



# **Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists**





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# **Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists**

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# Introduction

“I’ve been working as a speech-language pathologist for several years now, but I’m interested in changing it up a little and have been looking into getting involved in accent modification. I know it’s part of our scope of practice, but it’s a foreign area to me and I have no idea where to begin. I would like to take some trainings and buy some materials for help. Any tips on how or where to start? Any information would be greatly appreciated!”

—Anonymous

Those of us working in the world of accent modification have heard variations on this question throughout our careers. I wrote this book to answer it. *Here’s How to Do Accent Modification* is designed primarily for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) looking to bridge the gap between the insights and techniques they have developed in their work with communicative disorders and the skills and knowledge that will help them excel with clients whose communication challenges are related to language differences. It is also aimed at graduate clinicians and supervisors who work on accents, and it provides a fresh perspective to those who come to the field with other backgrounds, such as teachers of English to speakers of other languages, and voice and speech trainers. There is an emphasis on practical tips, techniques, and examples, and the PluralPlus companion website features additional resources, such as editable worksheets, sound files, and video clips.

At the heart of the book is the understanding that accents are normal and natural, representing the wonderful linguistic diversity of our species. Unfortunately, when non-native speakers have not achieved the degree of intelligibility and naturalness required for effective communication in their target language, they may face significant barriers to personal and professional success. When clients reach out for help in overcoming these hurdles, they often turn to professionals, and SLPs are well-equipped for the task. The key is to understand that although graduate training and clinical expertise provide SLPs with a solid foundation, it is their ethical obligation to attain the additional skills and knowledge necessary to produce results with this unique clientele. Fortunately this goal is well within reach, and the hope is that this book will play a role in the future success of many SLPs and their clients.

Chapter 1, “Accents,” lays a foundation by considering the nature of accents and why people have them. Although each of us has an accent, a non-native accent often presents significant challenges. Fortunately, non-native speakers who acquire a clear and natural

accent can overcome these obstacles and even communicate more effectively than native speakers of their new language. SLPs are well-suited to help them achieve this goal.

Chapter 2, “Accent Modification,” addresses the practicalities and efficacy of accent modification and discusses the professionals who provide it, along with their settings. It also discusses the training and skills that SLPs bring to this field. This chapter introduces the useful distinction between the segmental and suprasegmental features of phonology and provides a look at the counseling aspect of accent training.

Chapter 3, “Assessment,” reviews the principles involved in determining which areas of a client’s speech present the greatest barriers to communicative success. While many SLPs are uncertain about how to conduct second language phonological evaluations, the goal of this chapter is to empower them to develop their own methods by adapting the ideas and materials provided in this manual.

Chapter 4, “Segmentals Overview,” looks at ways to develop clients’ phonemic awareness and addresses the principles involved in working with the individual sounds of the language. There is an extensive review of techniques, such as minimal pairs, some practical ideas on promoting generalization, and an in-depth look at the process of target selection.

Chapter 5, “Suprasegmentals Overview,” focuses primarily on intonation and rate, since these two features can be addressed at any stage of second language phonological acquisition and form the foundation of much of the suprasegmental training that helps clients produce natural sounding speech.

Chapter 6, “Consonants,” outlines the consonant inventory of English and focuses on those which tend to be the most problematic. In keeping with the “clear and natural” approach advocated in the book, phonemes which tend to have a strong effect on intelligibility, as well as the allophones which can affect naturalness, are addressed.

Chapter 7, “Vowels,” bridges the gaps between the theoretical knowledge about the English vowel system that SLPs have from their courses in phonetics and phonology, and the practical aspects of eliciting these sounds with non-native speaking clients. While it is relatively rare for SLPs to work with vowels in most other areas within our scope of practice, in accent modification it is both common and powerful.

Chapter 8, “Syllables and Stress” returns to the suprasegmentals to examine several features of English that often prove troublesome for non-native speakers. Variations in syllable structure and lexical stress in the world’s languages make these aspects challenging, and clinicians often make significant gains when addressing them with clients.

