngang (level) — ghost</i>	mà <i>huyền (falling) — but/which</i>	má <i>sắc (rising) — cheek/mum</i>	mả <i>hỏi (dipping–rising) — tomb</i>	mã <i>ngã (broken/creaky) — horse/code</i>
mạ <i>nặng (heavy/glottal) — rice seedling</i>				

tone	mark	sounds like	shape of the pitch
ngang	(no mark)	flat, mid	Hold one steady pitch, like humming a single note.
huyền	à — low, falling	grave accent	Start low, sigh downward. A tired "ohhh."
sắc	á — sharp, rising	acute accent	Lift up quickly, like asking "huh?"
hỏi	ả — dip then rise	hook above	Dip down, curl back up. A doubtful "reaaaally?"
ngã	ã — broken, creaky	tilde	Rising with a catch in the middle. Hardest one.
nặng	ạ — short, heavy drop	dot below	Cut it off sharp and low, glottal stop.

INFO – NORTH VS SOUTH

There are two big accents. **Hà Nội (Northern)** keeps all six tones crisply distinct and pronounces **d/gi/r** as a "z" sound. **Sài Gòn (Southern)** merges **hỏi** and **ngã** into one tone, softens final consonants, and says **d/gi/r** as a "y" sound (so **rồi** sounds like "yoy"). Pick the region you'll spend time in and copy the locals — both are correct.

TIP – DON'T FREEZE ON TONES

Context carries most of the meaning. Nobody thinks you said "ghost" when you ask for the bill. Aim for the right tone, but if you miss, smile and repeat — your **effort** is the charm, not perfection.

02 The script is on your side **Chữ Quốc Ngữ**

Good news: Vietnamese is written in the **Latin alphabet** — a system called Quốc Ngữ. You can read it on day one. The catch is that the marks aren't decoration: they carry both tone and vowel quality.

LETTER	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
đ	<i>d (as in "do")</i>	the "d" with a bar	Plain d (no bar) is a "z" in the North, "y" in the South.
ơ	<i>uh (as in "sir")</i>	the curl vowel	Different vowel from plain o .
ư	<i>uu (lips spread, no rounding)</i>	unrounded "oo"	Smile and say "oo" — that's it.
ê	<i>ay (as in "café")</i>	closed e	Plain e is more like "eh".
ô	<i>oh (as in "go")</i>	closed o	Plain o is more open, "aw".
nh / ng	<i>ny / ng (sing)</i>	soft consonants	"ng" can start a word — say "singer" without the "si".

CULTURAL NOTE – WRITTEN MARKS MATTER

When you text on Zalo, many young Vietnamese drop diacritics ("anh thich em" instead of "anh thích em") and decode it from context. You can read those messages, but write **with** the marks when you can — it reads as careful and respectful, like spelling words correctly.

03 The pronoun system Hệ thống đại từ

This is the headline feature of social Vietnamese — and your secret weapon. There is no neutral "I/you." Instead you choose words based on the **relative age and gender** of the two people talking. Get this right and you instantly sound like an insider.

As a man, you will most often be **anh** (older brother) when speaking to a woman around your age or younger. She becomes **em**. That single pairing — **anh ↔ em** — is the heartbeat of friendly, then flirty, then romantic Vietnamese.

WORD	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	WHEN TO USE
tôi	<i>toy</i>	I (neutral/formal)	Safe, slightly distant. Good for strangers, business.
mình	<i>ming</i>	I / we (soft, casual)	Warm and friendly without claiming an age role. Great early on.
bạn	<i>ban</i>	you (friend)	Neutral, peer-to-peer, no romance implied. Your safest "you" early.
anh	<i>ahn</i>	older brother — also "I"/"you" to a guy	You, the man, to a younger woman. Or "you" to an older man.
em	<i>em</i>	younger one / sweetheart	A younger woman — or how she refers to herself with you.
chị	<i>chee</i>	older sister	A woman clearly older than you. Respectful, not romantic.

CULTURAL NOTE — ANH ↔ EM IS A SOFT CONFESSION

Calling a woman **em** and yourself **anh** isn't just grammar — to a peer it leans **warm and a little romantic**. Many couples flirt simply by sliding from **bạn/mình** into **anh/em**. So: start with **mình/bạn** to be safe; move to **anh/em** when there's a spark, and watch her smile. If she starts calling you "anh" first, that's a green light.

WARN — READ THE AGE

If a woman is clearly older than you, calling her **em** can read as presumptuous. When unsure, use **bạn** or just ask her age politely (it's normal here). Calling an older woman **chị** shows respect; she'll often invite you to switch to **anh/em** if she wants to.

04 Survival phrases & backchannel Câu sống còn

Ten phrases that carry you through any first encounter, plus the little sounds that prove you're **listening**. Vietnamese conversation is full of these tiny acknowledgments.

VIETNAMESE	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
Xin chào Xin (polite) chào greet	<i>sin chow</i>	Hello	Universal, polite. Drop "xin" with friends.
Cảm ơn Cảm feel ơn favour	<i>kahm uhn</i>	Thank you	Add nhieu ("nyew") for "thank you very much."
Xin lỗi Xin (polite) lỗi fault	<i>sin loy</i>	Sorry / excuse me	Also gets attention politely.
Không sao Không no sao matter	<i>khong sao</i>	No problem / it's okay	Endlessly useful, very relaxed.
Dạ / Vâng Dạ yes (South) Vâng yes (North)	<i>yah / vung</i>	Yes (polite)	Dạ = South, vâng = North. Softens everything.
Bao nhiêu tiền? Bao nhiêu how much tiền money	<i>bow nyew tien</i>	How much?	Markets, drinks, taxis.
Tôi không hiểu Tôi I không not hiểu understand	<i>toy khong hew</i>	I don't understand	Say it with a smile and a shrug.
Nói chậm lại Nói speak chậm slow lại again	<i>noy chum lai</i>	Please speak slower	Add được không? ("dook khong") = "can you?"
Tên tôi là...	<i>ten toy la</i>	My name is...	Your opening line in Lesson 1.

VIETNAMESE	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
Tên name tôi my là is			
Hẹn gặp lại	<i>hen gap lai</i>	See you again	Warm goodbye that leaves a door open.
Hẹn appoint gặp meet lại again			

Backchannel – the sounds of listening Tiếng đệm

VIETNAMESE	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
Ừ / Ờ	<i>uh / uhh</i>	Yeah / mm-hm	Casual "yes." Use with peers, not elders.
Thế à?	<i>tay ah</i>	Oh really? (North)	Shows you're following along.
Thế so à (question)			
Vậy à? / Vậy hả?	<i>vay ah / vay ha</i>	Oh really? (South)	Same energy, southern flavour.
Vậy so à / hả (question)			
Thật không?	<i>that khong</i>	Seriously?	Playful surprise — great in flirty banter.
Thật true không (question)			

TIP – YOUR UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

A foreigner who tries even three words of Vietnamese is genuinely charming here. Locals are forgiving, delighted, and generous with help. Lead with **sincerity and effort** — it beats fluency every time, and it's the throughline of this whole course.