

Accenting the Positive

Lynda Katz Wilner and Marjorie Feinstein-Whittaker offer simple tips for accent reduction

Many people with a good knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar are still frustrated by the inability to be clearly understood.

The problem is not so much a language barrier as an accent barrier, which is usually the result of the learner retaining the rhythm and melodic patterns, the sound system, as well as the muscular tension of the tongue and lips of their native language. This leads to altered intonation (melody of speech), pronunciation difficulties, and the breakdown of communication between speaker and listener.

Aside from the pronunciation difficulties that can interrupt clarity of speech, speakers of English as a second language have to learn rules to help to decipher the idiosyncratic patterns of American English. Once these rules are understood, clear and effective communication is much simpler.

The intonation challenge

Speakers of English as a second language often retain the melody and stress pattern of their first language. Some people speak in a monotone (flat) voice while others speak extremely quickly with excessive and unnatural pitch changes. In American English, words are not said with equal stress; one syllable or part of the word requires emphasis. This can be accomplished by saying the stressed syllable with a higher pitch, a louder volume, and longer vowel.

Learning how to properly stress a syllable in a word or a word in a sentence can feel overwhelming to a non-native speaker. However, if one can learn the rules that guide American speech patterns, more effective, confident, and clear speech is possible. The following are some important pronunciation rules to help navigate the complexities of spoken American English. They can be systematically taught to improve a non-native speaker's clarity and effectiveness. Of course, with every rule, there will be exceptions.

Rule 1: Compound Nouns

Our language is filled with compound nouns. Think about how we have business meetings, coffee breaks, checkbooks, cell phones, take-out, and e-mails. The rule for pronouncing compound nouns is to stress the first word of a compound noun with higher pitch, louder volume, and a longer vowel.

Rule 2: Proper Nouns

We frequently need to refer to individual's names, job titles, addresses, locations, sporting events, mass media, and cultural events. For example, we may introduce ourselves as Hillary Clinton from Chappaqua, New York, have lunch at the Tavern on the Green, see the Statue of Liberty, work on Park Avenue, have an appointment at St. Vincent's Hospital, vacation at Fire Island, get stuck in the Midtown Tunnel, see the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden, and read The Wall Street Journal while waiting for

the Long Island Railroad. The rule for pronouncing proper nouns is to stress the last word.

Rule 3: Acronyms and Initializations

In American English, we use a multitude of "abbreviations" or shortcuts for frequently used words. Each industry has an exhaustive list of its own. We may receive our MBA, CPA, Ph.D. or RN degree; invest in an IRA; buy stock in IBM or GM; watch HBO, ABC or ESPN; or discuss business matters with the CFO, CEO or VP. The rule for acronyms and initializations is to stress the last letter of the abbreviation or initialization.

Rule 4: Numbers

Stating numbers can be confusing, if we do not abide by the correct stress pattern. When counting, stress the first syllable in "teen" numbers such as thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. When counting, stress the first part of "ten" numbers such as thirty, forty. However, when discussing quantity, time, currency, and dates, stress the second part of the "teen" numbers, e.g., fourteen dollars vs. forty dollars. In this context, primary stress shifts to the noun.

If one adheres to this rule, an appointment at 8:50 or 8:15 will not be misinterpreted and 30 mg will not be confused with 13 mg. These errors can cost us time, money, and may have catastrophic consequences. The rule for numbers is to stress the appropriate syllable when counting and/or describing time, currency, dates, and measurements.

Rule 5: Heteronyms (multiple meaning words)

English is also filled with word pairs that are spelled the same way, but can be nouns, adjectives or verbs with different meanings and different stress patterns. For two-syllable words, stress the first syllable for nouns and the second syllable for verbs.

If one stresses the wrong syllable, it can be very confusing to the listener, e.g., Elliott projects that he will complete his projects by the due date. The rule for heteronyms is to stress the first syllable for nouns and the second syllable for verbs in two-syllable multiple meaning words.

These preceding examples are just a few of the many rules that can enhance the non-native speaker's communication. ■

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