Chapter 9, “Prosody,” uses a narrow definition of this term to address suprasegmentals related to the rhythm and phrasing of English. This chapter also examines vowel reductions, which are key to producing natural speech, and emphasis, which is often a good starting point for work on more abstract features of intonation.

Chapter 10, “Connected Speech,” discusses the elements of natural spontaneous oral communication and looks into features which are rarely addressed by SLPs in other fields, such as linking and elision. The goal is to help clients develop the ability to balance intelligibility and naturalness.



Chapter 11, “Getting Started,” begins with a discussion of the next steps SLPs can take to excel in accent modification and provides resources on how to get started in private practice. There is also an in-depth section on the mechanics of a university-clinic accent modification program and some words of advice from graduate students to their peers. The chapter ends with some thoughtful words from private practitioners concerning the challenges and rewards of this incredible field.

My personal journey has unfolded in the opposite direction of most SLPs working in accent modification. I had earned an M.A. in Russian Studies and an M.A. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) before I became an SLP. In my 26-year career teaching English to non-native speakers, I worked in six countries with clients from over 80 nations, and this experience has informed my work at San Diego State University’s Accent and Communication Training (ACT) program, where I have had the pleasure of supervising many outstanding graduate clinicians. My personal connection to accent comes from my experiences as a native speaker of English and non-native speaker of Hungarian, Russian, Spanish, German, and Portuguese. In the nearly 10 years of my adult life spent living abroad and communicating in other languages, I have had a glimpse of the challenges and emotions that often go hand-in-hand with sounding different. Accents and languages are a part of my home as well; my wife, who is also a practicing SLP, is a native speaker of Hungarian, and my son is a bilingual speaker of Hungarian and English. A love of languages, accents, and cultures brought me to this field, and if it brought you here as well, I know you will be rewarded by working with this amazing group of clients.





*Dedicated to Szilvi and Mark, whose accents lie in my heart.*









## CHAPTER

# 1

# Accents

## Our Accents

We each have an accent. We overlook this universal truth because we consider our own way of speaking as normal and speech that differs as accented. In the words of Peter Ladefoged, “an accent is always what the other person has.” (Ladefoged & Disner, 2012, p. 27) This is especially true if we speak the “standard” or “prestige” dialect of a language. Upon examination, this reasoning collapses quickly. It is important to understand that each one of us has an accent, and we sometimes use the word *idiolect* to highlight the fact that just as our voices are unique, so are our individual patterns of speaking. The way we speak is who we are. Native speakers are conjoined by the commonalities of their individual accents, creating a powerful sense of community. Yet for non-native speakers, a way of speaking that differs can pose significant challenges. The phonology of each language is unique, and if a non-native speaker is unable to produce particular sounds in the new language, miscommunication may result. In addition, speech produced with patterns dissimilar to a target language may cause listeners to focus on the delivery and not the message. Many non-native speakers devote time and energy to mastering the pronunciation of a target language because they believe that changing the way they speak can help them attain the personal and professional success they desire. Accent modification is an elective service that assists clients in achieving their goals, and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are especially well-suited to provide it.

### Native Accents

Accents and attitudes about them represent incredibly complex phenomena, and the concept of a *native accent* is an important starting point in any discussion of second language phonology. The word *accent* tends to be interpreted in two different ways. Crystal (2008, p. 3) defined *accent* broadly as the “features of pronunciation which identify

where a person is from, regionally, and socially,” but Scovel (1969, p. 38) defined accent in the narrower sense as “phonological cues, either segmental or suprasegmental, which identify the speaker as a non-native user of the language.” According to the first definition, everyone has an accent, but by the second definition, some of us do and some of us do not, and this division of the world into native and non-native speakers has profound implications. Subtle differences alone can set the non-native apart even when there is no effect on communication. From a very early age, native speakers of a language are able to identify non-natives quickly, and this has a profound effect on group identity that cannot be underestimated. When non-native speakers open their mouths they can be instantaneously categorized as “other.”

