Proficient in English But Trying to Lose Their Accents

The New York Times

April 21, 1996, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

Distribution: Long Island Weekly Desk

Section: Section 13LI; ; Section 13LI; Page 8; Column 1; Long Island Weekly Desk ; Column 1;

Length: 1309 words

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Body

GUIDO MASSOLA is holding his hand in front of his face and staring intently at Arlene Corcoran's eyes and mouth. The two of them are slowly and rhythmically intoning the words, "doe, toe" over and over again. As Ms. Corcoran repeats the words, she asks Mr. Massola if he can feel his breath on his hand.

Mr. Massola, an insurance agent from Italy who has taken up residency in Huntington Station, is one of the estimated 250,000 immigrants living on Long Island who speak ***English*** with an ***accent***, even though they may be ***proficient*** in the language. He has opted to take a private class in ***accent*** reduction at the Berlitz Language Center in Mineola.

Because it is often difficult for some foreigners to distinguish between the sounds "d" and "t," teachers at the center have their students hold their hands in front of their faces in order to feel the heavier breath that comes with pronouncing "t" correctly.

The Berlitz Language Center in Mineola has teachers who are specially trained in the field of ***accent*** reduction. "Unfortunately, ***losing*** a foreign ***accent*** is not an easy task," said Agnes Jean, the center's acting director. "It takes time, determination and repetition, repetition, repetition. Some ***accents*** are more difficult to ***lose*** than others, and if the student lacks confidence, it will take much longer."

There are other ways of learning to feel at ease with ***English***. Once a month, 30 children from the Caribbean gather in St. Martha's Church in Uniondale to practice their communication skills. The Junior Speakers Forum, a Toastmasters International program that teaches children to be at ease with public speaking, was started three months ago by Headly Wilson, a civil engineer who is originally from Trinidad.

Mr. Wilson recalled his son's and daughter's experience when they came to this country 28 years ago. "They had heavy ***accents***," he said, "but that changed over the years." He added that this was to their advantage because "when you have an ***accent***, people can prejudge you as unintelligent."

Some immigrants on Long Island are not as fortunate as Mr. Wilson's children. Those who came here as teen-agers or adults often have a harder time ***losing*** their foreign pronunciation, even though they are ***proficient*** in ***English***. They may find themselves isolated socially and experience difficulties in finding jobs as well.

Sheldon Shamitz, director of the Adelphi University Refugee Assistance Program in Hempstead, said: "Americans often do not take the time to accustom their ears to ***English***-speaking foreigners. Some even feel that people with

accents simply don't understand and are even intellectually inferior. As a result, those with ***accents*** are limited in terms of access to opportunities in many spheres of society."

Seema Azim, a young woman who left Afghanistan 11 years ago, works with Mr. Shamitz as the job developer for Adelphi's program. Her function is to match refugees in need of employment with suitable companies. Ms. Azim has an excellent command of ***English***, but years of speaking her native tongue have accustomed her to pronouncing the letter "r" with a gutteral trill. Her vowels are clipped and sometimes ***lost*** in between consonants.

She has elicited mixed reactions to her ***English*** pronunciation. "When I was in college," she said, "some of my classmates remarked that I have a beautiful ***accent***."

Not everyone, however, shares this opinion. When Ms. Azim contacts prospective employers for her clients over the phone, she occasionally has negative reactions. "People may act one way when they meet you face-to-face, but on the phone they react differently," Ms. Azim said. "They don't know you, and they can't see what you look like. Sometimes when I call a company for the first time, they hang up on me. But other people who I've had contact with for a long time treat me very well."

Jennifer Gordon, executive director of the Workplace Project, a center for Hispanic immigrant workers in Hempstead, said there were an estimated 200,000 Hispanic people living on Long Island. This makes them the largest ethnic group in the area.

