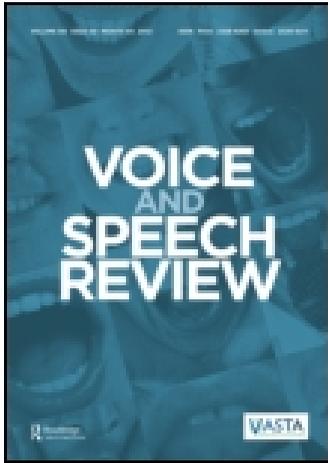


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Pronunciation, perception, and power: helping non-native English speakers find their voice in the workplace

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Not long ago, I was hired to work with an Indian pharmaceutical researcher on his pronunciation and presentation skills. According to the American human resources (HR) director, many people in the company (herself included) regularly had difficulty understanding him in conversation—although nobody had ever told him this directly—and the problem was greatly compounded when they needed him to give technical presentations to investors and at conferences, two contexts with huge repercussions for failure to communicate effectively.

This is a perpetual challenge encountered by many foreign professionals here in the US. Most of them are highly educated, often with degrees from American universities, and hold mid-level or even senior positions. But despite being highly motivated, expert and valuable employees, their careers plateau under what I call the “linguistic glass ceiling” because, as non-native speakers (NNSs) of standard American English (SAE), they frequently lack some communication skills necessary to be perceived as leaders, and one of the causes—most commonly disclosed to me by the Americans who hire me to work with these colleagues—is an unintelligible accent. When at HR conferences and events specifically for HR people, this issue frequently comes up in conversation when they find out what I do, and once one person acknowledges experiencing the challenge in their workplace, many of the rest quickly agree that it is a problem in theirs too.

One reason that the problem persists is that many American managers, per their own admission to me during needs analysis interviews, are often afraid of sounding politically incorrect, racist, or otherwise rude, so they never let on to the NNS colleague that they have trouble understanding what he or she is saying. Instead, years will go by in which, when in conversation with the international employee in question and having trouble understanding him or her, they will nod politely and subtly change the subject or try to end the conversation as soon as possible. Yet they tell me, in very direct terms, that because of the employee’s intelligibility problems, they cannot allow him to interact with clients directly, and pass over him for leadership opportunities. Then, after so much time being “politely silent” about the issue, they cannot tell the employee the exact reason they want me to work with him, nor do they permit me to clarify the need, because they fear it would be a loss of face for both parties, or worse. Not only does this *not* promote effective communication, but it leaves the NNS with a false sense of security, believing that his contributions were well received and his skills and knowledge fully recognized, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Another reason is that some people who speak other dialects of English, such as Indian English (with its many varieties), as a native language, do not consider

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themselves—and are not—NNSs, per se. Combine this with the fact that many of them attended American universities, may even have been living and working in the US for a decade or two, and, as some have shared with me, grew up listening to American and British pop music and watching Hollywood movies. At that point, they are fully accustomed to the sounds of SAE pronunciation, even if they have not appropriated that accent for themselves. While they frequently cite idiomatic expressions and other cultural references as perpetual linguistic challenges, it is very rare that any of them claim SAE pronunciation as a factor in their comprehension difficulties. As a result, they often do not seem to realize that this acclimation is uni-directional, not mutual, and many state outright that while they accept that SAE pronunciation training could be useful, they do not believe that accent differences would have any direct, negative impact on the success of their communication, their relationships, or careers, as was stated by the pharmaceutical researcher mentioned above, even though that was exactly why I was there.

In the end, the result is that the NNS employee is left behind, under the linguistic glass ceiling, never knowing that behind his back, there is often a general refrain of, “He’s a nice guy and really smart, but half the time I just can’t understand anything he says!” And this is the antithesis of leadership—on both sides.

The objective of accent training for my clients is not necessarily to make someone sound like a native speaker, which is both unnecessary and virtually impossible for most people. Rather, it is to develop a functional intelligibility, so that the listener is able to focus on and process the message at the rate of speech, without a delay caused by the need to filter and interpret unpredictable sound combinations and other vocal distractors. For each client, we collaboratively set development goals that reflect their professional goals, such as delivering high-impact presentations or participating more effectively in meetings. In order to reach these goals, whatever is on the client’s desktop becomes our “textbook,” whether that is PowerPoint slides they are preparing for a conference, or something more casual such as spreadsheets with data they need to interpret for weekly departmental meetings. Packages are typically 10 or 20 90-minute sessions, with diagnostic and summative assessments, and are conducted in person or via Skype, depending on location. Alternatively, if they are preparing for a specific presentation with a deadline, the duration and intensity of the accent training program can be adjusted accordingly to meet the respective goals.

