

They say a name like mine can hold you back in life, but I will never change it

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What does your name mean, and do you know its origin or cultural significance? How important is your name to your identity?
- Have you ever experienced someone having difficulty pronouncing a name? How did that situation make you or others feel?
- Do you think a person's name can influence their opportunities in life? Why or why not?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

anglicise	gazed at	prejudice
anticipation	heritage	subconscious
callbacks	markers	substitute teacher
counterparts	mispronounce	switch
detrimental	mutual understanding	wearying
fruitful	overt	well disposed to

1. If something is _____, it is very productive and produces good results.
2. When you _____ something, you say it in an incorrect way.
3. A(n) _____ is a shared knowledge or agreement between people.
4. To _____ means to change from one thing to another, often quickly and without much thought.
5. A(n) _____ is one who takes over when a member of staff is ill or unable to take their normal lessons.
6. If you're _____ something, you like it and have a positive or friendly attitude towards it.
7. _____ is the act of waiting for something to happen and looking forward to it.

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8. _____ are when you get asked to come to a second audition for a role in a play or film.
9. _____ means the same as 'tiring' or 'exhausting'.
10. An unfair or unreasonable opinion that is formed without much thought is called _____.
11. When you _____ something, you make it more English in sound or character.
12. A(n) _____ feeling or action is one that you have without being fully aware of it.
13. To be _____ means that something or someone is looked at for some time with interest, admiration or love.
14. When something is _____, it is done openly without trying to hide anything.
15. _____ are signs or symbols that are used to identify something.
16. _____ are people or things who have the same role or function but in a different context.
17. The traditions, beliefs and history of a group of people are called their _____.
18. When something is _____, it has a negative effect or causes harm.

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Spain is proud of its rich cultural _____, which includes flamenco music and dance.
2. City names (such as *Firenze* in Italy) are _____ to make them easier for English speakers to pronounce.
3. Martha was thrilled to get a(n) _____ for the lead role in the West End show.

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4. My name's Siobhán, but it's very common for people to _____ it. The correct way to say it is *shi-vawn*.
5. There was a definite buzz of _____ before the concert began, and the band walked onto the stage.
6. The couple _____ at their newborn son with a mix of awe and wonder.
7. Smoking and vaping are both shown to have a(n) _____ effect on our health.
8. The President of France met with his European _____ to discuss the new trade agreement.
9. Juan decided to _____ career and moved from graphic design to software development.
10. Our manager agreed and was _____ the idea of more staff working from home.
11. A good _____ will often begin the lesson with an activity designed to put students at ease.
12. Although the couple had divorced several years ago, they still have a strong _____ and respect for one another.
13. The discussion was _____, and we managed to sort out some of the main issues around pay and working conditions.
14. Studying for many hours was _____, but Alice knew it would pay off in the end.
15. Language can act as a cultural _____ that reflects a person's identity.
16. The manager's _____ hostility made lunchtimes together uncomfortable for everyone.

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17. You must let a member of the management team know immediately if you face any kind of _____ or discrimination at work.
18. Briony has a(n) _____ fear of failure, even though she's a successful lawyer.

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An unusual name can have a detrimental impact on your life and finances – but in my experience, it also has advantages

Xaymaca Awoyungbo

13 January, 2025

- 1 Growing up, there was a wearying and familiar pattern for me on the first day of school, or whenever a substitute teacher took the register.

“Blake.”

“Here, sir.”

“Aaron.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm ... wow ... how do I ...? Please forgive me if I mispronounce your name.”

My seven-year-old self would look up in anticipation of this awkward moment, and see a mixture of fear, panic and confusion as the teacher gazed at my name. You're probably wondering how to pronounce it as you read this.

“It's Xaymaca [zy-ma-ka], sir.”

- 2 I like to get in there first, to minimise any embarrassment because I've heard it all, from “Zakamaya”, to “Can I call you something for short?”, to “I'm not even going to try pronouncing that”.
- 3 My name is considered cool at best, and weird at worst, but beyond the difficult first interactions, I have the kind of name that could have a detrimental impact on my life, and my finances. A 2022 study of the US job market investigated the employment outcomes of more than 1,500 job applicants from 96 economics PhD programmes. It found that candidates with difficult-to-pronounce names were much less likely to find their first academic job, and when they did, it was at institutions with lower research standards.
- 4 My Yoruba surname, Awoyungbo, only adds to the difficulties I could face in the job market. According to research by the Centre for Social Investigation at Nuffield College, University of Oxford, people like me with Nigerian heritage need to send 80 per cent more applications than white Britons to receive a positive response from an employer.
- 5 None of this is a surprise to those of us who have long lived with the impacts of such prejudice. Some of us decide to shorten our names to make them easier to pronounce. Others switch to anglicised versions.

- 6 The actor Kal Penn, from the Harold and Kumar films, was born Kalpen Modi, but put Kal Penn on his résumé “almost as a joke to prove friends wrong, and half as an attempt to see if what I was told would work [that anglicised names appeal more to a white-dominated industry]”. He said he saw his audition callbacks increase by 50 per cent as a result of the switch. “I was amazed,” he said. “It showed me that there really is such an amount of racism – not just overt, but subconscious as well.”

