



SPEAKING CLEARLY: ACCENT & INTELLIGIBILITY

Multilingual Student Support
Camosun College



Accent Reduction vs Speaking Clearly?



"I want to sound more Canadian."

"My classmates don't understand me."

"I feel my pronunciation is bad and I feel nervous
when speaking."

Do any of these comments sound familiar?

What are your goals around speaking more clearly?

Do you want to "get rid of your accent"? If yes, why?

Let's explore these concepts...

Contents

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DEFINING ACCENT



What is an ACCENT?

There are 2 kinds:

1. "Foreign accent" – when you speak a language using the rules and sounds of another language.
2. The way a group of people speak their native language (geographic region & social groups; age, socio-economic class, etc.).

In reality – **everyone has an accent** – in somebody else's opinion!



Phonemic inventory: all the sounds a specific language has

distinction (in sounds): heard as different or contrasting

Why a "Foreign" Accent?



Differences in *Phonemic Inventory*:

Childhood – your first language has **sounds** that don't exist in other languages.

Our brains are BORN capable of producing and receiving all sounds, but as children, we learn what sounds are important and dismiss the rest.

E.g., Japanese r/l has **no distinction**.

Thai – *aspirated* p (pot vs spot)

Aspirated: a sound with a strong puff of air released (p/t/k in English)



Why a "Foreign" Accent?



Differences in Syntax (sentence structure):

Connecting verbs, lack of articles (the/an/a),
word order (SVO vs SOV, or OSV, etc.)...

E.g., A house he's buying now. (*Yiddish*) vs.

He's buying a house now. (*English*)

House very large. (*Russian*) vs.

The house is very large. (*English*)

Etc.



Why a "Foreign" Accent?



Differences in syllables or tone:

English **syllables** may begin or end with a cluster of consonants, e.g., *str* and *ngths* in the word *strengths*. In Japanese, a syllable contains only one consonant followed by one vowel – as in *ma* or *ki*.

Chinese has **tone**: One word can have multiple meanings! E.g., the syllable *ma* uttered with a high tone ('mother' in Mandarin) vs. *ma* uttered with a low rising tone ('hemp'), vs. *ma* uttered with a high falling tone ('scold').

See: [Chinese tone](#)





YouTube: [Amy Walker – 21 Accents](#)

"Social" Accents



Some **geographic** areas within a country have distinct accents (dialects) too. You can travel across England and find approximately 40 different dialects of English! How about "Newfie" English in Newfoundland, Canada? Or the southern Texas drawl of the USA?

Watch the video to see how one actress can mimic many different accents.



ACCENT BIAS



Posh=elegant,
stylish, upper-
class

Accent Bias



Bias = judging in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.

Media plays a huge role in the choice of a "standard" accent to portray as the "correct" accent of a language.

E.g.,

- The British accent often featured in media is “Received Pronunciation” (RP) or “The Queen’s English.” Because of bias, this accent is implicitly associated with poshness and higher intelligence.
- The United States has a "General American" accent. This is typically found in more metropolitan cities, like New York. Conversely, the Southern accent is sometimes **wrongfully stereotyped** as inadequate, “**redneck**,” or “**hillbilly**,” simply for its **drawl** and because it features less enunciation than its “standard” counterpart.
- Unfortunately for those with perceived “working class” or “lower class” accents, professional life can be challenging. This is because these expectations for appropriate communication are defined by the dominant white culture and "upper" class.

Drawl= speak in a
slow, lazy way

-Stephens, J. (2020)

Redneck/hillbilly=
working class, from
rural area,
unsophisticated



Reflecting

Accent is tied to your national origin or specific area of your home country.

- Language and accent are a part of your identity.
- Equality and tolerance of differences in accent should be encouraged and accepted.

The goal is **not** to **eliminate** your accent but to ensure you can be clearly understood and communicate your ideas effectively.



A yellow paper arrow pointing right, with a white semi-transparent box containing text and a decorative diamond symbol. The background is dark grey with several dark grey paper arrows scattered around.