Ultimately, the difference between success and failure is how much effort the client puts into practicing new skills in between our sessions, much like attending weekly Weight Watchers meetings can be very instructive, but is otherwise insufficient to lose weight without modifying one’s eating habits throughout the rest of the week. Of course there are individual differences that predispose each person to greater or lesser facility with modifying their pronunciation on the whole, but the fact is that *everyone* has the potential to make *some* lasting changes with the right type of instructional input, and personal effort.

The process, at its essence, is one of re-sensitization. As babies we are sensitive to all possible human speech sounds, and have the potential to accurately perceive and produce the sounds of any language. However, as we spend our critical period (Lenneberg 1967) of primary language development growing up in a particular sound-setting (e.g. with an English-speaking family, community, etc.) we lose sensitivity to other sounds not in that same setting but found in other languages. As a result, we lose the ability to hear certain contrasts, and/or we have trouble producing them accurately if we can hear them. Thus,

the goal is to re-sensitize adults to once again be able to recognize distinctions they once would have been able to perceive/produce but no longer can (Sicola 2009).

Some software programs can be particularly useful to help resensitize clients' perceptive and productive abilities, especially when they cannot initially hear the difference between their own pronunciation and mine, even with audio recordings for comparison. For example, Praat, a software package intended for linguistics to conduct phonetic analysis and other phonological research, records speech and produces graphic representations of many elements of the recording, such as F0/fundamental frequency (pitch and intonation) patterns and spectrograms to view features such as aspiration, stridency and sonority. Often, recording my voice and the client's voice separately, and juxtaposing the respective graphics to allow for simultaneous audio *and* visual input for the clients is the key to helping them perceive (and acknowledge) the difference and make the change. A secondary benefit to using this kind of software is that it intrigues and motivates many clients—especially male clients in scientific and technological fields—and persuades them to take our sessions more seriously overall. The difference in their facial expressions, body language, and participation is immediate, upon seeing what I refer to as their “voice print” on the screen. It is as if that kind of graphic data representation legitimizes my work as science, and they suddenly realize that I am more than just a “tutor” of some sort, and that the PhD after my name is not simply decorative.

To my above-mentioned Indian client's credit, he was open to coaching to improve his presentation skills overall (which also needed significant help), and seemed genuinely intrigued by the science of our pronunciation program. But despite his curiosity regarding the pronunciation lessons themselves, it was clear that he was putting in minimal effort into improving his skills in between sessions, focusing instead on the general presentation skills. Then, at the start of our last session (ten weeks later), to my surprise, he began with an apology. He explained that while listening to some Chinese coworkers in the laboratory that day, he realized that he frequently had difficulty understanding them due to their accents, and it suddenly occurred to him for the very first time that perhaps his American colleagues perceived his speech the same way. I could only confirm the potential validity of his observation, and I thought about how much more valuable and productive our time together could have been if the HR director had brought this—or allowed me to bring it—to his attention from the start.

No matter who we are, the universal belief is, “I am clear and easy to understand; it is the other person who has the problem!” Ultimately, *everyone* has an accent; people just don't tend to perceive their own because they sound “normal” to themselves! The difference is whether the accent is transparent enough to be simply interesting and colorful, allowing the listener a window into the speaker's personal background, or if it falls too far on the other end of the opacity continuum, to the degree that it is distracting and even unintelligible. The variable that tends to determine this score is the audience; what is music to one person's ears is cacophony to another's.

With that evaluation comes judgment: people who lack clear and intelligible speech for a target audience are inherently less effective communicators in that context. And foreign accents often trigger subconscious biases: people with “heavier” accents are often (erroneously) assumed to be less trustworthy or competent. (Hill and Tombs 2011) After all, if it is difficult to understand what someone is saying, no matter how technically skilled they are, it is almost impossible to be certain that *they* understand *you* more easily, what you need them to do, or what is in your best interest or that of the company. You go elsewhere; they lose status, opportunity, and power.

From the accent coaching perspective, there are some issues that require immediate and regular attention in order to be effective in helping business clients achieve greater intelligibility (as that is the real goal, rather than trying to sound “native.”) Many of these require psychological as well as phonological strategies.

