

## Talking your way to success: accent bias in the workplace

**Level:** Advanced (C1–C2)

**Time:** Approximately 90 minutes (plus extra time for research and writing)

**Business topics:** accent bias, discrimination, classism, equality in the workplace

**Business language:** equality in the workplace vocabulary, pronunciation

**Activities:** discussing accent bias, key words, understanding the text, business language, discussion, discussion and writing about action that should be taken to prevent discrimination in the workplace

**Groups:** whole class, one-to-one, pair work or small groups

**Overview:** This article shares examples of how accent bias still prevents people with working-class backgrounds from becoming successful in their careers.

### 1. Warmer

- a. Ask students to read the definition. You can point out that we all have unconscious biases (even though we don't all act in the same discriminatory manner). *Biased* is the adjective form. Put students into pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the questions. Write any emergent language related to the topic on the board.

### 2. Key words

- a. Ask students to complete the task individually and then compare their answers in small groups before eliciting the answers from the whole class. You can also ask half the students to complete 1–6 and the other half to complete 8–12 and then work together to check and share their answers. If students need support, encourage them to complete the activity methodically by first reading the definition and example sentence, identifying the part of speech and then scanning the paragraph for that part of speech.

**Key:**

1. *posh*
2. *crush*
3. *privilege*
4. *enunciate*
5. *distinctive*
6. *ceiling*
7. *prospects*
8. *classism*
9. *working-class / working class*
10. *social mobility*
11. *pernicious*
12. *incentives*

### 3. Understanding the article

- a. Ask students to scan the article for the information in each statement, then to write their answers in their own words. You can ask them to compare their answers in pairs before checking with the whole class.

**Key:**

1. *American actress and comedian, Kirstey Alley from Kansas; Glaswegian actor Robbie Coltrane; English actress from London, Angela Lansbury; Queen Elizabeth II, who obviously spoke 'the Queen's English'*
2. *He doesn't want to remind us of his posh origins and that he was born into the top of the hierarchy.*
3. *The show looks at how accent bias is still a factor in career advancement in the UK.*
4. *70% of newsreaders speak in accents that represent only 10% of the population, and the industrial working class, which represent around 75% of accents in the UK, were underrepresented.*
5. *None of them got the jobs they seemingly deserved because they didn't sound the part.*
6. *Only 21% of senior leadership positions in the City are held by people from working-class backgrounds.*
7. *The writer tried to sound less 'posh English' while working in Ireland. She didn't want to remind his colleagues of 400 years of colonial rule.*
8. *She hopes that the documentary will encourage employers to make their hiring more diverse so that more people with working-class backgrounds can rise to elevated leadership roles.*

## 4. Business language

- a. First provide a model. Ask students to look at the word “business” and clap out the number of syllables (2 syllables: *busi-ness* /'biz.nɪs/). Then ask them where the stress lies (first syllable – show them how this is indicated by a straight apostrophe in the dictionary entry). Then ask students to work together in pairs or small groups and read the words out loud and identify the number of syllables and word stress. Encourage them to use a dictionary to check their answers. **Key:**
1. *ad-vance-ment* /əd'vɑːnsmənt/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
  2. *ca-reer* /kə'reə/ – 2 syllables, stress on second syllable
  3. *class-ism* /'klɑːs.ɪzəm/ – 3 syllables, stress on first syllable
  4. *con-se-quence* /'kɒnsɪkwəns/ – 3 syllables, stress on first syllable
  5. *di-vi-sions* /di'vɪʒənz/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
  6. *em-plo-yer* /ɪm'plɔɪə/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
  7. *in-clu-sive* /ɪn'kluːsɪv/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
  8. *me-tro-po-li-tan* /metrə'pɒlɪtən/ – 5 syllables, stress on third syllable
  9. *pre-ju-di-ces* /'predʒʊdɪz/ – 4 syllables in plural form, 3 syllables in singular form, stress on first syllable
  10. *so-cial* /'səʊʃəl/ – 2 syllables, stress on first syllable

- b. Ask students to repeat the *schwa* sound. Explain that it is a lazy and neutral sound and that they don't need to move their lips to produce the sound. Go over the examples *social*, *investment*, and *little*. Use an online dictionary to provide a model if needed. Then ask students to say the words out loud again and try to identify the unstressed *schwa* sounds. Check with the whole class.

**Key:**

1. *advancement*
2. *classism*
3. *consequence*
4. *divisions*
5. *employer*
6. *metropolitan*

- c. Ask students to first practise saying the words from the previous activity and repeating them with the correct stress and pronunciation. Then encourage them to work in pairs and take turns reading the sentences and listening to offer corrections.

Encourage them to have fun and try out different accents as they read the sentences. Help them notice what changes with each accent. Is there more or less enunciation? Are the vowels longer or shorter? Are consonants crisper?

## 5. Discussion questions

- a. Put the students in pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the questions. When students have covered all the questions, bring the whole class back together so that they can share their answers and any interesting information that arose from their discussions.

## Extension

Ask students to go to the website and explore different accents in the UK or other countries. Encourage them to compare the accents in a locale between people from different backgrounds.

## 6. Wider business theme – diversity in the workplace

- a. Ask a student to read the situation to the whole class. Ask questions to check understanding, (e.g., *what is the problem?*) (Staff from working-class backgrounds are not getting opportunities for leadership positions.) What needs to be discussed? (How to support all employees to advance in their careers.)

Then have someone else read the task. Divide the class into small groups (although there are six role cards, groups should ideally be smaller to allow each student more speaking time). Assign each student a role card and give them time to prepare individually before asking them to complete the task with the rest of their group.

Before the meeting is up, ask students to recap and summarise the main points and conclusions together with their group. Ask them to take notes while they do this.

## Extension

Ask students to use their notes to write an email to the rest of the class informing them of the decisions made in the meeting. If you do not want to assign a writing task, you can have a spokesperson from each group report their conclusions.