The word *native* is derived from the Latin verb *nāscī* stemming from the proto Indo-European root \*gene-, meaning *to give birth*. Thus the use of the term “native speaker” implies that speakers born into a language will speak it differently than those who are not. The association with birth itself is imprecise; it is universally understood that humans can acquire the mother tongue they were born into and learn to sound exactly like a native speaker in a second language at a later point in life. The key question is whether this is possible throughout the lifespan or only up to a certain age. As a thought experiment, I ask my clients to imagine a 6-year-old girl from their country who is adopted by a monolingual English-speaking family and raised in the United States. When I ask whether she would have a native-sounding accent in her new language at the age of 20, they are universally certain she would. I then ask them to imagine a 20-year-old woman from their country who marries an American and moves to this country. She has some knowledge of English when she arrives and then spends 20 years speaking English to her husband, family, co-workers, and friends. When I ask my clients whether she would sound like a native or non-native by the age of 40, they generally say she will sound like a non-native, but in almost every group of clients, at least one insists she might be able to acquire a native accent. Is there evidence to support this?

This book argues that non-native accents are both natural and wonderful, and that they do not inherently interfere with communication. However, it is important to establish at the outset whether adult learners of a second language can acquire accents that sound exactly like a native speaker. This question has been the subject of considerable research and debate, but it is not an academic exercise because it has profound implications for accent modification. When non-native speakers choose to modify their accents it is common for them to aim for native-sounding speech as the ultimate level of success. Derwing (2003), asked one hundred adult second language learners in Canada to rate the degree to which they agreed with the following statement on a 7-point scale (with 7 representing “I strongly agree” and 1 representing “I strongly disagree”): “If it were possible, I would pronounce English like a native speaker.” Ninety-five out of one hundred responded affirmatively, with 82% rating their agreement as a 1 and 13% selecting 2. Many books and websites promote the idea that non-natives can lose their accent as a central selling point to attract customers. In addition, many natives tend to consider any differences between a learner’s speech and the native model as imperfections that should be corrected, and it is unfair to those acquiring a second language to pretend

otherwise even if we could eliminate these unfortunate biases in a perfect world. If attaining a native accent as an adult can be reliably achieved, SLPs' focus should be on determining exactly how to produce that result. On the other hand, if achieving this goal is extremely rare (if not entirely impossible) then disappointment is bound to follow, and we are setting our clients up for failure. In reality, the research has shown that for those who acquire a language at some point during or after adolescence, having an accent is expected. Clients should be encouraged to understand that they are normal; it is entirely natural to have an accent. The goal of accent modification is to help our clients communicate effectively, which is something SLPs are well-trained to do, and not to make them indistinguishable from native speakers of the target language, which is unrealistic and unnecessary. Nevertheless, because it is so widely believed by non-natives and natives alike that adults can "lose" their accents, this notion merits a more detailed investigation, and it is always worth exploring with clients before training begins.

## The Critical Period

Throughout the ages, adults have envied the advantages children enjoy in learning a second language, but serious study of children's relative facility dates only to the second half of the twentieth century. Balari and Lorenzo (2015) cite Juan Huarte de San Juan, a pioneer in cognitive psychology, as stating in 1575 that, "children, as already observed by Aristotle, learn any single language better than older men, in spite of the latter being more rational. And no one needs to remember us this, for common experience amply shows it, as when a thirty or forty years old native from Biscay [Basque Country] comes to Castile, and he never learns the Romance language, but if he is a child, within two or three years he looks as if born in Toledo." The modern era of research became active by the 1960s, picked up steam in the 1990s, and continues to the present day. Penfield and Roberts (1959) linked children's second language abilities to ongoing neuroplasticity, which is subsequently diminished through maturation. Lenneberg (1967, p. 176) was the first to conclude that "foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty," highlighting the uniqueness of phonology in second language acquisition and demarcating the boundaries of attainment on par with native speakers. This *critical period hypothesis* (CPH) posits a developmental point after which biological changes preclude second language learners from achieving natively like competence in a language. Scovel (1969) attributed the inability to acquire natively like proficiency after puberty to neuroplasticity, but others, including Patkowski (1990), sought to disassociate lateralization from plasticity. Long (1990) offered decreasing myelination during development as an alternative mechanism to explain the change in plasticity. Birdsong (2018) reports that: "more recent researchers have put forth other neurobiological explanations for plasticity deficits over age. For example, on a 'use it then lose' it model, after adolescence the circuitry that is required for language learning is dismantled because in adulthood there remains no selection pressure on humans to keep learning languages."