Omar Henriquez, a community organizer for the organization, came to Long Island 20 years ago as a teen-ager from El Salvador. At the time, he did not speak ***English*** at all. He began to teach himself, but became frustrated when his attempts to communicate in ***English*** were met with confused looks or demands to repeat himself. "I'm sure I was saying the right words, but I was difficult to understand because I had an ***accent***," he said. "It's frustrating because you know that you're an intelligent person, but if you can't communicate, then how will anyone else know? The perception is that if you have an ***accent***, you're an uneducated person. It's very wrong."

He said that at one point, he wanted to ***lose*** his ***accent***, but eventually changed his mind. "I don't want to do that now because it's what makes me who I am," Mr. Henriquez said. "It's part of my personality. I'm very proud of my ***accent***."

His co-worker, Rhina Ramos, also came to Long Island as a teen-ager from El Salvador. Ms. Ramos is a law school graduate who will be taking the bar exam this summer. Although she has been in the United States for 13 years, she speaks ***English*** with the rhythmic stresses of her native Spanish.

Like Mr. Henriquez, Ms. Ramos spoke no ***English*** when she came to this country. "I was placed in ESL for 10 months, and then they told me I was ready to go to regular classes with American kids," she said, "but I was always afraid to speak. In high school, I had a teacher who used to imitate my ***accent*** when I asked questions, so I decided not to talk in class and just study at home." As a result, she said, she did not develop her speaking skills as much as she would have liked to.

In college, one professor falsely accused her of not being the author of an eloquently written term paper, because it seemed incongruous coming from someone with such a thick ***accent***, she said. Eventually, other teachers rallied to her defense and convinced the professor of her honesty.

In addition, some students ***tried*** to correct her ***English***. "They didn't understand that it's not that I don't know how to speak," Ms. Ramos said. "It's just that I can't pronounce certain letters, like 'j' and 'y.' I mix them up."

She added that there is a comical side to this drawback. "I once met someone who went to Yale University, and he kept talking about Salvadorians in Yale, and I thought he meant prison," Ms. Ramos said. "It can be quite confusing, but it gets funny after a while. You can't take it seriously and let it get to you. You have to move on."

Gladys Serrano is the executive director of the Hispanic Counseling Center in Hempstead. She came to Long Island 25 years ago from Colombia. Although her ***accent*** is distinctly Spanish, she has an optimistic view of the situation. "Everyone in my agency is bilingual," she said. "A lot of people like myself have ***accents***, but that doesn't

cause any problems as long as you have an education. It can be difficult at times, but I think it's also difficult to ***lose*** an ***accent***, especially if you came to this country later in life. To have an ***accent*** can also be a good thing. The fact that some people are bilingual is very important. I'm proud to say that I am Hispanic and I know that my ***accent*** is heavy, but at the same time, I'm happy that we are providing good services to the community."

Dr. Susanne Bleiberg Seperson, professor of sociology at Dowling College in Oakdale, said: "People who are born here are not used to listening to those with foreign ***accents***. It's so ethnocentric of us to demand that the only language that people speak perfectly be ***English***. I think that's changing because weUre going to be forced to change. We're at least going to become more comfortable with it because the population mix is changing."

Graphic

Photo: Arline Corcoran, an instructor, works with Guido Massola of Italy on the pronounciation of the letter "h," as in house. (Steve Berman for The New York Times)

Classification

Language: ***ENGLISH***

Subject: LANGUAGE SCHOOLS (90%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); CHILDREN (88%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (88%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (77%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (73%); REFUGEES (71%); ADOLESCENTS (64%); GRANDCHILDREN (64%)

Company: BERLITZ INTERNATIONAL INC (90%); BERLITZ INTERNATIONAL INC BERLITZ INTERNATIONAL INC (90%)

Organization: BERLITZ INTERNATIONAL INC

Industry: LANGUAGE SCHOOLS (90%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (79%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (79%); TRINIDAD & TOBAGO (77%); AFGHANISTAN (65%)

Load-Date: April 21, 1996