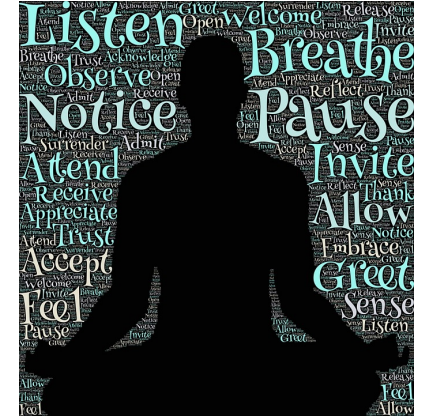
STRATEGIES FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION



Strategy 1: **Don't** Use Your Voice

Remember to slow down and take pauses when speaking.

Remember to breathe.



Using silence and pauses...

- Give your listener enough time to reflect between the "waves" (input of language).
- Create breathing space for the benefit of your audience/listener(s).
- Come across with poise and control.
- Create more atmosphere.
- Add variety and interest to your delivery.
- **It gives listeners a break!**



Where to Breathe?



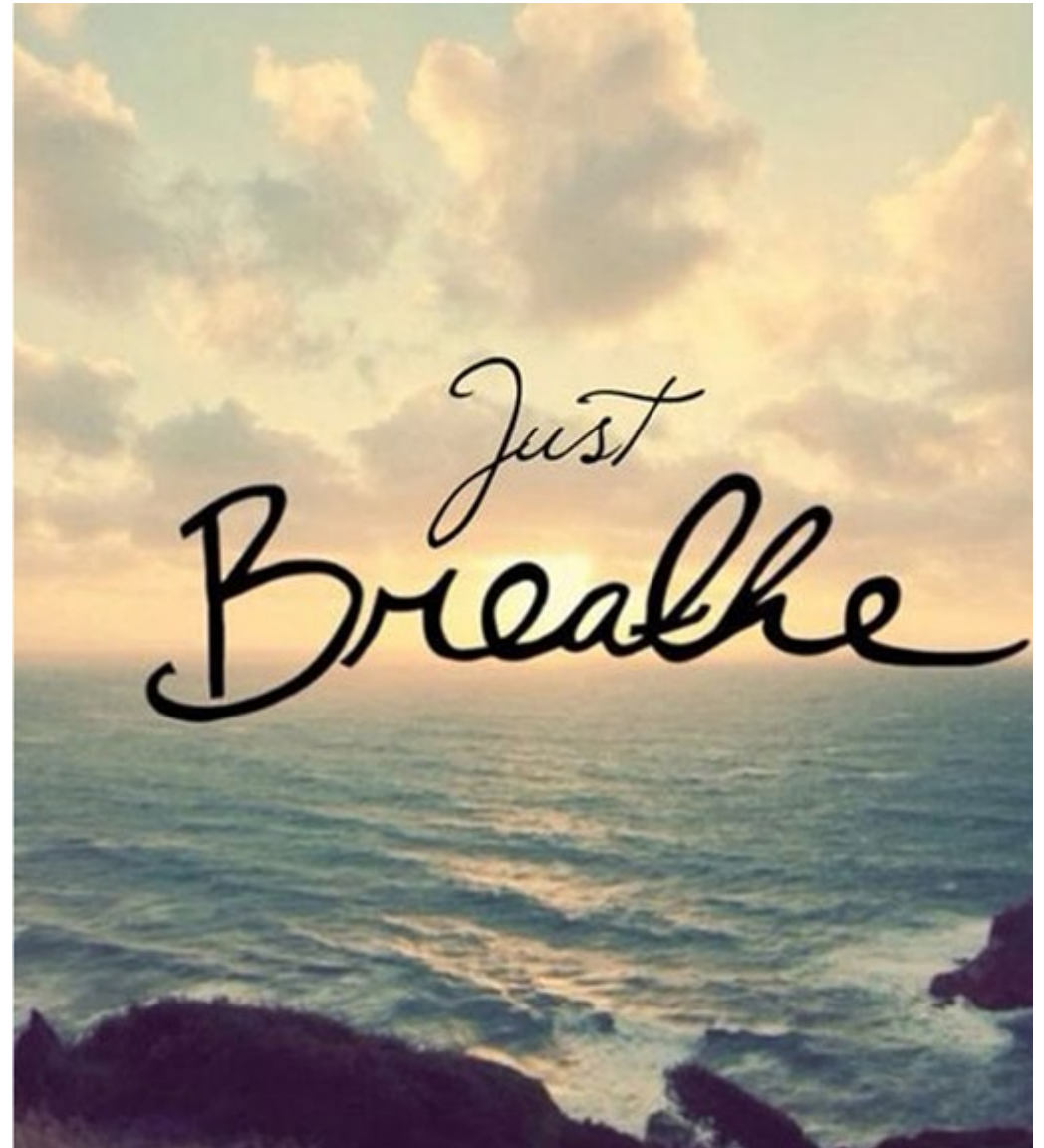
Before you say the first sentence.

