

Title:

Music 101: The Key To Pronunciation And Accent Reduction

Word Count:

735

Summary:

"Without music life would be a mistake"

These are the words of the famous German Philosopher Frederik Nietzsche, and as a specialist in pronunciation and Accent Reduction for non-native English speakers, I can attest to this regarding the English language. English is a musical language, as is Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, and many other languages. The trick to speaking English with clarity and impact, is understanding the melody and rhythm that is specific to English, but...

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Article Body:

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These are the words of the famous German Philosopher Frederik Nietzsche, and as a specialist in pronunciation and Accent Reduction for non-native English speakers, I can attest to this regarding the English language. English is a musical language, as is Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, and many other languages. The trick to speaking English with clarity and impact, is understanding the melody and rhythm that is specific to English, but differs in other languages. Therefore, without the music of the English language, pronunciation is a mistake.

If English were a two-man band, it would be made up of a drum and a saxophone. Firstly, English is a swinging language, more like a jazz or rock group than a classical orchestra. English sounds are big, loud, and emphatic, and our melody is bold and dance-worthy.

I hear complaints from my students time and time again that they are always asked to repeat themselves, and even when they do, the listener still has difficulty understanding. Where does this come from? There are three major components that make up an accent: Sounds (consonants and vowels), Rhythm (stressed and unstressed words), and Intonation (the rise and fall of pitch in a

sentence).

Let's take as an example, a native Russian speaker. When my former student, Raisa, said the word "coffee", she pronounced it "Kofi" with a quick "O" sound as in the word "Coke". There are two things that keep the listener from processing the word that she is trying to say. The first is the length of the vowel; in English we have stressed vowels that hold like a half note, instead of a quarter note, for example. The second problem is the articulation of the vowel. Russians tend to have a tight jaw when speaking, which inhibits proper pronunciation of the English open-vowel sounds such as in the words "coffee," "politics," and "options". In a modern pop song, most of the emotion comes in the singing of vowels. Think of Celine Dion, Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, who are known for stretching their notes. The same goes in English. We create impact and emotion in our vowel sounds. So not only is it necessary for the sake of proper articulation, but it is also a leveraging point for powerful speakers.

In the case of Rhythm, I will use, Luc, a former French student as an example. Most of his presentations and conversations sounded deadpan and unclear. In the French language, each syllable and word in a sentence should get equal emphasis. Conversely, in English, we not only stress certain syllables, but we stress certain words. Typically, we stress nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and question words (content words), and we de-emphasize articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, and "to be" verbs (structure words). This allows certain words to jump out at the listener, avoiding a stream of words that become jumbled together. So, with the implementation of rhythm, Luc went from a crowd sleeper to a crowd pleaser.

Last, but not least, we have the component of Intonation. Intonation is the overall melody of a song or a sentence. It allows the listener to determine the mood and the intention of the sentence. For example, Sylvia was an Italian student of mine, who constantly left a rising intonation at the end of her sentences. This made Sylvia look unsure of herself because her statements were delivered as questions. Sylvia's biggest challenge was overcoming working in a male-dominated, English speaking industry. Therefore, helping her control her intonation patterns was a first step in creating a better clarity and a more positive perception in the workplace. This is just one example of how intonation can affect the delivery of a speech. As in music, the more dramatic the change from high to low pitch, the more intense the delivery of a thought becomes. This can be used not only for clarity, but also for persuasiveness and emphasis. Intonation sets the tone, so it is extremely important for a non-native English speaker to understand the intonation patterns of the English language.

So, if you are a non-native English speaking individual and you are tired of

asking you to repeat yourself, you can always crank up the stereo and sing your heart out to your favorite American artists, or if you're worried about what your neighbors will think, take some accent reduction classes with an expert!