Several different strands of research related to CPH have emerged. Much research has focused on language acquisition in general, with a great deal of attention paid to

second language acquisition, and specifically, second language phonology, because it appears to follow different acquisition patterns than other aspects of language. Many studies have attempted to define this critical period by identifying its ages of onset and offset. In other words, what is the earliest age a child might be immersed in a second language and speak with a non-native accent and what is the latest age someone can acquire a language and sound like a native? Studies have also addressed the linearity of the critical period and whether it should be defined as a *sensitive period* (SP) to avoid falsification by exceptional learners. After analyzing previous research on the issue, Long (1990, p. 274) lowered traditional estimates for the age of onset, claiming that “exposure needs to occur before age 6 to guarantee that L2 phonology can become nativelike.” He based this conclusion on several long-term studies, including Oyama’s (1976) examination of sixty Italian immigrants to the United States. In that study, several children with an age of arrival between six and ten were found to have an accent in English, despite lengthy periods of residence in their adopted country. While Lenneberg (1967) cited puberty as the point after which non-native speakers could not achieve accent free speech, despite the presumably wide variation at which this process occurs in individuals, Scovel (1969) specified age twelve as the age of offset, and this number has been used consistently as a benchmark in studies of second language acquisition. Long concurred that age twelve represented the upper limit of the critical period, and he identified the age of six as the age of onset. More recently, Granena and Long (2013, p. 336) reaffirmed this timeframe, stating: “. . . the evidence from this study, plus from previous research by others, leads to the conclusion that there is an SP for phonology, its offset beginning at age six, and possibly earlier . . . probably closing by age 12.” It is important to note that there is no reason to believe that any specific age will ever be identified, so these timeframes are generalizations. As Munro and Mann (2005, p. 337) point out: “[no] model of an age–accent connection should ever hope to claim ‘before age X, a person is guaranteed to develop a native accent and, after age Y, a foreign accent is unavoidable’” On balance, however, the preponderance of evidence indicates that most non-native speakers will speak with a foreign accent if they are immersed in a second language after about the age of twelve, although the age of offset of the sensitive period for some speakers may come a few years later. The individual variations found between these ages lend credence to the notion of a sensitive period as opposed to a critical period.

## Ultimate Attainment

The relevance of the critical period to accent modification is clear—it is natural for adults to have accents. Many factors can affect a non-native accent. Some may be within the control of the speaker, such as motivation, amount of practice, formal study of the language, and length of residence in a country where the language is spoken; others are beyond the speaker’s control, such as native language or linguistic aptitude. Nevertheless, if we control for all of these factors, the most significant variable is still the age of immersion in the target language environment.

If we end the discussion by agreeing that the age at which someone is immersed in a foreign language is strongly predictive of whether that person will speak with a native or non-native accent, then we miss one crucial point that is inextricably tied to the world of accent modification: what can an adult learner ultimately attain in terms of a nativelike accent? In other words, is it ever possible for an adult learner to speak another language with a native accent? There is strong evidence suggesting that the answer is no. Despite this fact, many non-native speakers strive to sound exactly like natives and many natives expect them to do so.

It is important to analyze this issue in detail because we know that many non-native speakers cite native-sounding speech as their goal. As discussed above, Derwing (2003) quantified the percentage of learners who desired this outcome at 95%, and it is easy to understand why this number is so high. Being capable of sounding like a native implies that the speaker is still able to sound non-native as well, but the reverse is not true. Given the choice between two possible outcomes of learning a second language—one in which you could choose to sound exactly like a native whenever you liked, and another in which you would always sound non-native, which one would you choose? Intellectually, we can agree that there is no good reason for native-sounding speakers to have advantages over non-native-sounding speakers, but it would be wishful thinking to deny the tremendous amount of discrimination that occurs based solely on the way someone sounds when they speak, even if it is unrelated to issues such as intelligibility and naturalness, and it would be unreasonable to sidestep the expectations of our clients and the native speakers they interact with.

