

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

Level 3: Advanced – 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 warmer is to introduce the idea that there are different varieties of English and, therefore, different ways of pronouncing the same word. The article mentions the Indian way of pronouncing *laboratory*, which is also the British English way as India was a British colony. Ask students to decide whether the six words are stressed in an American or a British way and then to suggest the equivalent in the other variety. There are three of each. Note some Americans also say *advertis^{ment}*, with a secondary stress on the first syllable.

Key:

1. British (US: *lab^orat^ory*)
2. American (UK: *bro^{ch}ure*)
3. American (UK: *ad^{dress}*)
4. British (US: *vacc^{ine}*)
5. American (UK: *gar^{age}*)
6. British (US: *ad^{vert}isement*)

2. Key words

- a. Ask students to do the exercise individually and then compare their answers in pairs or small groups. The word *brunt* has a very restricted use and is only found in the collocation 'bear the brunt' or 'take the brunt' of something, as in "The city bore the full brunt

of the hurricane". Another word for a *thick* accent is a *strong* accent. Note that the opposite of a thick accent is not a thin accent but a *slight* accent.

Key:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>nasal</i> | 6. <i>taxing</i> |
| 2. <i>hurdle</i> | 7. <i>thick</i> |
| 3. <i>Neutralization</i> | 8. <i>mimic</i> |
| 4. <i>shortcut</i> | 9. <i>abuse</i> |
| 5. <i>brunt</i> | 10. <i>diminish</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 1 they may say 'software that makes speakers sound more American' or similar.

Key:

1. *accent-translation software*
2. *because their accents can make them difficult to understand*
3. *because he faced discrimination for his Indian accent*
4. *They often become frustrated and ask to speak to someone in America.*
5. *They feel more confident.*
6. *to make call-centre workers more comprehensible to the other side*
7. *the fact that they have to work at night because of the time difference with the USA*
8. *The word stress they use is British and different from the American pronunciation of the word.*
9. *He has mixed feelings about it.*
10. *He thought it sounded robotic and flat.*

4. Key language

- a. Students could be asked to do this exercise individually and then compare their answers in pairs.

Key:

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. <i>c</i> | 4. <i>f</i> |
| 2. <i>e</i> | 5. <i>b</i> |
| 3. <i>a</i> | 6. <i>d</i> |

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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.

6. In your own words

- a. The task could also be done as a homework task and students could then present their reports to the class. If you want to extend this task to include more details, follow the instructions on the Intermediate worksheet, which are also suitable for this level.