The first is some “myth-busting” around the erroneously-labeled process of “accent reduction.” Just as actor Hugh Jackman, after studying with renowned dialect coach Jess Platt, was able to imitate a standard American accent for his role as Wolverine in the *X-Men* movie series without having to “lose” his Australian accent, which is still audible in interviews (2013), pronunciation development for NNSs is also an *additive* skill as they learn to perceive and produce new phonetic contrasts. It is indeed the *lack* of these contrasts that result in the “foreign accent” in the first place. In my own experience as a generally fluent but NNS of Spanish, I can very easily switch back and forth between speaking Spanish with a very heavy American “gringo” accent, and one that may not be perfectly native-like for any particular native Spanish speaker’s ears, but still prompts them to listen for a while before confessing something like, “I can’t put my finger on it; where are you from? Were your parents from different countries?” and proceeding to list several Spanish-speaking countries as guesses. Thus, accent training is skill enhancement, not remediation, just like any other professional development, and should be framed and respected as such.

The second issue revolves around one’s sense of identity, which is often very closely linked to one’s culture and/or birthplace, and thus connected to pronunciation patterns. Often people resent the notion that they should have to change their pronunciation, as if to do so would be to admit that their own default accent was categorically of lesser value, and thereby feel the need to defend their own heritage by resisting learning to use alternative pronunciation patterns. Many have told me that they feel “fake” when trying to speak with a new accent, which is understandable given the reference to Hugh Jackman and analogy to acting above.

As a result, a shift in perspective (as demonstrated by my Indian client above) is often a prerequisite to successful accent training. For example, almost all of my students and clients have admitted to me that they instinctively speak to their young children in voices and styles that are different from how they talk to coworkers during meetings, yet at the same time they acknowledge that they do not feel “fake” in either context. In the same way, once they can recognize that all people naturally speak in a variety of styles, registers, etc. depending on the situation, they then become more open to the idea of simply adding another “style” to their repertoire: in this case, that of the more generally recognized SAE.

As a business communication tool, the key to effective pronunciation, whether for native or NNSs of a language, is to learn the stylistic expectations required by those in a particular audience so that they hear the message without fixating on or being distracted by the delivery (voice, etc.). This is what people respond to, how relationships are developed and how careers are made.

Of course each person is different, and some will be able to acquire certain pronunciation skills more easily than others will. But once the psychological door is open and resistance to accent training is mitigated, it is pedagogically essential to identify which elements of one’s voice and speech patterns are most distracting to the audience, and/or which have the greatest influence on intelligibility. Arguably, one of the most influential factors—if not *the* most—is word-stress placement. Word-stress problems (i.e. putting the *emPHAsis* on the wrong *syLLAble*) are typically more important to intelligibility than phonemic contrasts since it directly influences the quality (e.g. clarity, duration,

and aspiration) of the vowels and consonants themselves. Nevertheless, in over a decade of experience working in this field, it is often hard to convince clients of this fact. When they think about pronunciation, per se, they think exclusively of individual segments, i.e. vowels and consonants, and are often resistant to efforts on improving prosody, waiting impatiently to get to the vowels and consonants, which is what they are sure is the real root of their problems. I have even had people make comments such as, “We can work on word stress too, but I really want to focus on pronunciation.” They are reluctant to believe that more accurate word stress and other prosodic cues will inherently have a direct and positive effect on some vowels and consonants, and more directly, that *mis*placing word stress will inevitably have very direct and negative consequences on any phonemes they had produced accurately in other exercises just moments ago.

In the end, whether an actor, a politician, a business owner, or an IT staff member, there is a direct connection between a person’s accent, how she is perceived personally and professionally, and the power that she is likely to wield in a given context. For equality in the workplace, it is incumbent upon people at all levels to find the balance between being “helpful” and “politically correct” and address legitimate pronunciation and accent-related problems. After all, who would not be open to receiving training if they knew that their ability to learn these new speech skills would be the key to receiving new professional opportunities because it could be the ultimate factor that decides whether or not the new prospective client signs a multi-million dollar contract?

Once the minds and communication channels are open, then I can make the greatest impact as an accent trainer and language coach.

Notes on contributor



Laura Sicola is founder of Vocal Impact Productions, helping people hone their “vocal executive presence,” and the Sicola Consulting Group, providing intercultural communications training and business-English programs for international professionals. Her clients range from banks and pharmaceutical companies to not-for-profits. She has spent more than a decade coaching, lecturing, researching, and publishing on speech, cognition, pronunciation, culture, and education. She is a speech coach for the TED Fellows program and has delivered workshops, presentations, trainings, and keynote addresses for audiences across the US, in Egypt, Japan, Spain, and Germany. Laura earned her PhD in educational linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania where she is also faculty at the Graduate School of Education.

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