

BEYOND ESL: ACCENT LANGUAGE SERVICES FOR PROFESSIONALS

Working with employers to overcome communication and cultural challenges of top talent



Bernadette Hendrickx, Accent Language Services Founder

Lungs, lips, palate, teeth, tongue. Without even taking into account the nuances of grammar and arbitrariness of idioms, the delicate array of musculature required to work in tandem to produce the spoken word is daunting. And yet, most humans are capable of mastering the fundamentals of their native language before they've acquired the coordination to ride a bicycle without training wheels. The early development of speech is highly specific to the characteristics of the language being spoken. This means that those who have learned English as a second language, even to a high degree of proficiency, often face difficulty making themselves understood thanks to "fossilized" accents embedded in the very muscles of their mouths. Inability to express oneself clearly and quickly in English can be a critical professional disadvantage, particularly in the agile, team-based corporate cultures common to Kanata North's high tech sector.

"Heavily accented professionals are at a disadvantage because they lack what is called 'comfortable intelligibility,'" says Accent Language Services for Professionals founder Bernadette Hendrickx. "First- and second-generation Canadians often feel discriminated against in the workplace due to their accents, and the sad truth is, that's

often the case. But smart HR managers and recruiters know it too, and they see an opportunity to get the most out of talent other companies miss out on by helping them improve their language skills."

Accent provides a unique service to employers seeking to unlock the true potential of team members struggling with communication issues. Hendrickx, an expert in the accent modification field with over 20 years' experience as a language and performance teacher, designs an individualized curriculum for each client based on their needs. As Accent's website emphasizes, "Pronunciation is a physical skill." Hendrickx addresses clients' issues with the physical production of the English language through specialized exercises and routines.

"Changing the muscle memory of your speech apparatus is similar to taking tennis lessons after you've already 'taught yourself' how to play: you need to gain muscle awareness and then repeat the technique until it becomes automatic," explains Hendrickx.

Accent also focuses on the social and cultural roadblocks that impede effective communication and presentation skills in a westernized, high tech workplace (see sidebar) through techniques derived from Hendrickx's background in professional theatre, such as roleplay.

"I work with highly skilled professionals such as engineers and scientists, some of whom actually did their PhDs in English," says Hendrickx, "and I'm proud that I can boast a 100% success rate." A young company founded in 2014, Accent has already made a positive impact on many, reducing clients' first language "interference" within a matter of weeks, until speaking English becomes second nature.

ISSUES ACCENT MODIFICATION EXPERTS HEAR FROM PROFESSIONALS ON A REGULAR BASIS:

1. "My English is good, but I don't feel confident enough to contribute my ideas to our team."
2. "I'm tired of repeating myself."
3. "I haven't received a promotion in years, and I know it's because of my strong accent."
4. "I work by myself because people don't understand me."
5. "I struggle with simply ordering a meal."
6. "My English sounds so bad on the phone so I do everything by email."
7. "I think people judge me to be unintelligent as soon as I start speaking, so I just don't say anything."
8. "I only speak to people from my own country because nobody else understands me." and, sadly...
9. "I will never reach my true potential."

Bernadette Hendrickx, from her blog post "Comfortable Intelligibility"