- 7 But I will never change my name. For one thing, there's just too much history attached to it – Xaymaca means “land of wood and water” and it was the name given to modern-day Jamaica by the Taino people, the early inhabitants of the island. It became Jamaica (juh-may-kuh) as a result of mispronunciation by Spanish colonists, and further mispronunciation by their English counterparts.

- 8 It's a history many people are unaware of, even Jamaicans, and it is often a conversation starter. I remember speaking to a colleague about it during a coffee break where a question as simple as: “What does your name mean?” sparked a discussion about colonialism, Haiti and family history. We've remained friendly ever since.

- 9 I can usually tell if I'll get on with someone based on how they react to learning my name. A remark about how strange my name is probably won't lead to a long and fruitful friendship. But a look of curiosity, followed by a question, is a sign that we could build a meaningful relationship. I'm already well disposed to you because you've taken an interest in understanding me, and you're brave enough to learn something new.

- 10 Perhaps that's why employers in the UK will call back an Olivia before they call back a Xaymaca. There's an idea that they will fit in because of a mutual understanding of race, culture and meaning, even if the recruiter isn't thinking about olive trees.

- 11 For me it's about respect. People will learn your name when they respect you. Take a look at Ronaldinho, Beyoncé or Tchaikovsky to know this is the case. If I changed my name just to make it easier for strangers to pronounce, I'd lose my sense of self-respect.

- 12 My first name has the same number of letters as Charles and the same number of syllables as Benjamin. It's not overly difficult, only unfamiliar. My names are not mere letters on a job application, but markers of my identity, an identity that I'm proud of. We should all take pride in our names.

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- 13 Before my grandfather's journey to the United Kingdom, my great-grandfather said a prayer: "The name Awoyungbo shall be heard in London." How could I let him down? By displaying and pronouncing my name so publicly, I hope I am making things easier. Not for myself, but for other journalists entering the industry. Or at least for the next generation of substitute teachers.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b, c or d).

1. What problem do people with difficult names usually face?
 - a. Colleagues commonly forget their names in professional contexts.
 - b. Their name is frequently associated with a celebrity.
 - c. They are less likely to get an academic job because of their name.
 - d. People often misspell their names on official documents.
2. What does the author suggest about names?
 - a. Most people only remember short and simple names.
 - b. Respect can influence a person's willingness to learn names.
 - c. Only famous people can keep difficult names.
 - d. Names lose value if they are hard to pronounce.
3. The author has decided not to change his name because ...
 - a. it has connections to colonial history.
 - b. he wants it to be a conversation starter.
 - c. it sounds similar to a popular location.
 - d. it helps him blend into society.
4. What historical significance does the author's name have?
 - a. It represents a significant event in history.
 - b. It was the name of a famous leader.
 - c. It was used as an early form of currency.
 - d. It was the ancient name of the island of Jamaica.

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5. What does the case of actor Kal Penn illustrate regarding names?
 - a. Real names should always be used despite industry norms.
 - b. Changing one's name has no impact on job opportunities.
 - c. Only actors with unique names become successful.
 - d. Anglicised names increase one's chances in the acting industry.
6. What pressures do individuals with non-anglicised names face in the job market?
 - a. They must send significantly more applications.
 - b. They often have to change their field of work.
 - c. They receive more promotions, but fewer job offers.
 - d. They get higher starting salaries to compensate for biases.
7. Why does the author believe it's important to display his name publicly?
 - a. To follow a family tradition.
 - b. To pave the way for easier acceptance of diverse names.
 - c. To ensure people see and recognise his name often.
 - d. To make it easier for substitute teachers.

4 Key language

- a. Find a form of these words in the article.

act bravado colony habit over prove proud race

- b. Choose the correct form of the words from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

1. You should feel very _____ of the excellent work you have done on the project so far.
2. I often feel uncomfortable when people I don't know are _____ friendly.
3. There can be no place for _____ or discrimination in any society.

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4. Philip spoke with great _____ when he described his achievements, but it was clear that he was trying to hide his insecurities.
5. The effects of British and Spanish _____ on many countries in Africa and Asia are still being felt to this day.
6. The accused's legal team provided _____ of her alibi, including CCTV footage and witness testimonies.
7. Linda's small _____ of kindness didn't go unnoticed in the office where she worked.
8. The _____ of the village had very little contact with the outside world until the arrival of religious missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you think it is important to maintain cultural or personal identity through one's name, even in the face of potential prejudice or discrimination? Why or why not?
- In the text, the author reflects on the impact of anglicising names in an attempt to fit in. Do you think changing one's name for professional or social reasons can be justified, or does it undermine individuality and heritage?
- The text mentions the concept of subconscious bias. How do you think this may influence employment practices and what steps can be taken to address this issue?

6 In your own words

- a. Research to find the meaning and history of your own first or surname and write a brief description of it. You can ask family members for information, search historical records or find online resources. Explore where the name might have come from (e.g. country, culture or language) and what it might mean.
- b. Share any relevant or interesting information you find with your class.