Before a main point.

After a main point.

After a question.

★Don't be in a rush.★



Strategy 2: Mind Your Body Language



Be mindful of your body language and how it affects how others see you. **Try to remain open and positive.**

- Eye contact is important in Canada.
- Hand gestures (see next slide)
- Facial expressions (smile!)
- 55% of communication is body language, 38% is the tone of voice, and 7% is the actual words spoken (Mehrabian, 1972).
- Mehrabian (1972) argued that body language gives the strongest impression of a speaker's attitude, more so than words.



Strategy 2: Mind Your Body Language



Cultural differences exist with gestures of the hands. Watch the video for a few examples:



Gestures
around
the world



Look at the photos. Which person seems more confident? Why did you have this reaction? What does the body language tell you?



Strategy 3: Focus on Suprasegmentals

What are suprasegmentals?

- speech features such as **stress** or **tone**
- not limited to single sounds but often extend over syllables, words, or phrases. (Brittanica)

Why are they important?

- If a suprasegmental like the stress pattern is incorrect, speech is much harder to understand for native listeners (Fraser, 2001).
- Therefore, English learners can focus on the pronunciation features of larger chunks of connected speech (suprasegmentals)




1. Target the "big" pronunciation features first. These are information (*focus*) words and phrases (*thought groups*).

2. Next, practice word stress, speech rhythm and intonation.

3. Lastly, go back to fine-tuning individual sounds (vowels and consonants).

Note: If you have extreme difficulty with a specific sound that causes a recurring lack of understanding, you may need to rethink this strategy. Every learner is **UNIQUE**. Talk to your language coach (MSS).

Strategy 3: Focus on Suprasegmentals

Word Stress	Sentence Stress	Thought Groups
<p>Individual words have a stressed syllable = a louder, more noticeable sound.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• inforMAtion• eCOnomy• iDENtify <p>You can try humming each syllable to see how the stress lands without getting distracted by the individual sounds.</p> 	<p>This is the pattern of stressed and unstressed words across a sentence.</p> <p>Some words (content) take priority for meaning over grammatical markers (function words).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you pass me the butter, please?• I think I failed my last exam.• Terry gave Dave a present.	<p>Organizing words into short, meaningful phrases.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think of how you say a phone #: 555-216-9112• In terms of male life expectancy, / the country of Iceland / ranks the highest / with 74 years. <p>We pause around each "chunk" of language (intonation also shifts down at the end of a thought.)</p>

Please see
MSS resource:
[Pronunciation](#)

Summary

Accent/Identity

- Having an accent is a normal part of being a human being! You only notice it when you are out of your usual environment and/or using a different language.
- Society is slowly acknowledging the idea of "Global Englishes."
- We have a long way to go to reduce bias around accent and ethnicity which are deeply rooted in ongoing systemic class and race issues.
- Don't feel you need to "get rid of" your accent. Work with it and the rules of English.
- Being exposed to a range of accents and having an open mind and heart will move society forward and improve communication (but be patient as language shift takes time!)

Speaking Strategies

- Communication is much more complex than just sounds and words! Don't neglect the use of body language and attitude.
- Focus on the bigger pronunciation targets (suprasegmentals) and make the most impact on your listeners.
- Don't forget to breathe!



Resources

Camosun Resources:

[Camosun Policy on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#)

• [MSS Speaking and Listening Self-Access Resources](#)

Other Resources:

• [English Club: Sentence Stress](#) & [English Club: Sentence Stress Quiz](#)

• [Is Nonverbal Communication a Numbers Game? \(Psychology Today\)](#)

• [A Guide to Word and Sentence Stress Rules for English Learners and Teachers](#)

• [Ellii Blog: When a little stress is a good thing...](#)

• [Rachel's English: Word Stress: Sentence Position](#) (she has several other videos on the topic)

• [Website with links to articles on accent acceptance](#)



• [Why the brain doubts a foreign accent](#) (article)

Thank you!



Please let us know what you think of this presentation!

Short 2 min survey:

<https://forms.office.com/r/YZPJCceFPQ>



References

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