Several studies dating back to the 1990s have attempted to falsify the critical period theory with evidence of exceptional learners who attained native-sounding speech despite being late learners of a language. Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, and Moselle (1994), analyzed Julie, a highly successful late second language learner, who as a twenty-one-year-old monolingual British immigrant to Egypt, found herself immersed in an exclusively Arabic environment when her husband was unexpectedly called into the Egyptian military. During a 45-day period spent with her monolingual, Arabic-speaking in-laws, Julie began to acquire Arabic; within two years she was often mistaken for a native speaker. Ioup et al. collected a spontaneous speech sample by asking Julie and several native-speaking controls to talk about their favorite recipes. Julie was rated as a native speaker by 7 of the 13 judges. Other studies have also reported on exceptional learners who attained native-sounding speech as evidenced by self-ratings or native-speaker ratings of recorded phrases or spontaneous speech (Moyer, 1999; Nikolov, 2009; Piller, 2002).

In a more thorough analysis, Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009) studied 195 Spanish-Swedish bilinguals who self-identified as having native Swedish accents, and found that none of the speakers who acquired Swedish after age 17 were able to pass as native speakers after rigorous examination, concluding that “absolute nativelikeness in late learners, in principle, does not occur.” They argued that previous reports of exceptional learners were identified due to “subjective, and unverified observations, . . . inappropriate definitions of nativelikeness or insufficiently sophisticated techniques for linguistic scrutiny.” (p. 292)



It can be difficult to evaluate evidence of exceptional learners. Anecdotal reports are often made by non-natives, who may not be able to judge native speech accurately. Second-hand reports of native speakers complimenting someone on their nativelike speech tend to be more likely due to flattery than intensive phonological analysis. Scovel (1988, p. 177) points out that in some cases, “. . . when they say, ‘I’m amazed that you sound just like a native!’ they are really saying something like ‘You speak my language brilliantly—especially for a foreigner!’” Objective measures used in research may be insufficient due to a ceiling effect: a non-native might pass for a native when reading a sentence but not when several minutes of spontaneous speech are examined. In fact, it is essentially possible for any adult learner to pass for a native speaker depending on the conditions. A non-native may be mistaken for a native when saying a single word, reciting a prepared phrase, or speaking in a loud environment, but this is not what is generally understood to mean by acquiring a native accent. In order to bolster the argument that nativelike speech is not truly acquired by late learners, this book uses another type of evidence.

## Actors and Spies

In almost every profession, speakers who have an accent but communicate effectively can carry out their work as well as a native speaker, but there are two professions that come to mind when considering occupations in which even a trace of an accent might cause significant difficulties: acting and undercover spying. Actors work hard to create the illusion that they are someone else, so actors playing native-speaking American characters need to sound as if they were born in the United States. In a similar vein, but with higher stakes, deep cover spies or “moles” need to convince others that they are part of the very societies they are working against. By examining the role of accent in these two professions, we can find more evidence for the notion that attaining accents that are indistinguishable from native versions appears to be extremely rare, if not entirely impossible.

To shape their performances, successful actors must have, almost by definition, above average abilities to observe the voices and gestures of those around them and to mimic them accurately. When training for their roles, they are careful to create an identity for their character that will ring true for their audience. Many actors have been successful at sounding exactly like speakers of other dialects of their language when they are on the stage or screen. Hugh Laurie, who is originally from England and normally speaks with a British accent, played an American character successfully for eight seasons on the television series *House*, and many Americans reported that they only realized he was not from the United States when they heard him speaking in his native dialect during interviews. British actors have a strong tradition of voice training, and television and movies expose them to a great deal of American English, but actors from around the world also appear to be able to imitate mutually intelligible dialects when reading their lines.

