

BeingAfrican, LLC Curriculum-Lesson 8

Objectives

1. To learn and understand the pronunciation of phonetic sounds in Bemba.
2. Practice sounding out the phonetic sounds using some words.

The Bemba language uses the same letters of the alphabet as English. Before learning to make sentences in Bemba, you need to know about the building blocks.

VOWELS

Definition: Vowel = A sound made by allowing air to flow freely through the mouth and throat. Apart from “O” vowels are pronounced differently in Bemba, compared to English: Five Vowels:

A	E	I	O	U
----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

While the sound of a vowel can change in English, it does not change in Bemba. As an example, in English the “E” sound is different in the word “End” compared to the word “English.” This does not happen in Bemba. This makes it much easier to read Bemba words.

Double Vowels

Bemba is a very musical language. Some words change their meaning merely by the way they are pronounced. The vowels are drawn out to make a different sound. A caret is used to show such vowels. An alternative way is to write the vowel twice to denote the drawn out sound.

â (aa)	ê (ee)	î (ii)	ô (oo)	û (uu)
Aa	Ee	Ii	Oo	Uu

Examples of Bemba words using the double vowels:

â (aa)	ê (ee)	î (ii)	ô (oo)	û (uu)
Langa	Leenga	Fiimba	Boomba	Fuuma
Show	Draw	Cover	Be wet	Spray

CONSONANTS:

Definition:

A consonant is a sound made by the partial or total obstruction of air flow in the mouth and throat. This can be done with the lips (e.g. “B”), the teeth (e.g. “T”), the tip of the tongue or the back of the tongue (e.g. “K”).

- There are no Bemba words that use the letters J , Q, R, V, X, or Z.
- The Bemba alphabet is different in another way; it contains a unique letter “ŋ” . To make life easier when typing and writing, this letter can be represented by “N’g”. It is pronounced “n’g” as in the English word “singer” (soft “G”). The good news is that there are just a small number of words that use this special character sound.

Examples:

Ng’anda (Nganda)	Ng’wena (Ngwena)	Ng’uni (Nguni)	Nang’ana (Nang’ana)
House	Crocodile	Honey Bird	Be Lazy

Other special consonant features:

B – The letter “B” is a soft sound in Bemba. E.g.

Bowa	Bomba	Kabwe
Mushroom	Work	Stone

- In everyday usage, you will hear the “B” sound used as a hard sound, e.g. in describing the language as “Bemba” or in pronouncing the name “Banda.” These are adapted sounds and are not original Bemba sounds.
- **C** – In English, the letter “C” can be a soft sound (e.g. “Church” or a hard sound (e.g. “Candle.” In Bemba, it only exists as a soft sound.
- **D** – The letter “D” only exists in combination with a preceding consonant,

Example

Ndeya	Ndusha
I am going	Bile

***Note: There are no Bemba words that start with the letter “D.”**

- **G** – As for the letter “D”, the letter “G” exists only in combination with a preceding consonant and there are no Bemba words starting with the letter “G.”
- **“Hanging” Consonants:** Most Bemba words end with a vowel. As more foreign words are incorporated into

the language, you come across adapted words that end with a consonant. The Bemba tend to finish the word off with a vowel.

Examples:

Golf becomes Gofu	Gofu
Salad becomes Saladi	Saladi
Scarf becomes Shikafu	Shikafu
Book becomes Buku	Buku
Abigail becomes Abigelo	Abigelo
Bell becomes Belu	Belu
Jam becomes Njamu	Njamu
Queen becomes Kwini	Kwini
Bus becomes Bashi	Bashi

SYLLABLES

Definition:

A syllable is made up of letters in a word that are pronounced as one unit

Features:

Syllables can be formed by the combination of a consonant and a vowel.

Examples:

BaBa	BeBe	BiBi	BoBo	BuBu
-------------	-------------	-------------	-------------	-------------

- The sound of the vowel does not change.
- Syllables can be formed by a combination of two consonants and a vowel.

Examples:

ChaCha	ChaChe	ChiChi	ChoCho	ChuChu
---------------	---------------	---------------	---------------	---------------

- Syllables can be formed by a combination of three consonants and a vowel.

Examples:

MfwaMfwa	MfweMfwe	MfwiMfwi	(Mfwo)	(Mfwu)
-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	---------------	---------------

- Syllables can be formed by a combination of vowels

Note that vowels, alone, can also make syllables.

Reading Exercise:

For words you are not sure how to pronounce, identify the vowels in the word. Say the vowels out loud and then mix each one with the consonant(s) that come before the vowel. e.g. In “Chibale”, the vowels are “i”, “a” and “e”:

- Make the “i” sound and then mix it with the “Ch..” sound.
- Next, make the “a” sound (there is only one way to pronounce “a” in Bemba) and then mix it with “b” (soft sound for “b”).
- Finally, make the “e” sound and then mix it with the “L” (once more, there is only one way to pronounce the “e” in Bemba).

Look up some words that challenge your pronunciation and break them up in the same way. You will find it easier to feel your way through each word.

This knowledge of vowels, consonants and syllables forms an important part of the foundation for the forthcoming lessons on How to Construct Sentences in Bemba.

E.g Shalenipo (Bye) - Shalenipo

Vocabulary Bank

Practise reading these words out loud as guided by the phonic sounds learnt.

Lepula	Tear
Makashi (Shisala)	Scissors
Pakati	Center
Imito	Ashes
Tontokanya	Think
Pona	Fall
Senda (poka)	Take
Isula	Open
Ipusha	Ask
Kabwalala (Sakala)	Thief
Itila	Pour

Reference

Mukosha, c., 2010. *About*. [online] Kitwe Online. Available at: <<https://kitweonline.com/about>> [Accessed 8 June 2021]