

Talking your way to success: accent bias in the workplace

Level: Intermediate (B1–B2)

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

- b. Ask students to complete the task individually and then compare their answers in small groups before eliciting examples from the whole class. You can also ask half the students to complete 1–6 and the other half to complete 7–12 and then work together to check and share their answers. If students need support, encourage them to do complete the activity methodically by first reading the definition and example sentence, identifying the part of speech and then looking at each word in the word pool.

Key:

1. *posh*
2. *tribe*
3. *represent, represented*
4. *hierarchy*
5. *prejudice*
6. *overcome*
7. *industrial*
8. *progress, progressed*
9. *prestige*
10. *social mobility*
11. *advance*
12. *incentive, 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. Ask students to compare their answers before checking with the whole class.

Key:

1. *False. Kirstey Alley was from Kansas; actor Robbie Coltrane was Glaswegian; Angela Lansbury was an English actress from London; and Queen Elizabeth II was of a different social class.*
2. *True*
3. *True*
4. *False. Chris, Paige, and Seth from the show experienced a form of classism that hasn't changed in the last 50 years.*
5. *False. No information is given about the UK, only the City, and it's much lower.*
6. *True*
7. *True*

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. **ca-reer** /kə'riə/ – 2 syllables, stress on second syllable
2. **class-ism** /'klɑ:s.ɪzəm/ – 3 syllables, stress on first syllable
3. **di-vi-sions** /di'vɪʒənz/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
4. **em-plo-yer** /ɪm'plɔɪə/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
5. **in-clu-sive** /ɪn'klu:sɪv/ – 3 syllables, stress on second syllable
6. **in-dus-trial** /ɪn'dʌstriəl/ – 4 syllables, stress on second syllable
7. **pre-ju-di-ces** /'predʒʊdɪs/ – 3 syllables in singular form, (4 syllables in plural form) stress on first syllable
8. **re-pre-sent** /,repri'zent/ – 3 syllables, stress on last syllable
9. **so-cial** /'səʊʃəl/ – 2 syllables, stress on first syllable

- b. Ask students to first identify and repeat the words from the previous activity. Then have them work in pairs and take turns to read the sentences and to listen and offer corrections. Encourage students to try and say the sentences more quickly each time.

Then ask students to 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 local 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. If students need more support, you can group them so that they share a role card and prepare before regrouping them and asking them to complete the task with a different 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 a short email to the rest of the class informing them of the decisions made in the meeting. Allow them to use the support provided, but they can also use their own email structure if they prefer. If you do not want to assign a writing task, you can have a spokesperson from each group report their conclusions.