The key points above are “performance” and “dialect.” Hugh Laurie practiced his dialog carefully before each episode, and even then reported that he dreaded certain words or phrases such as *New York* because he felt he could never say them with credible rhoticity (Rose, 2012). Although he could probably get through a day speaking American

English without anyone realizing his origins, it would not be easy. This is an important point to keep in mind because the actual incidence of natives acquiring a second dialect to the point where they blend into their new environment completely is considered to be very low (Siegel, 2012). Moreover, when it comes to languages, as opposed to dialects, actors have an entirely different track record. Meryl Streep is frequently lauded for her skill with accents, but this is generally in reference to either her ability to accurately produce a dialect of English or English spoken with a non-native accent. When actors with considerable imitation skills play roles in which they must speak a foreign language as a native, they are virtually always identifiable as having an accent by speakers of that language. Robin Williams, an incredibly talented mimic, studied Russian for five hours a day for five months before undertaking his role of a Muscovite in *Moscow on the Hudson* (Blau, 1984), and he performed much of the movie's dialog in that language with an impressive accent that nevertheless, would not convince a Russian audience that he was born there. Meryl Streep also worked meticulously to develop her accent for the lines she delivered in Polish in the movie *Sophie's Choice* (Maslin, 1982), but Poles, while impressed with her effort, would not mistake her for a native. There have been many stars and supporting players who learned English as adults and found success in Hollywood, but they are not cast in roles that require the audience to believe they are native speakers. When they are cast in such roles, audiences may notice and the suspension of belief evaporates. There are exceptions, such as Christoph Waltz, the gifted multilingual actor from Vienna, who played an American character in the movie *Big Eyes*, but directors understand that this is a gamble because the audience will likely notice that the actor is not a native speaker. It is also noteworthy that in virtually every case in which an actor or actress has portrayed a native speaker of English without having had significant pre-pubescent exposure to the language, their native language has been from the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, and typically a close relative of English, such as Dutch. In short, given the level of talent and motivation of the non-native English-speaking actors around the globe, the fact that none of them routinely play native-speaking Americans serves as anecdotal evidence of how difficult this is to achieve.

Similarly, in the world of espionage, intelligence agencies from around the world have high motivation to train their agents to infiltrate another country by speaking its language in a way that would not draw attention. The notion of deep cover spies who are trained to speak another language perfectly has been popularized by spy novels and movies, but the reality is quite different. In the former Soviet Union, a 1970s television mini-series, *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, captured the nation's attention by portraying the exploits of a Russian intelligence officer who was able to infiltrate the Nazi high command in the closing days of World War II. The series is said to be based on the real-life exploits of Nikolai Kuznetsov, who was born near the Urals but could pass for German even though he had never traveled outside of his home country. It is difficult to assess his actual abilities since he died in the war and was lionized immediately afterward, but it is important to note two relevant points. First, his interactions with Germans were relatively short, and second, he was careful to never speak the particular German dialect of his interlocutors, so as an analogy, if he had operated in English he might have chosen an

Irish dialect when talking to someone from New York. Despite his apparent success, this type of case is extremely rare; in the history of espionage, virtually all undercover spies had significant pre-pubescent exposure to their target language, whether by birth in an environment where the language is spoken or from interaction with a native-speaking parent.

Several recent spy stories attest to this phenomenon. Jack Barsky was an East German spy recruited by the KGB to penetrate West Germany in the 1970s. During his training in Moscow it was discovered that he had an incredible talent for accent and had acquired English exceptionally quickly. The KGB decided to take a risk and send him to work as a sleeper agent in the United States, where he would attempt to pass himself off as an American with a German mother. Although he was never activated, he was caught by the FBI, but because he had never actually spied and was able to provide useful information, he was never charged with a crime and went on to become a U.S. citizen and author. This story provides several important insights. First, his accent abilities predated his training to become a sleeper agent. In other words, the KGB did not train him to speak with a nearly flawless native accent, but rather they exploited his unique gift. Second, the fact that he was given a cover story of having a German mother indicates his handlers were nervous that someone might pick up on traces of his accent.

