

ACCENT ON COMMUNICATION **GOOD PRONUNCIATION IS POSSIBLE**

By Carol Dinnes

What is an Accent?

An accent is considered to be any variation in the pronunciation (e.g. sound, syllable, stress, intonation, rhythm), grammar and vocabulary of a specific geographical location. A more common definition is any variation from Standard English that is spoken in the Midwest region of the United States. For example, a native California speaker is considered to have an accent if the listener is from the New England States.

Why do I have an accent?

Any speaker of English is filtering their pronunciation through the rules of their native or regional language. Accent is generally the result of the combination of the pronunciation rules of English and native or regional speech patterns.

Why work to change accent?

Most accents are charming, interesting and distinctive. Unfortunately, some accents are distracting, irritating and penalizing. Problems arise when listeners pay more attention to the speaker's accent than to what he/she is saying. In the workplace, accents can hamper performance, interfere with career goals and advancement and may be a source of concern and embarrassment. Many foreign-born professionals may be adept at reading and writing English, but find speaking clearly and effectively quite difficult.

Why is an accent so difficult to overcome?

Children acquire a second language rapidly, effortlessly and unconsciously. That is why they typically speak a second language without any trace of an accent. However, adults usually require years of study and practice to master a second language. Learning new sounds, rhythm, and intonation (timing, stress and pitch changes) of a second language is a separate process from acquiring the vocabulary and grammar. We see this when pronunciation of a second language rarely improves with the passage of time, even after many years of continual exposure and use. These native language/speech habits usually cannot be overcome without specialized training and practice.

Why do I still have an accent after taking pronunciation classes?

Most ESL programs focus on vocabulary and grammatical forms, often reading and speaking being taught at the same time. The result is that most people learn the grammar and vocabulary of English very well but still have difficulty being understood. In traditional ESL pronunciation classes, the entire class works on the same sounds. These classes may not focus on the specific sound or intonation/melody differences necessary to change the speech habit patterns of each individual.

Why focus on intonation or melody?

Emphasis on the wrong syllable can make a word in English undecipherable. Uncommon intonation/melody patterns can also be a hindrance. For example, when the *flat lilt* of another language is applied to English, it can prove utterly distracting to the listener. Some people may have very poor word level intonation and yet, may be more on target with sentence level stress and pitch. Perhaps their native language rules for stress and pitch changes in longer messages are similar to English and therefore, cause fewer problems.

What do I need to work on my accent?

Adequate hearing, the ability to use English fairly well, a fair ability to imitate, a period of one-on-one instruction and motivation!

How long will it take to reduce my accent?

This is directly influenced by how much time is spent working on accent outside the training sessions. With the proper amount of practice, there will be a marked reduction in accent within 15 sessions, held a minimum of one or two one-hour sessions per week. Classes may vary from a few weeks to several months.

Will I lose my ability to pronounce my native language?

No. All of the speech sounds addressed will be applied to English. People do not lose the ability to discriminate the speech sounds of their native language nor the ability to speak English with the sounds of their native language. People gain the choice to speak with native accent or with a more standard American English accent. When speech is easier to understand, we grow in assertiveness and

confidence. Students often say that even if they don't understand all of what is said, they can understand what is meant.

What is training like?

The goal is not necessarily to lose or eliminate accent, but to reduce accent and pronounce English so that people are understood. Programs are individually designed to meet the communication needs of each client.

Goals are based on an evaluation of the individual's ability to perceive the sounds of English correctly as well as on an assessment of their entire speaking pattern. Specific areas of emphasis include stress and intonation in words, phrases and lengthier messages, articulation of vowels and consonants, rate of speech and occasionally, grammar or social/colloquial language usage. Each session contains some practice at the word, sentence and spontaneous speech level. Spontaneous speech activity is important to ease the transition to daily communication. Home practice includes drills with audiotapes and, ultimately conversational practice.

What are the benefits of Accent reduction?

Listeners no longer struggle to understand the speaker. Interactions in social, business and teaching situations occur more quickly and efficiently. This leads to greater confidence that the *speaker* understands messages as well –which results in greater satisfaction and more successful relationships. In many instances, improved speech intelligibility place employees in a better position for advancement. This in turn generates greater loyalty, as opportunities for advancement are not restricted.