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SPEAKING

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Accent Reduction for non-native English speakers

or

How to acquire an American Accent

by Judith Shahn

Introduction

I have been coaching non-native speakers for about twenty-five years, but most intensively in the past five years. I have worked with French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Belgian, Romanian, Polish, German, and Austrian speakers from Europe; Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian and Pakistani speakers from Asia; Zambians, South Africans, Congolese, Egyptians, Ethiopians from Africa; Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians and Jordanians from the Middle East and Argentinians, Chileans, Mexicans, and Guatemalans from South and Central America.

All these people, for one reason or another have wanted to "reduce" their accent while speaking English. Typically, it is their profession which drives them to take on this challenge or they are simply tired of people asking "what did you say?" and want to be more easily understood.

Perhaps many Americans are not as used to foreign accents and are not as forgiving when it comes to different pronunciations? Ironically,

Americans, themselves, speak in a myriad of different pronunciations - not only vocabulary, but in vastly different dialects. I grew up in a suburb of New York. Compare that with the deep south or the midwest and it is clear that Americans speak a variety of regional, cultural and ethnic dialects. There really is no such thing as a non-regional accent, although this is taught in theatre schools across the country, in order to serve some plays which might not want to identify people from a specific region. I have heard many states where people claim to have no dialect including Ohio, California and the state I currently reside in - Washington.

The Drama in speaking "American"

In addition to working with people on accent reduction, I have spent the majority of my professional life teaching actors both voice and dialects, as well as coaching professional actors in dozens of productions in regional theatre. Actors have every kind of motivation to acquire other accents. If they can make an audience believe that they are really from another country, it adds to the authenticity of the play. Dialects and Accents are considered essential to actor training. My work with actors has informed my work with non-native speakers.

The first useful impulse is to mimic. Sometimes there are negative connotations associated with mimicking, but mimicking is not mocking if it is done with the intent to really understand, examine and embody the person you are emulating. For actors, the intention is clear. We give ourselves permission to transform ourselves in order to tell a story. Non-native speakers need to do the same thing when acquiring an American accent. The intention may not be story telling (although many of my clients need to do presentations - a kind of story telling), but it is to communicate more effectively.

I want to say that personally, I love the variety of accents with which people speak English, whether they are native or non-native English speakers. The non-native speakers I work with have never fully

learned certain English (or American English) sounds, so this may impact clarity. For example, the English "th" sound is particularly tricky as well as the American "r" and "l" sound. For languages, that have words that end mainly in vowel sounds, learning to pronounce final consonants may be challenging.

The elements of acquiring an accent

In my experience, these are the elements needed to acquire a different accent from one's own.

1. Focus on the sounds that are obviously challenging to form and practice speaking them in warmups, words, phrases and sentences.
2. Listen, listen, listen to native speakers and begin to mimic their *inflection*, *stress* (emphasis), *rhythm* and *energy*.
3. Practice both with reading and with spontaneous conversations (improvising). When you read, read something you enjoy speaking.

With awareness, repetition and desire - change is possible!

The dance of learning accents

I tell my students when they are learning an accent, it is a bit like learning a new dance. At first, you go step by step (perhaps looking at your own feet to make sure they are really moving as you intend). Then, you are confident enough to dance a phrase. Finally, you are dancing as if you knew it all along - your body has claimed the movements and they are yours and you are alive in the dance! The same is true for speaking - although you may be borrowing another's accent, it must eventually be yours and come through your own voice and body. Accents are not just in the lips and tongue - the whole body is expressing something. My colleague, Cathy Madden who teaches the Alexander technique often tells my students, "remember, you're whole body grew up in Ireland" or whatever accent they might be working on.

Changing British English to American English

Since the British Empire had colonies throughout the world, the influence of British speech is still prevalent with non-native speakers. They may have been taught to speak English without r coloring (not pronouncing the final r as in mother, or the vowel of r as in early, for example) as well as pronouncing certain "a" sounds as "ah" - for example: can't, dance, ask, answer, class. Again, Americans have a variety of ways of pronouncing both the "r" and the "a" sounds, but I try to help them differentiate British English from American English.

The art of practicing

I tell my students and clients that transformation cannot occur without the commitment to practice. We have been told that to master something, we must have at least 10,000 hours of practice at it. How is this possible in our splintered and busy contemporary lives? I don't have a formula to solve this, but in my experience, one must practice with desire. It is possible to spend an hour mindlessly repeating something without really benefiting from the repetitions. I think it is better to spend *less* time and be more *mindful*. Perhaps ten to fifteen minutes of mindful practice a day would really begin to shift old patterns. The same is true of building muscles or an aerobic routine or a yoga practice or learning a language, which is much more challenging than an accent. If you have more time and want to spend it on practicing changing your accent - by all means, do it. My teacher, Kristin Linklater always says (and I think it is the best advice):

PRACTICE WITH PLEASURE.

Another quote from Kristin, which is a through line for me as a teacher is:

THE DESIRE FOR THE THING YOU WANT MUST BE GREATER THAN THAT WHICH INHIBITS YOU.

The following exercises are designed for you to focus on the specific sounds that challenge you in speaking American English. Start with one or two a day, then review those and begin to add more. You can listen to my pronunciation of them as a guide, but listen to your co-workers, and

friends. Listen to books on tape (with American narrators), the radio and TV. Many of my clients have children who are either first generation Americans or who have spent substantial time here to acquire their own American accents. See if your children will take on the role of cheerleaders, rather than critics. If you find it useful to record yourself and listen back, try to be objective . Finally, enjoy the task you have set before you.

Judith Shahn