The FX channel series, *The Americans*, depicts a group of Soviet agents trained to blend into American society, and it bears a loose resemblance to actual events that unfolded in 2010 as the FBI arrested 10 Russian agents who had moved into an American neighborhood to create a spy base. When events like this reach the public's attention, they feed into the belief that spies can achieve native-sounding accents. On a website devoted to a language teaching business promising fluency in just 3 months, the owner refers to this specific group of spies and argues that they had achieved accents that were indistinguishable from native speakers, with the implication that others could do the same with the right techniques and effort. In fact, even though some of these agents spoke excellent English, they generally pretended to be from Belgium or Quebec since it was obvious to any casual listener that they were not native speakers. The agent with the accent closest to native (Andrei Bezrukov) has given many interviews in English, and his slight accent is easily detectable within seconds. Thus, even when a sophisticated foreign intelligence service attempts to plant non-native speakers into another society, their trained agents cannot truly pass for natives, and a search of the annals of world espionage provides no counterevidence.

In the final analysis, non-native speakers who are proficient in English and have intelligible and natural pronunciation can do well in any job they choose, and accent should not be a barrier. The two notable exceptions are spying and acting, and for those professions the accent itself can determine success. While the public holds onto the belief that spies, actors, and other non-native speakers often break the odds and achieve nativelike accents, a critical review of the scientific evidence and historical record disproves this claim.

Perhaps you know someone who has learned a language without significant exposure to it in their youth and can speak it without sounding any different than a native. These exceptional learners may exist, but if so, they are exceedingly rare. Perhaps more





importantly for those of us working in the field of accent modification, we do not know how they got there, and it certainly was not because of our work. Derwing and Munro (2015, p. 34), who have spent decades researching accents, state unequivocally, “no study has ever shown that instruction or other systematic training can help adult L2 learners to speak with a perfectly nativelylike accent at all times under all conditions.” On the other hand, we can all cite many examples of non-native language learners who achieve nativelylike phonological proficiency, although they are still identifiable as non-natives. This is a practical and achievable outcome for anyone, and accent modification can play a significant role in bringing it about.

## Effective Communication

While some clients may have difficulty accepting the permanence of their accents, it is important to let them know that the accent itself does not have to be the source of their miscommunications. Clients should be proud of their backgrounds and the hard work they put into mastering another tongue. Their accents may set them apart, but they should not interfere significantly with the personal or professional success of non-native speakers if they are effective communicators. There are successful non-natives in virtually every profession in the world. For example, we encounter successful non-native speech-language pathologists, lawyers, teachers, doctors, air-traffic controllers, homemakers, and counselors.

A good analogy to highlight the shift away from focusing on eliminating traces of a non-native accent is the nature of dialects that bear similarities to one another. Languages have regional and social dialects, and in most cases, differences in speaking do not interfere with intelligibility or naturalness. When a speaker of American English communicates with someone from Ireland, for example, there is no doubt in either speaker’s mind that they grew up speaking different versions of English, yet they have little difficulty exchanging complex thoughts efficiently. Each speaker may spend some extra time processing language when segmentals or suprasegmentals stray from their expected targets, but there is minimal effect on overall communication. Speakers from Ireland do not need to sound exactly like speakers of American English to achieve their personal or professional goals in the United States, nor would Americans need to adopt an Irish dialect to succeed in the Republic of Ireland. In much the same way, non-native speakers may have accents that mark them as coming from a different part of the world, but they are capable of being equal and even better communicators in English than their native-speaking peers.

As another analogy, beyond the world of language, think of speakers of each language of the world as playing both a different instrument and a different style of music. We might imagine a speaker of English playing violin and a speaker of Mandarin Chinese playing piano. In order to make music successfully in the American style, the Chinese musician does not have to concentrate on making the piano sound just like a violin. Instead, the goal is to adapt to the new musical style. The instruments will sound different, but the music they make together can be beautiful.

