

The AI start-up erasing call-centre-worker accents: is it fighting bias – or perpetuating it?

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate – Teacher's notes

Article summary: The article describes how a computer program is being used to make foreign accents sound more American so that callers in the USA can understand operators at call centres in countries like India.

Time: 60 minutes

Skills: Reading, Speaking, Writing

Language focus: Vocabulary

Materials needed: One copy of the worksheet per student

1. Warmer

- a. The purpose of this activity is to introduce the idea of some words being different in varieties of the same language. Indian English (or, more precisely, the multiple Indian English accents), which is discussed in the article, tends to use British vocabulary, so Americans calling call centres in India may not understand these words. There are hundreds of examples but these are some of the most common. Note that Americans do use the word *biscuit*, but it refers to a type of baked bread. Also, most Americans use the word *gas* when referring to *gasoline* or petrol. When students have finished the warmer, ask them if they know any other pairs of American and British words (e.g., *movie/film*; *apartment/flat*; *underground/subway*, etc.).

Key:

1. *petrol*
2. *soccer*
3. *autumn*
4. *cookie*
5. *lift*

2. Key words

- a. Ask students to do the exercise individually and then compare their answers in pairs or small groups. Note that the answers to items 1 and 2 are both in

the article title. Note that in the verb *abuse* the 's' is pronounced as /z/, while in the noun form it is pronounced /s/.

Key:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. <i>call centre</i> | 6. <i>mimic</i> |
| 2. <i>Westerner</i> | 7. <i>Training</i> |
| 3. <i>Software</i> | 8. <i>salary</i> |
| 4. <i>transform</i> | 9. <i>abuse</i> |
| 5. <i>frustrated</i> | 10. <i>flat</i> |

3. Comprehension check

- a. Ask students to work individually to answer the questions and then compare their answers in pairs or small groups. The answers given are not the only possible answers. For example, in item 1 students may say 'It sounded American' or similar. The word *laboratory* mentioned in the text is problematic because Americans stress the first syllable.

Key:

1. *It sounded completely different.*
2. *accents*
3. *It transforms a speaker's accent into a different one.*
4. *The customer becomes frustrated.*
5. *about a thousand*
6. *the Philippines and India*
7. *because Indians pronounce it with the stress on the second syllable*
8. *working at night and sleeping in the day*
9. *He has mixed feelings.*
10. *flat, robotic, and neutral*

4. Key language

- a. These words are normally stressed in the same way in both American and British English. Note that two-syllable verbs tend to have the stress on the second syllable but this is not always the case. Words ending in -ee are usually pronounced with the stress on the last syllable, e.g., *refugee*.

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Key:

A	o	o	B	o	o
<i>accent</i>			<i>upset</i>		
<i>constant</i>			<i>pronounce</i>		
<i>agent</i>			<i>trainee</i>		
<i>demo</i>			<i>abuse</i>		
<i>mimic</i>			<i>transform</i>		
<i>feedback</i>			<i>respect</i>		

5. Discussion

- a. Allow students time to note down their ideas and encourage them to give reasons for their answer.

6. In your own words

- a. This could also be done as homework.