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Accents on the Wrong Syl-LA-ble

By MICHAEL T. LUONGO

It was not what Sergei Petukhov said. It was how he said it.

“The way I said ‘accent reduction,’ he couldn’t understand me,” Mr. Petukhov said. That was enough for Mr. Petukhov, a Moscow native who works for the law firm of Kaye Scholer as a scientific adviser, to get his employer’s approval to pay for training to decrease his Russian accent.

He is one of many educated non-native English speakers working in the United States who take voice training and accent reduction to improve presentations, workshops and everyday conversations with their American-born co-workers.

Mr. Petukhov’s accent coach, Jennifer Pawlitschek, said that from her experience in New York, the field is growing. “Here it’s hot, and I think it’s because it’s an international crossroads,” she said, both because the [United Nations](#) is in the city and because of New York’s role in global financial markets.

Ms. Pawlitschek, who has a master’s of fine arts degree in drama from the [University of California](#), Irvine, said “the posture of the mouth” affects accent. She teaches how to change “the way you hold your jaw, lips and tongue,” along with stress and intonation.

She contended that the term accent reduction is a misnomer. “Accent reduction is learning an accent. It is learning an American accent.”

Another coach, Brian Loxley, has a doctorate in speech from Southern Illinois University as well as degrees in theater. He began helping foreign-born students in 1983, when he headed the speech and theater program at [Pace University](#) in White Plains.

Mr. Loxley said speaking English correctly allows “people to look at you like you’re a leader and your ideas count.” His clients, he explained, are “educated and brilliant people but they’re having trouble making themselves understood.”

Ms. Pawlitschek said the “r” and the “l” are problematic for Asians, and the “v” and the “w” for Indians, who also often have “a mix of their own mother tongue and then a British layer on top of it.” Some problems appear across cultures. “The ‘r’ is fascinating,” she said. “You can go to so many countries, and the ‘r’ is done in different ways.”

Non-native speakers may not even be aware that they are speaking incorrectly.

Melanie Hua Chen, 37, was born in Beijing and works as a lawyer for UHY Advisors, informing clients on tax issues in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. She has lived in the United States off and on for 10 years and has worked with Mr. Loxley since 2005.

“Taking the classes with Brian, I started to realize that some Chinese have trouble with words with ‘r’ and ‘l,’ ” she said. “I did not know this problem existed, until pointed out.”

Often trained as actors, some coaches use techniques they learned to reduce regional American accents or to affect foreign accents. Ms. Pawlitschek teaches clients jaw exercises and muscle relaxation to reduce “a tightness in the jaw that nasalizes the sound.” Her exercises focus on mouth muscles, and her clients listen to themselves from recordings and practice speaking in front of mirrors. Mr. Loxley uses similar techniques.

Ms. Pawlitschek said she also used videos that show how the mouth should be positioned. Both she and Mr. Loxley give phone training to clients who are traveling or too busy for appointments.

Judy Ravin, who runs the Accent Reduction Institute, based in Ann Arbor, Mich., said the institute works with clients directly and offers books, CDs and other teaching tools. Ms. Ravin developed her program, which is called the Ravin Method, in 1998 while teaching English pronunciation at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

Her goal, she said, is “to make people independent.” The CDs and video programs allow clients to “model the articulation techniques and how to place their mouths.” The materials are “a visual model,” she said, so that “people don’t have to get on a plane to get to us.” According to Ms. Ravin, the company has grown from working with a handful of local automotive industry clients to working with over 50 corporations and universities.

One of her clients, Pascal Kinduelo, 39, has worked for [Cisco](#) for the last seven years. A native of Congo, he grew up speaking French and now lives in Ottawa. But most of his customers and co-workers are in the United States. “Oftentimes over the years, on a conference call I was asked to repeat myself or to clarify,” he said, adding, “So I thought, O.K., there was something I needed to do.”

He said he found Ms. Ravin’s company on the Web. “They were offering this remotely and so I didn’t have to go to Michigan,” he said, instead using “live video sessions.”

In addition to pronunciation techniques, Mr. Kinduelo said they caught “specific technical words that could have been confusing” during a dry-run for a presentation. Now, he said he gets fewer “looks like a deer caught in the headlight.”

Training fees and duration vary. At the Accent Reduction Institute, group training begins at about \$40 an hour a person, and individual training at \$100 an hour, with additional fees for materials. What Ms. Ravin calls Webinars can cost as little as \$20 an hour, and

clients “can dial in from anywhere in the world and have a live presentation.” She believes “people should expect results quickly, after 10 to 15 hours.”

Ms. Pawlitschek charges from \$75 an hour for semiprivate lessons and \$100 to \$125 an hour for private. Some clients have seen her for years, and she says she believes that developing the proper “kinesthetic skill” takes time “so the muscles will default into position.”

Mr. Loxley coaches individually, at a fee of \$150 an hour, or \$210 for an hour and a half session, plus material and travel time, though most clients visit him. Regardless of the trainer, some clients pay directly, others are covered by employers. Referrals, advertising, a Web presence and Craig’s List are ways trainers get clients.

Of course, not everyone sees an accent as something negative. Ms. Pawlitschek said that particularly for her clients from the United Nations, “there is a lot of strong feeling there about the validity of all accents and dialects,” and the emphasis is on “pronunciation.” Mr. Loxley said that people once viewed accent reduction as “an attack on heritage,” but that is less the case now.

His clients, he said, “are very good at their jobs; they just want to be better.”

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