

The “Best-Kept-Secret Career”

by Judith Maginnis Kuster

Patricia Cecil-Reed identified “accent-reduction specialist” (also called “accent modification”) as “the number-one best-kept-secret career” with a mean annual salary of \$63,740 (*U. S. News & World Report*, December 2008). Employment requires “a master’s degree and licensure in speech-language pathology or ESL training” (<http://hotjobs.yahoo.com/career-articles-best-kept-secret-careers-811>).

ASHA's position paper on social dialects (1983; www.asha.org/docs/html/PS1983-00115.html) states, “no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language.” However, in our global economy, business executives, university professors, graduate teaching assistants, clergy (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vB90Uqk3W-Q), technicians, foreign Web site developers, medical staff, and others from around the world may wish to learn a standard dialect, and speech-language pathologists are uniquely qualified to provide this service.

“What American Accent Do You Have?” demonstrates (unscientifically) that we all have a dialect (www.gotoquiz.com/what-american-accent-do-you-have), and a short humorous video from Berlitz shows the importance of accent modification (www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vBn2-ia8zM).

To hear the phonological and prosodic features of potential client dialects, visit these sites that demonstrate various accents:

- George Mason University’s Speech Accent Archive (<http://accent.gmu.edu/>) provides 1,246 samples of native and non-native speakers of English all reading the same English paragraph.
- The International Dialects of English Archive by Paul Meier (<http://web.ku.edu/~idea/index.htm>) is “a free, online archive of primary source dialect and accent recordings for the performing arts.”
- Audio samples of accent improvement from the Institute of Language and Phonology (www.ajcomptonpesl.com/audio/index.html#) are short before and after sound files of speakers from 11 countries.
- The late Peter Ladefoged’s phonetics course allows listeners to hear “Arthur the Young Rat” in five English accents (www.phonetics.ucla.edu/course/transcription%20exercises/fivesentences.htm).
- Listeners can hear audio examples of all phonemes at the word level for nine English-speaking countries, including American English, at fonetiks.org (www.fonetiks.org/).

The unique intonation patterns of American English are a problem for virtually all non-native speakers. Working on a speaker’s prosody prior to or in conjunction with consonant and vowel drills is often recommended. These resources provide suggestions:

- Intonation and Stress—Key to Understanding and Being Understood, by Kenneth Beare (<http://esl.about.com/od/speakingadvanced/a/timestress.htm>)
- Teaching English Intonation to EFL/ESL Students, by Mehmet Celik (<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Celik-Intonation.html>)

- Teaching English Intonation and Stress Patterns, by Ted Power (www.btinternet.com/~ted.power/esl0108.html)
- Stress in Phrases and Sentences, a 10-minute YouTube presentation (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwWPUfaqnpE)
- Stress and Tone phrases (www.fonetiks.org/engsou7am.html)
- Carol Samuels' Pronunciation Strategies includes listening for stress patterns (<http://individual.utoronto.ca/English/SGSPronunciation.htm>)
- British English with some helpful tips and audio files of intonation patterns (www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/johnm/eptotd/cat-inton.htm)
- The Listen and Repeat Machine (www.manythings.org/lar/) a different exercise each day to improve intonation, rhythm and pronunciation

Many online resources offer the opportunity to *see* and *hear* how American English sounds are produced:

- The Sounds of Spoken Language (choose American English) animates production of each sound in isolation and in all word positions (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/#>).
- FunEasyEnglish (<http://funeasyenglish.com/english-video-lessons.htm>) visualizes pronouncing English sounds, with practice words for each sound.
- The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com/) defines and pronounces words.
- Jennifer's Free Language Tutorials include 35 pages of English vocabulary words in print (PDF) and audio (mp3) (www.ielanguages.com/lessonplan.html#englishmp3s).
- Eva Easton's "Authentic American Pronunciation" clearly pronounces words with all the sounds of American English, with many practice lessons (www.eleaston.com/pr/home.html).
- My "Vowel Practice" (www.mnsu.edu/comdis/phonetics/phonetics.html) pronounces words and sentences loaded with all American English vowel sounds.
- LanguageGuide.org (www.languageguide.org/english/) teaches vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation of English and many other languages through pictures and clear pronunciation.
- English Pronunciation/Listening (<http://international.ouc.bc.ca/pronunciation/>) includes interactive lesson plans and worksheets focused on problem sounds for second-language learners.
- American Clear Speech Sounds has good illustrations and exercises (www.paulnoll.com/Books/Clear-Speech/index.html).

Minimal pairs can focus attention on pronunciation differences:

- Perfect Your English Pronunciation with Minimal Pair Practice (www.shiporsheep.com/page1.html)
- American English Pronunciation Practice (www.manythings.org/pp/)
- "Minimal Pairs for English" by John Higgins (<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/wordscape/wordlist/>)
- Caroline Bowen's Minimal Pair Wordlists (www.speech-language-therapy.com/wordlists.html)

Advanced practice can employ reading script phrases and sentences along with Internet audio pronunciation:

- Videos of English sounds and functional phrases (www.ugoeigo.com/).
- Listen and Repeat Machine (www.manythings.org/lar/) provides daily practice of intonation, rhythm, and pronunciation.
- VOA's Special English Programs (www.manythings.org/voa/rss/) offers podcast RSS feed audio for ESL.
- Breaking News English (www.breakingnewsenglish.com/index.html) offers current news events in British English

Finally, an appreciation for the culture of your client is not only interesting, but also important in working on accent modification. The following two Web sites are good places to start:

- Side-by-side similarities and differences between two countries are available at side.aneiki.com (www.aneiki.com/comparison.php).
- Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions (www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php) offers a graphic comparison of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation.

Judith Maginnis Kuster, MS, CCC-SLP, is an emerita professor from the Department of Speech, Hearing, and Rehabilitation Services at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Contact her at judith.kuster@mnsu.edu. An archive of all of Kuster's columns can be found at www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster4/leader.html. URLs change, however, and there is no guarantee that links from previous columns are still functional.