

Talking to People Where Language is a Barrier

Guest Author

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Why Work on My Accent?

Whether you speak with a foreign accent or regional dialect, it can impact your job performance and affect the way you are perceived by customers, co-workers and employers. Although the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission prohibits discrimination on the basis of national origin, a survey done by the General Accounting Office of the US found that accented job applicants were treated unfairly 31% more times than unaccented job applicants .

Many American listeners are inflexible or impatient with accented speakers. Some “tune out” a speaker who doesn’t sound like people they know. Additionally, a person’s accent may stand in the way of a job promotion and may hurt communication on the job. Although it is difficult to eliminate an accent completely as an adult, it is possible to minimize it in certain speaking situations while still retaining one’s native culture and dialect.

Common Mistakes of Accented Speakers

Many non-native English speakers have learned to talk softly, reduce their mouth opening and even put their hands in front of their faces because they are embarrassed or have gotten criticized for their speech. Some will speak faster, hoping to “jump over” the sounds that they cannot pronounce. All of these further the miscommunication. Many avoid public speaking situations.

It is best, when faced with a situation where someone has trouble understanding you, to speak slowly and look directly at the person. If on the phone, do not try to shout, but speak slowly at a normal conversational level. Try to re-word what you are saying if the listener is unable to get your meaning. If all else fails, spelling is a great assist.

Skills Needed to Work on Your Accent

- One must be able to speak at a conversational level of English before working on his accent.

This usually means speaking the language for a minimum of four years, and sometimes, seven years to become fluent. If a person is not at this level, it is best for him or her to learn the basics of English through an ESL class or through an English coach.

- One must be extremely motivated. If the individual is working on accent only because someone is forcing the issue, the changes the person will make are likely to be minimal.
- The individual must speak English as much as possible throughout the day. Those who speak their native language at home and with friends and only speak English on the job have the most problems in permanent improvement.

Where to Get Training

Look for a certified Speech/Language Pathologist who has been trained in Accent Modification. Speech pathologists are trained to listen for and correct subtle variations in sounds and melodies of speech and can also diagnose any other speech, language or voice problems that may be underlying the communication difficulties.

There are many programs now that can be found online or can be purchased with tapes and CD’s. Many are good, but some are not. Working with these, without the benefit of a speech coach, can be frustrating since the individual may not be able to hear his/her own mistakes or know how to correct them. The person also may not be able to determine which areas to work on to make him the most understandable. It is best to use these with a coach who can assist in correct production of sounds.

What is Involved in Training

Every language has a unique sound system and melody that is very different than American English. Training should start with an evaluation of the sounds and intonation patterns that are distinctive to the individual and the person’s native language. An assessment should also include how the individual

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stresses different sounds and how the sounds link together to form a cohesive message. The evaluation may be done with a video camera so that the coach can assess facial movements. Once sound differences are assessed, the individual will have an understanding of what sounds and melodies are making him or her sound different than “Standard American English.”

It is crucial for the individual to record himself frequently and to listen to his own speech as compared with a native American speaker. PRACTICE is the key word. Usually, about 20 – 30 minutes daily is needed. Lasting changes can be made in as little as three months if the person is proficient in using English, is committed to change and does daily practice.

Outcomes

Business professionals report that they feel more confident in communicating on the job, on the phone, and in social situations. They take more risks and apply for jobs they otherwise would have shied away from. They take on more public speaking activities and participate more freely in meetings. Because of these activities, they are promoted to more highly visible positions within organizations.

Tips for the Employer

Dealing with speech differences is a delicate matter. Many people are sensitive and have already faced criticism or rejection because of their way of speaking. If an employer would like to offer accent reduction training, it is best to offer it as a voluntary program or part of a continuing education package for self improvement. It does not work to force anyone to work on their speech. They most likely will not be successful. Most people with speech differences know they have trouble and, with the right support, are happy for the help.

About the author:

Deb Kowalczyk is Director of CLEAR SPEAK, a company that provides the highest quality of training in changing speech and voice patterns for purposes of improved speaking quality and effectiveness.

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