

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

### Level 2: 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, 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. In the UK, *chips* are what Americans call *fries*. Also, Americans usually use the word *gas* when talking about *gasoline* or *petrol*. When students have completed the warmer, ask them if they know any other words that differ in the two varieties of English (e.g., *apartment/flat*; *sneakers/trainers*; *pants/trousers*, etc.).

**Key:**

British English	American English
<i>pavement</i>	<b>sidewalk</b>
<b>tap</b>	<i>faucet</i>
<i>starter</i>	<b>appetizer</b>
<i>petrol</i>	<b>gas</b>
<b>postcode</b>	<i>zip code</i>
<i>autumn</i>	<b>fall</b>
<b>handbag</b>	<i>purse</i>
<b>cashpoint</b>	<i>ATM</i>
<b>biscuit</b>	<i>cookie</i>
<i>crisps</i>	<b>potato chips</b>

#### 2. Key words

- a. Ask students to do the exercise individually and then compare their answers in pairs or small groups. Note that the verb *alter* appears in its participial form in the compound word *voice-altering*, so it may be tricky for learners to locate. The ‘s’ in the verb *abuse* is pronounced as /z/, while in the noun form it is /s/.

**Key:**

- |                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. <i>nasal</i>      | 6. <i>neutralize</i> |
| 2. <i>alter</i>      | 7. <i>mimic</i>      |
| 3. <i>hurdle</i>     | 8. <i>abuse</i>      |
| 4. <i>frustrated</i> | 9. <i>diminish</i>   |
| 5. <i>witness</i>    | 10. <i>flat</i>      |

#### 3. Comprehension check

- a. The answers given are only suggested answers and students may correctly answer the questions in different ways, e.g., in item 3 they may say ‘He changed his name because he wanted to sound American’, or similar.

**Key:**

1. *True*
2. *True*
3. *False. He changed his name to sound more American because he experienced discrimination.*
4. *True*
5. *False. It has been positive.*
6. *True*
7. *False. They had to relearn the pronunciation of some words to sound American.*
8. *True*
9. *False. He has mixed feelings about it.*
10. *False. He thinks Sanas makes the speaker lose their emotion and politeness.*

#### 4. Key language

- a. Students could be asked to do this exercise individually and then compare their answers in pairs. Ask students to refer back to the text to see the words in context. Note that *social* can also be used with *centre*, but the solution given in the key is the only one that uses all six phrases.

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**Key:**

- |      |      |
|------|------|
| 1. e | 4. c |
| 2. a | 5. b |
| 3. f | 6. d |

You can add Indian English to the list but note that India is linguistically and culturally extremely diverse. Therefore, speakers of English as a first language in India will have very varied accents because they are usually bilingual or multilingual.

#### 5. Discussion

- a. Allow students time to note down their ideas about each statement and encourage them to say why they agree or disagree with each one.

You can follow this task up with a discussion on the meaning of 'correct' or 'native' pronunciation in English and what it means to a learner of English as a second language.

#### 6. In your own words

- a.-b. This task might require some explanation. To start with, you need to introduce the idea of the standard American accent and Received Pronunciation in British English to your students. You can do so by having them to look at a dictionary, both British and American English. Explain that, in both cases, the pronunciation that is coded in the phonemic script is a standard, generalized pronunciation, and that most people in the two countries speak with accents differing from these charts.

Then mention that English is spoken as the first language in many countries around the world and in each of them people have distinct accents. too. Then encourage students to explore these differences by researching the varieties of English in a chosen country. You can either let them pick or assign them a country (accent) from the list below. Students can also look for videos of people speaking with these accents and try to pick out the differences themselves.

#### Suggested countries and accents:

- Nigerian Standard English
- Scottish English (Standard Scottish English)
- Jamaican English (not Jamaican Patois)
- South African English
- Irish English
- Australian English